What Corsica Represents: W. G. Sebald's Poetics in "The Alps in the Sea"

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The article analyzes the destruction of Corsica's flora and fauna in "The Alps in the Sea" ("Die Alpen im Meer"), a work of prose by W. G. Sebald published in 2001 and included in the posthumous volume Campo Santo *in 2003. The article reflects upon Sebald's approach to travel and tourism, as well as upon the devastation of the island of Corsica over the centuries, as a metonymy of Europe's decadence. The literary techniques applied in "The Alps in the Sea," such as the retelling of Gustave Flaubert's "Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitaller" ("La légende de Saint-Julien l'Hospitalier") and the apparent convergence of the story's elements in several key paragraphs, are understood in the article as fundamental characteristics of Sebald's poetics. In turn, Sebald's poetics is approached with a hypothesis that rethinks–along with several studies of the author's oeuvre and with Jacques Rancière's interpretation of Sebald's 1995 novel* The Rings of Saturn *(*Die Ringe des Saturn*)–the technique of obliquity, a device defended by Sebald himself and deployed by many influential interpreters of his oeuvre.*

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Between the publication of *The Rings of Saturn* (*Die Ringe des Saturn*) in 1995 and the publication of *Austerlitz* in 2001, W. G. Sebald worked on an unfinished project provisionally titled *Notes from Corsica: On Its Natural History & Anthropology* (Kunze 110).[1] Often referred to as *The Corsica Project*, four extracts of the text were published posthumously in

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2003 in the volume *Campo Santo*, together with a dozen speeches and essays. Two sections, "Prose" and "Essays," comprise the book, with the first including these four extracts. Yet, in the preface, the book's editor, Sven Meyer, acknowledges the difficulty of separating some texts from others, citing one of Sebald's most well-known assertions: "My medium is prose, not the novel." The editor likewise points out that in the last texts in the second section, "the essayist can no longer be distinguished from the writer" (Meyer ix).

Campo Santo was, like *Unrecounted* (*Unerzählt*) or *Across the Land and the Water* (*Über das Land und das Wasser*), one of the posthumous books published after Sebald's unexpected death in 2001. In 2008, on the occasion of an exhibition on Sebald at the German Literature Archive, Ulrich von Büllow published the catalogue *Wandernde Schatten* (Wandering Shadows), which contained the complete *Corsica* manuscript portfolio. As Graeme Gilloch notes, there are two versions of *The Corsica Project*, apart from other materials in the archive, such as newspaper cuttings, images, and cards (Gilloch 145). This is important here not just to show another case of our era's apparently indomitable need to rummage through the raw materials of our most celebrated authors in search of anything publishable, but also because in an article about "The Alps in the Sea," one of the prose pieces from *Campo Santo*, the history of the text's publication demands an explanation on the place where are we reading the text from, because several studies mix the stories published in *Campo Santo* with the posthumous manuscript, understanding both as a whole and thus interpreting each as an incomplete work. And it is indeed incomplete, even though some of *Campo Santo*'s prose pieces were published before Sebald's death, regardless of whether they may have been conceived as a part of a larger project. Sebald read "The Alps in the Sea" upon receiving the Düsseldorf Heinrich Heine Prize in December 2000 (Schütte 328) and then published the text in the journal *Literaturen* in 2001. How are we to deal with the similarities between this text and the manuscript, or with their differences and contradictions? Coleridge's ancient mariner, for example, appears in the story of "The Alps in the Sea" within the *Corsica* manuscript, but is absent from Sebald's published text. So, studying the mariner's presence in one of the versions might lead to engaging analyses while blurring the limits of what should be considered a draft and what should not. For this article, however, it does not seem relevant to wonder if, in a more advanced phase of the work, Coleridge's sailor would have been the only passenger on a yacht on which there were no signs of life at all; "The Alps in the Sea" was

presented—and, above all, shows itself—as a finished piece, so it may be read as one.

Traveling to a Mediterranean island, reflecting on Europe

All the narrative action in "The Alps in the Sea" is presented through the narrator's thoughts, memories, and sights from his hotel room in Piana during his journey to Corsica. The first pages deal with the evolution and decadence of the flora and fauna of the island, as well as with some childhood and later recollections coming to the narrator's mind as he sits by the window and finds a copy of Flaubert's "Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitaller" ("La légende de Saint-Julien l'Hospitalier"), which he summarizes, fascinated and disturbed, by describing how "an insatiable passion for hunting and a vocation for sainthood do battle in the same heart" (Sebald, *Campo* 42). The final scene, in which the main character watches the sunset and an apparently empty yacht crossing a somewhat apocalyptic landscape through his binoculars, is also told from the same room. It is from this deliberately static narrative position that the Corsican journey rejects the touristic idea of traveling: instead of taking a tour through the village or relaxing in what could be described as idyllic coastal scenery, the narrator does not leave his hotel room and spends the day meditating on the forms that destruction can adopt. In the last chapter of his book *Ghostwriting: W. G. Sebald's Poetics of History*, one of the most thorough interpretations of *Campo Santo* and *The Corsica Project*, Richard T. Gray also understands the first part of "The Alps in the Sea" as a counterpart to the hegemonic imagination of what tourism is: the trip to the island opens a space for "experiencing ecological decimation in its most immediate and exaggerated forms"; in that sense, Sebald "pursues a brand of ecotourism motivated more by the desire to experience decline than the pristine recuperation of nature" (Gray 373). Immediately afterwards, Gray writes that Sebald "once again takes Corsica as a microcosm for a 'dialectic of Enlightenment' that exposes how purported advances in human civilization are concomitant with the despoliation of the human world." The idea of the "microcosm" sparks a latent question that traverses Gray's text, but also Sebald's and almost any work of prose that involves an island or isolated place. Gray addresses it explicitly earlier in his text through a reference to the beginning of "The Alps in the Sea." Asking "Why Corsica?" he writes:

> As an island nation whose political history is closely yoked to that of continental Europe and the Mediterranean region more specifically, Corsica represents a microcosm of this larger geopolitical, natural-historical, and anthropological domain. It circumscribes that part of the world that Sebald refers to as the "cradle of our civilization" ("Wiege unserer Zivilisation" …). The possessive adjective "our" ("unserer) is significant, since it indicates how Corsica stands as a metonymy, as *pars pro toto*, for the larger abstraction of "Western civilization." … Corsica offers a narrowly circumscribed experimental object from whose study one can extrapolate conclusions about European civilization more generally. (366)

Corsica might then be the perfect place to extrapolate conclusions on Europe's progression. Throughout the first pages of "The Alps in the Sea," as mentioned, the narrator meditates on the evolution and decadence of Corsica's flora and fauna, describing the impressive European forests of the nineteenth century and explaining how some Corsican trees could be millennial and tower more than fifty meters. The narrator laments that perhaps, if humans had not intervened in the trees' growth, they would have kept growing and growing until they reached the sky. Through the diaries and notes from personalities like Ferdinand Gregorovius or Edward Lear, the narrator focuses on "the destruction of the Corsican forests *par des exploitations mal conduites* (by mismanaged exploitation)" (Sebald, *Campo* 36). The conviction of nineteenth-century writers that these forests would eventually vanish reappears in almost every paragraph; the opening sentence splits the past from the present in fairytalesque style: "Once upon a time Corsica was entirely covered by forest" (35). The narrator then places the origin of the degradation of nature in the "cradle of our civilization" that Gray alludes to—one of the elements that confers Corsica the possibility of representing something larger than itself.

The understanding of Corsica as a metonymy can be ambivalent, though, as the island may well represent the evolution and decadence of European civilization but may also function as a blank canvas, as a representative place so long as its specificities are erased.[2] How does this metonymy work in "The Alps in the Sea"? The approach to Corsica in the text gives reason to believe that the island was not chosen as a way of appropriating an apparently peripheral place. Sebald writes:

> Most of the high forests that once grew all the way to the Dalmatian, Iberian, and North African coasts had already been cut down by the beginning of the present era. Only in the interior of Corsica did a few forests of trees towering

[2] For touristic representations of islands as blank canvases, see Moyà.

> far taller than those of today remain, and they were still being described with awe by nineteenth-century travelers, although now they have almost entirely disappeared. (Sebald, *Campo* 35–36)[3]

Although the island has almost no vestiges of those magnificent forests, Corsica remains one of the few European territories where these landscapes can be imagined. Its regional particularities, and the deterioration of its environment, may prove representative of the similar environmental destruction across the rest of Europe. Yet, a metonymy must always leave some things behind, and Corsica could become a symbol of something that it is not. For instance, if we talk about the "cradle of our civilization," an apt metonymy should include not only the natural characteristics of Corsica and Europe but also historical, political, and economic issues that have affected both. However, considering how Sebald deals with the topics of destruction and eradication not only in "The Alps in the Sea" but in other works as well, it seems that his main interest is not Corsica at all. Sebald's narratives appear to be based on a contradictory principle, as every place that appears in his works has its own specificities and is relevant to what is being told, but it is simultaneously quite difficult to affirm that these places are essential, or that a different topography would not have allowed for the same questions and problems to arise in the writing.

Although his arguments go in another direction, Gray alludes to an interview with Sebald that will be useful at this point:

> In what would be his very last interview, conducted by Uwe Pralle in December 2001, Sebald insisted on the continuity of a European politics of mastery from its inception with Napoleon to its perverse culmination in the crimes of Nazi Germany. The "traces of this catastrophe," he claims, "are discernible everywhere in Europe, regardless of whether they are in evidence in the north of Scotland or on Corsica or Corfu." (Gray 367)

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[3] In an interview with Joseph Cuomo from March 2001, Sebald, asked about the conflict between nature and civilization in his work, gives an answer that is astoundingly reminiscent of the fragment from "The Alps in the Sea" yet does not evoke *The Corsica Project*. Indeed, Sebald mentions neither *The Corsica Project* nor "The Alps in the Sea," despite having read "The Alps in the Sea" at the Heinrich Heine Prize reception ceremony just a few months earlier. This was his answer: "Organic nature is going to vanish. We see it vanishing by the yard. It's not very difficult—I mean, you can hear the grass creak. Once you have an eye for it, if you go to the Mediterranean you can see that there used to be forests all along the Dalmatian coast. The whole of the Iberian Peninsula was wooded; you could walk from the Atlas Mountains to Cairo in the shade at the time of Scipio. It's been going on for a long time, it's not just now. There are pockets, Corsica, for instance, where you can see what these forests looked like. The trees were much taller. They were like the American trees, straight up, some sixty yards. But there are only pockets of it left" (Sebald, "Conversation" 102).

Rooted in Sebald's poetics, in dialogue with Walter Benjamin's, is the assertion that the catastrophic path Europe has taken over the last centuries can be corroborated in any place, and proof emerges from people's stories, lost objects, city ruins, or in writing from other eras. This is palpable in all of Sebald's books, and among examples like Iver Grove's isolated and untouched room in *Austerlitz*, or the small Welsh village where Jacques Austerlitz grows up, or the Manchester docks in *The Emigrants* (*Die Ausgewanderten*), the lamentation in *The Rings of Saturn*, where the narrator recalls his walk through the county of Suffolk, might be the most paradigmatic. There, a trip that begins "in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work" and succeeds in doing so to an extent, "for I have seldom felt so carefree as I did then, walking for hours in the day through the thinly populated countryside," ends up making the narrator preoccupied "not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place" (Sebald, *Rings* 3). The question of the ethics of metonymy becomes somehow outdated as a result of Sebald's approach to any place he chooses to discuss history, memory, or the decline of nature. The intriguing debate in his work is not about the places where his texts take place and whether they are fairly represented. Rather, why we constantly find reflections drawing from concrete spaces that seem to stand for broader issues in Sebald's works—Europe's destiny, the unstoppable catastrophe toward which we are headed, the impossibility of dominating the writing of history—may be a better question with which to comprehend his poetics.

The history of Europe as a long account of calamities

This characteristic is mostly developed through a literary technique and, as we will see, through an alternative epistemological understanding of the temporality of narration. In his harsh critique of Carole Angier's biography of Sebald, Ryan Ruby conceptualizes this technique, this narrative position, as "metaphysics of coincidence," defined as "the way an apparently associative series of random details and incidents makes it difficult to tell how one sentence follows from the next, only for the whole to reveal itself, in the end, as having operated according to a complex, latticelike order from the beginning" (Ruby 134). The first

part of "The Alps in the Sea," which concludes with a description of a butcher's shop to which we will come back later on, presents this structure and fits into the explanation that Sebald himself proposed on different occasions, becoming a common reference in discussions of his style. This style, usually characterized as oblique, would be a response to humans' self-defensive compulsion toward apathy in the face of injustice. As Sebald wrote in *Notes from Corsica*, "the eye learns to look away from those things that cause it pain, and perhaps it even learns to love a world that is constantly becoming more graphite-gray" (qtd. in Gray 394). The gaze, the insight, is fundamental to all of Sebald's works, and his proposal of a levity writing complements the obliquity through the same metaphor: in a 1996 interview, when he spoke of his ambition as a writer, he claimed that it was "to write about the difficult things in such a way that they lose their gravity," as he believed "that things can only be communicated by means of levity and that everything that is as heavy as lead also places a burden on the readers, so that it makes them blind" (qtd. in Gray 410). The method that Sebald proposes tries to avoid this looking away, this blindness. His process of writing about history, violence, and injustice comes together in a famous interview with Michael Silverblatt, in which the ideas of obliquity, levity, and metaphysics of coincidence—writing about an absent presence through this "apparently associative series of random details and incidents"—are displayed in a conversation about the approach to concentration camps in *Austerlitz*. Sebald explains:

> To write about concentration camps in my view is practically impossible. So you need to find ways of convincing the reader that this is something on your mind but that you do not necessarily roll out, you know, on every other page. The reader needs to be prompted that the narrator has a conscience, that he is and has been perhaps for a long time engaged with these questions. And this is why the main scenes of horror are never directly addressed. I think it is sufficient to remind people, because we've all seen images, but these images militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things. And also paralyze, as it were, our moral capacity. So the only way in which one can approach these things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation. (Sebald, "Poem" 80)

These concepts are key to discussing Sebald's poetics, as they generally lead to conclusions that should be reconsidered. These explanations provide insights regarding the way Sebald's texts work, and it is obvious that the Holocaust is fundamental to the author's books, but one of the most misleading interpretations of these ideas is that there is an existing

center to be fathomed in the texts, with all the elements approaching it serving as mere excuses, or as contingent elements that exist in the text with the sole purpose of reaching what is being chased. The fact that the Holocaust is probably the most recurrent topic in Sebald's books does not imply that all the other issues addressed in them are subordinated to it, as if these works' only goal were to find a way of representing the Shoah, or as if Sebald's oeuvre still followed Aristotelian poetic principles presenting fictional events through what Jacques Rancière has called the "verisimilar consequences of a chain of causes and effects" (Rancière 1). According to Rancière, classical fiction is based on the core idea that chance and coincidence do not exist, meaning that works are built to reach a final conclusion whose explanation can be traced by this cause-effect principle. However, to Rancière, modern fiction abolishes "the division in which the fictional rationality of plots is opposed to the empirical succession of facts" (5), thus creating a kind of book that, in Rancière's reading of *The Rings of Saturn*, rejects a "causal chain endowed with a necessity superior to the unfolding of ordinary life events"; the loss of this "super-rationality" (105) permits a new temporality for fiction, liberated from the chain of causes and effects.

To which kind of temporality does Rancière refer, and how might we describe this dialogue not only with *The Rings of Saturn* but also with "The Alps in the Sea"? Rancière understands *The Rings of Saturn* as a book in which digression is the rule, so that "at each spot, easily locatable along the coastline of a small English county, it is possible to find the point of departure for an infinite digression," a point that also "ties [a] place and its history to a multitude of different but comparable places and times, of serious or fantastical tales, of historical documents, of collected objects bearing witness or of myths lost forever in the night of time" (Rancière 116). This brings about a temporality of coexistence in which in every moment different objects, places, and stories from different periods are in dialogue with each other, without any being inferior or secondary to the rest.

One of the scenes in *The Rings of Saturn* that represents this as well as the misguided interpretations mentioned above is the one in which the massive slaughter of herrings throughout the last few centuries is juxtaposed against a photograph of human corpses in the camp of Bergen-Belsen. The fact that we see two photographs of corpses piled up on the ground, one of herrings and one of people; that the narrator draws information on the history of herrings from a documentary filmed in the year 1936; that the process of killing the fish is described as "the most extreme of the sufferings undergone by a species always threatened by

disaster" (Sebald, *Rings* 57); and that the story that follows the herrings is that of Major George Wyndham Le Strange, a man who served in an anti-tank regiment that liberated the camp of Bergen-Belsen in April 1945—all these facts reinforce the connection between the herrings and the Holocaust. While the former is usually read as a comparison that foreshadows the real tragedy, an oblique way of referring to the Nazi genocide, Rancière defends a kind of fiction in which events are not taken as hierarchical. What is more, scenes like this are also intertwined with elements of equal importance throughout *The Rings of Saturn*, with the most recurrent probably involving the silk industry, which appears in the herring chapter to explain how fishing nets are made, although the silk is also present, among endless examples, in the recounting of Thomas Browne's biography, in Joseph Conrad's mother's return to exile, in the Chinese empress Cixi's desire for limitless power, and in the Third Reich. These examples help to understand why Rancière asserts that Sebald's fiction "unfolds not as a linking of times but as a relation between places," as "each place is several things at once and fiction is built as a relation between several forms of reality" (Rancière 117).

Sebald did consider the possibility of representing the horror of the Holocaust, in his own words (using yet another metaphor for sight), "like the head of Medusa: you carry it with you in a sack, but if you looked at it you'd be petrified" (qtd. in Gray 395). However, rather than understanding Sebald's entire poetics as a catalogue of strategies with which to approach the mass murders of World War II, we may glean an ethical position inscribed in his project, which may be partially defined as an understanding of our history "as a long account of calamities" (Sebald, *Rings* 295). Yet, following Rancière, the aim of such an understanding of history may not be to melancholically sit in front of these calamities like Albrecht Dürer's Angel, but to believe in "another use of knowledge, one that produces not only a new sort of fiction but another sort of common sense which links without subordinating or destroying" (Rancière 125).

Connecting human guilt to the decimation of Corsica's wildlife

Back in the first part of "The Alps in the Sea," after reviewing the decadence of Corsica's flora and fauna, the narrator considers "our dark past" and recalls two personal experiences, the first being from his childhood, which "filled [him] with uneasy premonitions" (Sebald, *Campo* 41):

> I remember, for instance, how on my way to school I once passed the yard of Wohlfahrt the butcher on a frosty autumn morning, just as a dozen deer were being unloaded from a cart and tipped out on the paving stones. I could not move from the spot for a long time, so spellbound was I by the sight of the dead animals. Even then the fuss made by the hunters about sprigs of fir, and the palms arranged in the butcher's empty white-tiled shopwindow on Sundays, seemed to me somehow dubious. Bakers obviously needed no such decorations.
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> Later, in England, I saw rows of little green plastic trees hardly an inch high surrounding cuts of meat and offal displayed in the shop windows of "family butchers." The obvious fact that these evergreen plastic ornaments must be mass-produced somewhere for the sole purpose of alleviating our sense of guilt about the bloodshed seemed to me, in its very absurdity, to show how strongly we desire absolution and how cheap we have always bought it. (41–42)

These two paragraphs close the narration of the progressive destruction of Corsica's wildlife in "The Alps in the Sea." Paraphrasing Ruby, the whole reveals itself, and random details appear to merge in a singular moment. On the one hand, in the first pages, we find constant references to the shortening of the island's trees: from having almost sixty-meter tall, millennial trees, we transit to the chopped down trees that measure more or less thirty meters, and finally arrive at the "slender conifers which cannot be imagined lasting a single human lifetime" (Sebald, *Campo* 38) after the great fire of the 1960s. From being chopped down to enduring a fire, the tree population is no longer native, as "no trees grow here except those planted by the forestry department." This scene is especially interesting because the figure of the tourist appears in the nineteenth-century notes of Melchior van de Velde that Sebald reproduces in his text, and the kind of tourism he describes is once again opposed to the one the narrator practices. "Of the forests I have seen, Bavella is the loveliest. … Only, if the tourist wishes to see it in its glory, he must take haste! The axe is abroad and Bavella is disappearing!" (38). Tourists are never presented as people who want to, or even ought to, worry about the fate of the forest. Merely in pursuit of beautiful landscapes, they only risk arriving too late to enjoy them.

On the other hand, something similar unfolds with Corsica's animals. Van de Velde affirms that "the ground under these meager pines is largely bare: I myself saw not the slightest trace of the wealth of game mentioned by earlier travelers" (Sebald, *Campo* 38). Hunting is described as a "ritual of destruction which long ago became pointless" (39); the book describes animals that have become extinct, with hunters compared to Yugoslav soldiers of the Civil War, or to guerrillas that do not want to be

photographed in the fields, as if deep down they were aware of the consequences of their killing. It is the hunters' inability to see the contradiction between their own photographs posing with dead boars and their lamentation of the drop in the hare and partridge population year on year, or the disappointment of a hunter's wife, ever excluded from the hunt, who watches her husband come home almost empty-handed, what is seen as "the closing episode of a story that looks far back into our dark past" (41) and what precedes the previous, longer fragment.

The sensation that the palms arranged in the butcher's empty, white-tiled shop window arouse in the narrator becomes clear in the next paragraph: the little green plastic trees come off as an attempt to alleviate guilt, a demonstration of our desire for absolution. Even though this paragraph is cast as the narrator's recollection of his childhood in England, the fact that the text combines themes that have been previously developed around Corsica's wildlife establishes a kind of narrative convergence: the last phase of humankind's subjugation of flora and fauna is nothing other than their commodification. The trees planted after the fire are no longer of natural origin, but are mass-produced plastic; and if artificiality marks the end of the trajectory of the trees that, centuries ago, astonished their onlookers, then the end for the animals is death itself, transforming them into consumable goods, usually also mass-produced, as it were, and presented as yet another man-made product.

The objective here is to remark upon the fact that establishing a moment in which previous elements resonate does not make them mere bridges toward ideas of guilt and absolution. The progressive destruction of Corsica's flora and fauna should not be overlooked; "The Alps in the Sea" adjusts to Rancière's way of understanding new fiction because there is no such thing as a final goal. One could interpret the butcher's shop scene as a narrative convergence, yet the text does not end there, and, further to this, everything we have read up until this scene is presented as recollection. "All this was going through my head again one afternoon as I sat at the window of my hotel room in Piana. I had found an old volume of the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in the drawer of the bedside table, and I began to read Flaubert's version of the Legend of Saint Julian" (Sebald, *Campo* 42). This almost works as a long digression, a parenthesis that, following the classic structure of fiction, would lead to the center of the story. Yet this does not happen either: Sebald's retelling of Flaubert's tale cannot be declared the heart of the text, nor a point to which the reader arrives thanks to a logic of cause and effect. Similarly to what Rancière argues regarding *The Rings of Saturn*, digression is the rule in "The Alps in the Sea," and the goal, if there is any, appears to

be to develop the answer that Sebald famously gave in "An Attempt at Restitution" to the question *A quoi bon la littérature?*: "Perhaps only to help us to remember, and teach us to understand that some strange connections cannot be explained by causal logic" (204).

Ways of approaching the Mediterranean devastation

The existence of these strange connections, however, does not imply that any link one suggests is valid. In his text about *The Rings of Saturn*, Rancière states that "the point is not that everything is equivalent and that all orders are good" (Rancière 121). Sebald does not work with chaotic interconnections but with subtle associations or affinities that he often reinforces. The narrator's retelling of "The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitaller" is exemplary: in his three-page summary of Flaubert's story, Sebald introduces an element in the saint's life that differs from Flaubert. Flaubert's Julian hunts, like the described Corsicans, and his history is, like the island's, a tale of progressive destruction. Julian's hunting story begins in his childhood, with the killing of a little mouse: he sees it for the first time at mass, and the next Sunday he was troubled by the thought that he might see it again: "It did come back; and then every Sunday he watched for it, was troubled, seized with hatred for it, and determined to get rid of the mouse," and when he killed it, he "stood lost in amazement at this tiny body which did not stir again" (Flaubert 82). Soon after, he starts killing pigeons without questioning why he is doing it, and just a few pages later, having grown up, we behold a brutal and exponential massacre. He kills bears, bulls, wild boars, "an endless company of beasts … [that] grew more numerous at every step, … thinking of nothing, with no memory of anything at all" (89–90), and if, as a child, he went to see the pigeon he hit with a stone to feel it die in his hands, in this slaughter he cannot even stop to skin a black beaver that he has never seen before nor to pick up a grouse whose two feet he has chopped off with a sword (88–89). Julian's need to kill progresses like the island's destruction at the hand of industrialization, catastrophe, and human devastation. But despite these elements, Sebald alters Flaubert's tale to establish a stronger link. The narrator's reading seems to faithfully summarize Flaubert's writing,[4] but at

[4] Flaubert writes: "Night was close at hand; and behind the woods, in the interspaces of the boughs, the sky was red as a sheet of blood. Julian leant back against a tree, and gazed with staring eyes at the enormous massacre; he could not think how it had been done" (Flaubert 91). Sebald writes: "In the end, night comes, the sunset is

the end of the aforementioned massacre an idea of guilt and absolution that is absent from the original source appears in Sebald's text. On his reading of "The Alps in the Sea" as a critique of how we have become inured to death and destruction, unmoved by catastrophe, Gilloch summarizes Sebald's view:

> Julian is the hunter who one day, after causing the most terrible carnage, is moved to renounce hunting altogether, only to find himself the quarry pursued relentlessly by the avenging ghosts of the animals he has killed. In his desperation, he is driven to the ends of the earth searching for absolution for his sanguineous atrocities, and finds it eventually in the infectious embrace of a leper whose pitiful bed he is forced to share. (Gilloch 137)

Sebald's Julian does feel guilty, and after the killing, he "falls victim to a paralysis of the soul, and begins his long wanderings through a world which is no longer in a state of grace. … He refuses to hunt anymore, but sometimes his terrible passion comes over him again in his dreams" (Sebald, *Campo* 43–44). Conversely, Flaubert's Julian stops hunting not because of his emotions, but because the last stag he shoots on the night of the massacre threatens Julian with the prophecy that he will murder his own parents. Julian leaves his home after nearly murdering them by accident on a couple of occasions, but eventually kills them after succumbing to the temptation to hunt again: many years after the massacre and the stag's prophecy, Julian lives with his wife, and he decides to go hunting. He fails at it, with the forest animals enclosing him as though plotting their vengeance, so Julian returns home. Yet "his thirst to kill swept over him again, and for want of beasts he would gladly have slain men" (Flaubert 107). Like a modern Oedipus, he murders his parents in his own house, who have visited him: Julian finds them asleep in his bed and, confusing them for his cheating wife and her lover, slays them. In Flaubert's story, Julian's guilt emerges from this point: it is the killing of his parents that will make a beggar of him until he finds the leper who brings him redemption.

Sebald omits this part of the tale, and his Julian feels guilty for the massacre of the first animals, a guilt that Corsican huntsmen have not experienced yet but that is described in the butcher's shop scene with the reference to the "guilt about the bloodshed." Similarly, Julian does not reencounter the animals physically as he does in Flaubert's short

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red among the branches of the forest like a cloth soaked with blood, and Julian leans against a tree with his eyes wide open, looking at the vast extent of the slaughter and wondering how he can have done it" (Sebald, *Campo* 43).

story: in "The Alps in the Sea," "wherever he goes, wherever he turns, the ghosts of the animals he has killed are with him" (Sebald, *Campo* 44). These animals and their spectral existences are figments of the imagination sparked by Julian's guilt. Rather than a modern Oedipus, Sebald's Julian is like Aeschylus' Orestes, and the animals are like the Erinyes that chase him for having murdered his mother.

After the narrator finishes reading Flaubert's story, the transition between this scene and the next resembles the one between that on the butcher's shop and the finding of Flaubert's volume in a drawer. Once the narrator abandons the book, he looks out the window to see what could be described as an apocalyptic landscape: "The monstrous rock formations of Les Calanques … were in flames, glowing from within. Sometimes I thought I saw the outlines of plants and animals burning in that flickering light, or the shapes of a whole race of people stacked into a great pyre" (Sebald, *Campo* 45). Connections with the other parts of the text, mainly through the reference to the burning of plants and animals—another form of destruction—emerge here, but always through dialogue, not as the be-all and end-all of the story. As Rancière puts it, we have a link that does not subordinate or destroy.

We may conclude by stating that this last fragment, among others, can also be related to Sebald's other works, as one could link the underlying ideas in the Les Calanques paragraph to the problems that arise when Sebald writes about the Holocaust, with the image of a "whole race" of people stacked into a great pyre. Some of the reasoning in "The Alps in the Sea" can be linked to several fundamental ideas in *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Austerlitz*. Comparing "The Alps in the Sea" to the latter works should broaden an interpretation which, however, could paradoxically become a coercive reading of this short story, if associations were to be detected through what we can define as obliquity overuse. Sebald's characteristic way of creating associations must not be reduced to a sum of metaphorical substitutions of the Holocaust, lest we betray the fact that "all is determined by the most complex interdependencies" (Sebald, *Vertigo* 157), an idea expressed in *Vertigo* (*Schwindel*) that is basic to Sebald's poetics.

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Kaj predstavlja Korzika: poetika W. G. Sebalda v zgodbi »Die Alpen im Meer« (»Alpe v morju«)

Ključne besede: nemška književnost / imagologija / Korzika / Sebald, W. G.: *Campo Santo* / turizem / estetika uničevanja

Članek obravnava tematiko uničevanja korziške flore in favne v zgodbi »Die Alpen im Meer« (»Alpe v morju«), proznem besedilu W. G. Sebalda iz leta 2001, ki je bilo dve leti pozneje vključeno v avtorjevo posthumno izdano knjigo *Campo Santo*. Članek se osredotoča na Sebaldov odnos do popotništva in turizma – pa tudi na onesnaževanje Korzike skozi stoletja – kot na metonimijo evropske dekadence. Literarni postopki v »Alpah v morju«, med katerimi so parafraziranje Flaubertove povesti »Legenda o svetem Julijanu strežniku« (»La légende de Saint-Julien l'Hospitalier«) in nakazano konvergiranje različnih elementov zgodbe v ključnih odlomkih, so v članku obravnavani kot temeljne poteze Sebaldove poetike. K tej pa članek pristopa s pomočjo hipoteze, ki – skupaj z izbranimi razpravami o Sebaldu in z Rancièrovo interpretacijo njegovega romana *Saturnovi prstani* (*Die Ringe des Saturn*) iz leta 1995 – problematizira tehniko odklonskosti kot postopek, ki ga je zagovarjal Sebald sam, analizirali pa so ga mnogi vplivni interpreti njegovega opusa.

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