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Against “Cartesian Rigidity”: W.G. Sebald’s Reception of Borges

W.G. Sebald’s The Rings of Saturn contains a several-pages-long reference to the Borges’ story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” and also brief comments on other texts by the Argentinian author. This essay will show that Sebald’s apparently casual comments on Borges have a more profound significance. They suggest a close affinity between both authors’ artistic Weltanschauung, one that is deeply pessimistic and contradicts the enlightenment master discourse on historical progress. By strongly criticising processes of cultural rationalisation in modern or post-modern society and highlighting the work of fantasy, both authors show romantic features.

Sebald speaks of the lack of a “starren cartesischen Blick” (“free of Cartesian rigidity”) [RS, 27; RS, 17] in order to describe Rembrandt’s philosophy of painting. However, we also can use this expression to outline the reason for Sebald’s fascination with Jorge Luis Borges’ texts, especially with “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”. The Rings of Saturn contains a several-pages-long reference to this short story as well as brief comments on other texts by Borges. In the following, I will attempt to show that Sebald’s apparently casual comments on Borges have a more profound significance and suggest a close affinity between the artistic Weltanschauung of each author.

It was difficult for Jorge Luis Borges to gain acceptance in Germany. As Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot has shown, German disinterest in Borges’ work dated from long before the author committed the error of welcoming the military takeover in Argentina and of accepting a decoration from the Chilean dictator Pinochet. In 1958, when it was suggested to Ernesto Grassi, director of the renowned Encyclopaedia Rowohlt, that he undertake the publication of a German translation of Borges’ most important texts, Grassi responded: “This is neither understood nor of interest in Germany”.¹ A year later, Hanser Verlag published a selection of Borges’ most important short stories, translated by Karl August Horst. The publication remained all but unnoticed in the German literary scene. There were two reasons for this disinterest in Borges’ work in Germany, the first of which was that with “the narrow horizons of

German Romance Scholarship” the cosmopolitan author Borges could not be fitted into the existing academic categories for Latin American literature. Secondly, the strong influence of the Frankfurt School on the German public sphere as well as the dominance in literary circles of the so-called “Gruppe 47” prevented Borges’ literature from being appreciated for many years. Most members of both groups strongly believed in the enlightenment notion of art and literature as social practice, a notion with which Borges’ historic pessimism disagrees strongly.

Borges’ short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940), to which Sebald refers several times in *The Rings of Saturn*, is a typical example of this pessimism. The story deals with the creation, by experts in different disciplines, of the fictive world of Tlön, a perfect planet where things are arranged in the interest of everybody. On paper it looks so attractive that humankind, fascinated by its rigour, is ready to forget that Tlön is merely a fictional invention and is willing to replace the horror of the real world by the coherence of the imagined one. John Beck stated that, according to Borges, the disciplines that create Tlön are both “instruments of destruction” (they dismantle the real) and the means toward a “perfect kind of order” (by substituting form for contingency). The narrator of Borges’ tale tells us that “any symmetry with a semblance of order – dialectical materialism, anti-semitism, Nazism – [used to be] sufficient to entrance the minds of men. How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet?”.

How could you not, we might add in regard to Sebald, fall prey to one of the new imaginary attempts to put the world in order in the chaotic totalitarian country that Germany was during much of the twentieth century? – whether it be Hitler’s thousand-year Reich with its racial underpinnings or the GDR’s “sozialistische Einmaleins” (“socialist ABC”), as Sebald’s narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* calls it [RS, 122; RS, 98]. Sebald does not comment on the anti-utopian tenor of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbius Tertius” (his narrator summarises it in three pages), but it is obvious that Sebald’s prose works, which describe in detail the physical and spiritual debris caused by those attempts to put the world in order, strongly support Borges’ historical pessimism. According to John Beck, Sebald replaces the enlightenment master-discourse of historical progress with the image of the tides: like low tide and high tide, the catastrophes in human society come and go until “our eventual demise”.

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2 Girardot: Borges in Germany. P. 64.
4 Ibid. P. 83.