

Crocodiles and Obelisks: The Literary Afterlife of Roger Casement in the Work of Jamie McKendrick and W.G. Sebald

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I

In a 1997 essay on the “posthumous” life of Roger Casement, Lucy McDiarmid suggests that “Nothing about Casement has ever been stable, definitive, determinate, ‘official,’ except the fact that he was hanged. Posthumous Casement, like living Casement, has endured in a blur of rumor, gossip, romance, and innuendo, public pronouncements and private uncertainty.”^[1] McDiarmid’s specific comments on the contentions and contradictions that have contoured Casement’s “posthumous” existence intersects with general debates in contemporary historiography on the relationship between history and memory.^[2] Casement’s political, ethical, and sexual lives—documented and attributed—have long been characterized by controversy, elision, and embellishment in both disciplinary, mainstream historical studies, and in popular remembrance; as Angus Mitchell argues: “Despite the well of subsequent writing on Casement, much about this enigmatic man remains ignored, suppressed, or obscured behind heated speculation about his sexuality and secret revolutionary activity. Moreover, his incorporation into Ireland’s modern historical consciousness has been even more problematic.”^[3] And in any consideration of the literary afterlives of Casement, one must recognize the necessary influence of political agencies in processes of remembrance. For historians like Mitchell, control is at the heart of the politics of remembrance; with respect to Casement, it is concerned with producing and reproducing a limited “version” of a complex and incendiary historical actor. As both McDiarmid and Mitchell maintain, Casement, and versions of Casement, are multiple and self-contradictory, but it is precisely this plurality and ambiguity that is so prized by historians seeking to challenge established nationalist, revisionist, or imperial histories. If, as Pierre Nora asserts in his seminal essay, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” “[a]t the heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory. History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it,”^[4] then Casement, and his legacies, are representative of the objects of History’s suspicion. As Mitchell argues, the “excess” and plurality of Casement’s life and memory are contradictory of any historiographical urge towards political containment and moral consensus. And, as such, these are irreconcilable with Nora’s definition of “History’s goal and ambition”—namely, “not to exalt but to annihilate what has in reality taken place. [...] History’s procurement, in the last century, of scientific methodology has only intensified the effort to establish critically a “true” memory.^[5]

In addition to the ambiguity and lack of fixity detailed above by McDiarmid, varieties of conspiracy theories have also been facilitated by the secrecy that has long shrouded Casement’s life and legacies. As McDiarmid later illustrates, literary versions of, and cameos by, Casement abound across twentieth-century Irish writing, no doubt nurtured and, themselves, popularized by the very culture of uncertainty associated with

Casement.[6] Whether appealed to, or drawn on, as a political, nationalist martyr, a homosexual icon, or a human rights activist and campaigner, romance and idealism have been consistent features of “literary” Casements.[7] In fact, while McDiarmid catalogs the literary afterlives of Casement, “living” Casement had his own literary avatar by 1912. Writing to Casement in 1910, Arthur Conan Doyle reveals his plans for the work that would become his 1912 novel, *The Lost World*:^[8]

I envy you your journey up the Amazon. What an experience. I have a sort of wild boy’s book in my head. The idea roughly is that news reaches a group in England of a peculiar place up in the unexplored parts at the head of one of the tributaries of the Amazon. At this spot a considerable plateau has been elevated long years ago, and left with cliffs all round which forbid access. On the forty square miles of the top the extinct flora and fauna still live, dinosaurs, maslodours and a weird prehistoric race up the trees. My group go there, take photos and have wondrous adventures. It is a fine idea, I think. Now if you hear of anything weird and strange out there let me know, and I’ll sew into my patchwork quilt.^[9]

At the time, Casement was engaged on his first investigative human rights mission to the rubber-producing region of the Putumayo; thus there is a certain irony to Conan Doyle’s imagination of the nature of Casement’s “adventures” within the recesses of the Amazon. Nevertheless, Conan Doyle did integrate Casement’s humanitarian labors into the narrative of *The Lost World*; the character of Lord John Roxton is based on Casement, and Roxton has a personal history of activism against the slave trade.^[10] Conan Doyle’s is an early literary distillation of the “romantic” facets of Casement’s life and career, spotlighting adventure and romance, maybe, but gesturing also to the writer and activist driven by his conscience and acute sense of justice and humanity.

Thus, when one reflects on literary incarnations of Casement, it is apparent that his life has exercised the imaginations of a range of canonical writers before and since his death; we think of Conan Doyle, Yeats, Joyce, at least. And the most recent “canonized” novelist to resurrect Casement in his writing is the Peruvian Nobel Laureate, Mario Vargas Llosa, who, it seems was attracted by Casement’s moral integrity and by his humanity: “Besides being a great warrior for human rights and defender of indigenous people, Roger Casement was an intelligent observer of human nature, society, and the human diversity that crossed his complex and adventurous life.”^[11] *The Dream of the Celt*^[12] takes its title from one of Casement’s poems, and is focalized through a Casement awaiting execution, a narrative that is alternated with a historical account of Casement’s life and career.^[13] Though technically and tonally flawed, the novel is another (contemporary) reminder of the continuing fascination with Casement and of the fertility of his conflicted life-story for literary artists.^[14] And it is in this context that our discussion will address the work of two other contemporary writers—one deceased—who have, in very different ways, exploited both the ethical integrity of Casement’s humanitarian campaigns, and the contentiousness of his revolutionary commitments and his homosexual proclivities. The title of my essay is taken from Jamie McKendrick’s 2007 collection, *Crocodiles and Obelisks*, which is a political departure for the poet, and which intersects with the more longstanding interest in the politics of memory evident in the prose writing of the German writer W.G. Sebald.^[15] Both writers have produced literary versions of Roger Casement, variously using Casement as a redemptive historical voice in the transhistorical context of his poetry—as in the case of McKendrick—or presenting an iteration of Casement that confronts and confounds the dominant, and dominating, schematics of mainstream historiography and mechanisms of historical record and elision—as in the case of Sebald’s work.

II

Asked in a recent interview about the title of his collection, *Crocodiles and Obelisks*, McKendrick stated that

Cocodrillo is Italian journalistic slang for an obituary, suggesting fake tears shed for someone's death. The cover's claim that "obelisk" is the Russian equivalent is a stretch too far, but the obituary-writer in Andrei Kurkov's novel *Death and the Penguin* calls them "obelisks"—another kind of falsification of the dead. The book also contains references to more literal crocodiles and obelisks, including a crocodile in Seville and the Axum obelisk in Rome.^[16]

Thus the title operates both in literal and figurative terms, signaling bare thematic content but also alerting us to the political, philosophical, and ethical positions that undergird McKendrick's poetics; the title "advertises its concern with monumentalizing the past," according to Ailsa Hunt.^[17] At times polemical and intemperate, while at other points elliptical and enigmatic, the collection engages with the politics of memorialization on a variety of scales: international, national, and personal/individual. It oscillates between the baroque and the absurd, with references to ancient Roman excess and the Albanian King Zog, while simultaneously invoking the literally and figuratively Hadean, with excursions into a classical literary Hades, and diversions into Nazi Germany and Leopold II's Congo. Power, then, suffuses McKendrick's poetics here: the vanity and hubris of political power, in ancient and contemporary forms, and the relationship between such power and architecture (and memorialization through architecture)—the stark fact that most of us will be forgotten, or that we are powerless to frame just how we will be remembered. For Hunt, "McKendrick loves to linger over monumental remains [...] standing as they do as fragments of once powerful empires; such ruins inescapably embody the 'tilt of power' which is for McKendrick a major thematic concern."^[18] So the collection is as much about ethical and philosophical questions as it is concerned with the particulars of its thematic content. As McKendrick comments later in the same interview: "The book looks at how cultural memory represents the dead, sometimes sentimentalizing, sometimes memorializing. Between these two falsifying options I hope there are spaces discovered for a more authentic memory."^[19] McKendrick, then, is preoccupied with how memories and histories are constructed and fabricated but is equally excited by the necessity for such labor in the face of temporal transience. There is never a fatalism, however, in his meditations on the depredations and distortions of history and historical monumentalization, and despite the legion of tyrants and tyrannies that score the poems of *Crocodiles and Obelisks*, McKendrick alights on figures of historical and ethical redemption, in particular Casement and General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army. In contrast—as we shall see—with Sebald's iteration of Casement, McKendrick's poetic renditions are not hagiographic, and though they deal with and pay tribute to idealism, they are not, in themselves, idealizations.

Suitably, the collection opens with an obituary, simply entitled "Obit.," as the poet recalls being asked to compose an obituary for the Italian poet, Attilio Bertolucci. And it is the end of this poem that sets the thematic and philosophical keynote for the remainder of the volume. On foot of mulling over the composition of the tribute, McKendrick realizes that:

the more I read the less I understand
the less I understand the more I warm
to the way his quiet voice is fretted
by "the hopeless transit of time,"

the sense of loss that flowered from his hands.[20]

The reiteration of the first-person singular enforces the profoundly personal/private experience of historical ephemerality, yet is also indicative of how the poetic voice sources and retains redemption in the work of the deceased Italian writer. This is not to claim a transcendent permanence for the aesthetic; rather, it provides the first moment of reflection by McKendrick on the salvific agency of human creativity. Yet such moments, effusions, and artifacts are perpetually shadowed, as the quoted lines indicate. In bringing a humanist ethic of endurance and redemption into alignment with the “hopeless fatal transit of time,” McKendrick, in fact, anticipates much of what Sebald articulates on the utopian capacities of literature and literary language.[21] But as we’ve indicated, *Crocodiles and Obelisks* is equally noteworthy for its rogues gallery of historical and contemporary tyrants, and its references to campaigns of historical and contemporary violence. Numbered among the former are General Franco, Benito Mussolini, and Dick Cheney, while Nazi Germany and imperial Rome and Russia are also namechecked. Several of the poems that deal with this broad spectrum of histories are extremely effective in attending to racial bigotry, military invasion, political vanity, and callous violence, yet there are occasions when the polemic strangles the poetic. One such example is a poem entitled, “Black Gold,” the title an obvious allusion to oil, and historical commodities markets. It is a brief ten-line, two-stanza poem, in which Cheney explicitly mirrors Mussolini’s Foreign Minister, and son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano. There is a sharp political case articulated here, yet there is a loss of poetic nuance under the freight of political conviction and simplified transhistorical connection.[22] Regardless, it is one instance, a less effective occasion, in which we see the political and ethical temper of McKendrick’s collection exposed, and in which the poet ventilates his moral convictions. Within this poem, McKendrick sketches an uncomplicated transhistorical correspondence across the twentieth century, and it is this tendency to think in such transhistorical terms, and to translate this into a poetic-ethical mode of expression, that partly explains the invocation of Casement.

McKendrick’s poeticization of Casement in “When Casement Crossed the Line” obviously belongs to the same literary historical lineage as Yeats’s balladic defenses of his career and legacy in “Roger Casement” and “The Ghost of Roger Casement.”[23] Unsurprisingly, perhaps, McKendrick’s poem bears little or no formal resemblance to Yeats’s, and, furthermore, it does not partake of the tonal extremity of either of Yeats’s poems. As mentioned, McKendrick’s “When Casement Crossed the Line” can be read in terms of the skein of political, philosophical, and ethical preoccupations of the broader collection, and the title invokes figurative and literal boundaries. But the poem is also meta-poetical in its reference to the crossing of lines, and this attention to poetic form is a crucial aspect of reading McKendrick’s work. McKendrick’s poeticization of Casement, then, is a fraction of his meditation on the politics of memorialization, a fact given added force by the note in the book’s “Acknowledgements,” which reveals that McKendrick’s Casement is indebted to Adam Hochschild’s volume *King Leopold’s Ghost*. [24] Derivation, mediation, and representation are, then, both tools and thematics not only of McKendrick, but just as clearly of Sebald.

As we mentioned, McKendrick’s poem departs from the balladic form of Yeats’s pair of poems, and this is also key to the relative polemical and rhetorical intensities of the respective works. Yeats’s reversion to the balladic form is consistent with the political messages and intentions of both poet and creation—the easy metrical and rhyming patterns are formal midwives to the readerly comprehension of thinly concealed political convictions. McKendrick adheres to no such formal closure, yet neither does he forego pointed and

resonant formal poetic gestures. So while McKendrick's poem is relatively documentary in its inventory of Casement's humanitarian and patriotic enterprises—as well as in his relationship with Joseph Conrad, and the controversies over his “Black Diaries”—there is no gainsaying the interleaving by McKendrick of poetics and politico-ethical intention. “When Casement Crossed the Line” opens with Conrad; in rather heavily wrought syntax and recursive diction, we read: “The great Pole for whom the British Empire | was a last ditch, a last line of defence | against darkness, even its own darkness, | even if finally a useless defence.”^[25] The triangulated repetitions across these lines—united in sibilance—are suggestive of demise, but also of boundaries or limits being traduced by (as yet) unspecified forces or influences. They also, of course, chime with the ambiguity of the poem's title—what “line” did Casement cross? And on what terms is such a line policed, and by whom? Does crossing any such “line” warrant abandonment, excoriation, demonization, and death? Despite the common experience of Leopold's Congo—what McKendrick terms “Their fellowship | of horror at Leopold's Congo”—Conrad's refusal of support for Casement is, in this context, played out in the recursive syntax, which reflects the machinations of conscience that McKendrick attributes to Conrad. Casement crossed the line; he has breached the “last line of defence” within an historically specific moral economy.

But Conrad is not the only contemporary literary figure enlisted by McKendrick; in the second, and final, stanza, we encounter:

The poet laureate, Alfred Noyes,
heedful of his master's voice,
spread rumours abroad about *The Black Diaries*:
“they touch the lowest depths of degradation”
though later (wrong again) he'd write his book
declaring them a forgery.^[26]

Yeats's poem in defense of Casement's reputation is informed by Dr. William Moloney's 1936 book *The Forged Casement Diaries*, which claimed to expose the forgery of the diaries, and Noyes is the target of Yeats's scorn in the poem.^[27] Indeed, on its original publication, visual and verbal profiles of Noyes were juxtaposed with the poem in *The Irish Press*. Here McKendrick quotes from Noyes's damning piece published on August 31, 1916 in the *Philadelphia Ledger*, in which he concluded, “[...] page after page of his diary would be an insult to a pig's trough to let the foul record touch it.”^[28] Noyes was also working in the News Department of the British Foreign Office at the time. While the twinning of Conrad and Casement is common to both McKendrick's and Sebald's texts, the presence of Noyes adds extra poignancy to the former's meditation on the precariousness of historical memory and its proximity to moral adjudication. Loyalties are gained, tested, and forsaken in this poem, and it seems with the relative positioning of Conrad and Noyes that Casement is being outflanked and abandoned within the confines of the verse, just as much as he was in life and death. There appears to be nowhere near the severity of moral judgement passed on Conrad by McKendrick, but this is not the case with Noyes. This is evinced in purely technical terms, in the imperfect/off-rhyme of “Noyes/voice,” which, in turn, draws our attention to the tri-syllabic and tetra-syllabic metrics of “Alfred Noyes” and “his master's voice,” which might be scanned as an *amphimacer* and a *diambus* respectively. The connections at a technical level correlate to McKendrick's derision of Noyes's deference to campaigns that conflated

political expediency, moral judgement, and personal sexual mores. In the first intertextual quotation in the poem, we read Noyes's publically voiced statement on Casement's private reflections; in the context of the poem, his conclusion that "they touch the lowest depths of degradation" permits Noyes to expose and to condemn himself. In an associated move, McKendrick further indicts the Leopoldian Hades in the Congo by using the interpolated Noyes text. Rather than let "degradation" stand as an uncross-examined judgement on Casement, we note that it is cross-rhymed with two earlier words detailing the horrors witnessed by Conrad and Casement: "forest stations" and "rubber plantations"—thus the rhyming patterns partially subverts the uniformity and uni-directionality of moral sanction against Casement in the poem.

The latter half of "When Casement Crossed the Line" details his involvement with the Irish nationalist revolutionary cause, his time in Germany, the failed Irish Brigade, and his fateful return to Ireland. But just preceding these there is a further interpolated text, this time from Casement's diaries: "Eyes agog at a strolling *cholo*'s penis: 'I [word illegible]'d (*rogered*?) him with Vaseline" | "Also dark eyed lad who said *Buenas | noches* as he passed [...]"[29] This, then, is one of the lines "crossed" by Casement—if he "crossed a line" in bearing witness to, and excoriating the savage machinations of imperial capitalism in Africa and South America, exposing the flagrancy and facility with which moral boundaries could be sundered, the sexual opportunism noted in the diaries crosses a *moral* frontier.[30] Is there, then, a contestation at the level of interpolated texts? Does McKendrick present these interpolated extracts, on the one hand, to reveal and undermine moral hypocrisy; but also, as this poem is never a hagiographic portrait of Casement, do the latter extracts simultaneously humanize Casement as both legitimately sexual, and predatory? While Casement certainly retains what moral high-ground there is in the poem, McKendrick is not one to simplify or whitewash this historical figure at the redemptive heart of his poem and his collection. From another perspective, and in the context of the collection as a whole, the inclusion of these extracted sections of Casement's diaries takes them out of the contestations of Irish public and academic history writing—in a move that is similar to that of Sebald. The Irish context is, in fact, the one with which the poem concludes and is introduced with three lines that are summative of McKendrick's perception and re-presentation of Casement as an idealistic and exemplary historical figure: "After years of witness for the dispossessed | he cut his last links with the possessors | and impaled himself on a principle." [31] The violence of the last line, the graphic correlation of physicality and abstraction is, firstly, part of Casement's appeal for McKendrick; but it is also part of the tension in the poem and in the collection between human life and various forms of political, philosophical, and ethical abstraction. In many ways, this line is a philosophical pivot point in "When Casement Crossed the Line." And, in the end, for McKendrick, Casement is a reprieve in the collection in the midst of terror, vanity, and hubris. Through never an uncomplicated lionization of Casement, he is adduced as part of the collection's poetic-ethical criticisms of political cynicism, but is equally germane to the problematic workings of international and intra-national historical remembrance. So while violence, betrayal, and arrogance populate and animate the collection, McKendrick finds room to accommodate—needs space to accommodate, but never venerate without qualification—a glocal figure of idealism and conviction.

III

In a 2001 interview with fellow novelist, Maya Jaggi, published in *The Guardian*, W.G. Sebald maintained that

The moral backbone of literature is about the whole question of memory. To my mind it seems clear that those who have no memory have the greater chance to lead happy lives. But it is something you cannot possibly escape: your psychological make-up is such that you are inclined to look back over your shoulder. Memory, even if you repress it, will come back at you and it will shape your life.[32]

Here Sebald aligns both Benjamin and Freud in his explication of the ethical duties of literature—though it is a Benjaminian sense of history that contours Sebald’s broader literary project. For Sebald, there is an equivalence between Benjamin’s “Angel of History,” painfully regarding the destructive processes of historical progress, and the literary author who confronts the excesses of humanity’s ruinous exertions in the post-Enlightenment era. And, in this latter respect, there are also affinities between Sebald’s philosophical inclinations and those of Adorno and the Frankfurt School, what Helen Finch terms in her study of Sebald’s bachelors “an overarching critique of modernity.”[33] Understandably, the majority of studies of Sebald’s work have forged links between his concerns with memory and history, his background and the legacies of National Socialism, and catastrophe and civilization. For Sebald, the genocidal logic and actions of National Socialism are fractions of a larger historical continuum characterized by extremes of violence and exploitation against humanity and non-humanity. As a storyteller, a fabulist, Sebald is equally sensitized to the materialities of historical victimhood, as well as to the narrative elisions and violences of associated triumphalist historiography—again chiming with a Benjaminian critique of historicism. And, in this respect, scholars have begun to critique Sebald’s work as postcolonial, and as critically engaged with the oppressive operations of specific imperial regimes across global history, and also with the politics of historiographical representation attendant to, that accompany and/or undergird such imperial polities.[34]

Sebald’s literary texts are animated by moral motivations to restore and to voice the disenfranchised constituencies and artifacts of colonial histories, and, just as much, to shed light on the fraudulence, vanity and hubris of key colonial actors. In texts such as *Austerlitz*, *The Emigrants*, *Vertigo*, and *The Rings of Saturn*, he describes his own awakening to the incomprehensibility of history, which cannot be narrated, he suggests, simply because one happens to be a contemporary witness.[35] He departs from linear conceptualizations of history, demanding that the past can only be grasped by pursuing more circuitous, and indirect, trajectories, which involve acknowledging the silences in our historical records. Such historical records are the domain of power; they include the edited, acceptable versions of the past, but such versions are not always adequate to the needs and the lapsed memories of those that were abandoned by history, those who feel unmoored from the stability that such grounded historical certainty seems to offer other people.

In broaching his works, we need to attend to the formal patterning of these works in equal measure to their thematic contents. In this vein, the digressive and associative arrangements of Sebald’s narratives have been highlighted by critics. In a piece on the novel *The Emigrants*, J.J. Long writes:

Located at the intersection of biography and autobiography, history and fiction, travel writing and memoir, the narrative works of W.G. Sebald resist traditional genre categories. They partake instead of a generic hybridity dictated by the ambitious scope of Sebald’s project, which involves an exploration of man’s historical relationship to his environment, the connection between individual, familial, and collective memory, and the means by which such memory is passed from one generation to the next.[36]

Whether one adjudges Sebald’s narratives as modernist, postmodernist, or postcolonialist in tenor or form—and cases can be made for these nominations—their formal elasticity

functions as an index of the author's resistance to linear narrative structure, and to conceptions of linear historical narration and temporality. In other ways, as Long indicates, Sebald's thematic, historical, and philosophical aspirations dictate the generic variety assumed by his narratives. But what is crucial as we begin to think about Sebald's entry into Irish history, and Irish colonial history, and historical debates surrounding Casement—which intersect with and are partly conditioned by political and/or “revisionist” agendas—is that Sebald is a fabulist: his literary ethics far outweigh his fidelity to historical facticity. And this is a point suggested by Barbara Hui: “Sebald is more interested in composing a cogent work of art and gathering compelling examples of the historical cycle of rise and decline than he is in exhaustively researching the basis for his descriptions for strict historical accuracy.”[37] Of course, this should not go unchallenged in itself; but for the purposes of the current argument, I am concerned with the invocation and the deployment of Casement as both an historical figure and a literary figuration within the aesthetic field. As Long's final clause above indicates, the politics of remembrance are a fixture of Sebald's narratives, and this is not unproblematic given that Sebald enlists the often contested lives and legacies of historical actors such as Casement, among many others.

In this section, we will look at two of Sebald's novels: his 1995 *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* from 2001, and we will do so specifically in relation to the author's attention to imperialism in broad and precise terms. As mentioned already, it is important we touch upon the formal devices employed by Sebald in his various, and differential, engagements with the grand legacies and minor monuments of imperial histories. *Austerlitz* is an oblique and mediated life-story of the eponymous Jacques Austerlitz, relayed by an anonymous Sebaldian narrator. Jacques Austerlitz, it transpires, after myriad deviations and gaps, was a displaced orphan from Czechoslovakia during the Second World War, who ended up as a foster child to a rural Welsh family. The narrative centers on his physical and intellectual peregrinations—and he is a character entirely out of place wherever he travels, always seeking some semblance of homeliness from a history, individual and familial and ethnic, largely sundered during the Holocaust.[38] The narrative is scored with digressions on warfare and violence, and Sebald assembles features from a variety of different narrative forms; *Austerlitz* is part travelogue, memoir, autobiography, detective story, historical fiction, and philosophical tract. But, tellingly, and for our purposes, the novel commences with the Sebaldian narrator recalling his first encounter with the enigmatic Jacques Austerlitz, at the Centraal Station in Antwerp. One of Leopold II's grand architectural projects, the Centraal Station was completed in 1905 after a decade of construction work, and to the eyes of the narrator, on arrival,

I saw how far the station constructed under the patronage of King Leopold II exceeded its purely utilitarian function, and I marvelled at the verdigris-covered Negro boy who, for a century now, has sat upon his dromedary on an oriel turret to the left of the station façade, a monument to the world of the animals and native peoples of the African continent, alone against the Flemish sky.[39]

This is as close as Sebald's narrator gets to detailing the source, and the resources, that underwrote Leopold's campaigns of architectural construction, and it furnishes both a link with and a divergence from the stylistic moralism of *The Rings of Saturn*. The non-articulation in explicit terms is a function of Sebald's characterization of both of his focalizing consciousnesses in *Austerlitz* and the more pressing narrative concern with Jacques Austerlitz's Holocaust trauma. Nevertheless, such direct absence does not mean that we cannot infer the author's ethical position from what is actually relayed by his characters.

Austerlitz is an architectural historian, and while his historical information on Leopold's architectural exploits extends no further than formal detail and some historical, contextual coloring, the hubris inscribed in the Centraal Station project, as outlined by Jacques Austerlitz, is an implicit critique of the moral system that facilitated such enterprises. Sebald's narrator recollects, at length:

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Austerlitz began, in reply to my questions about the history of the building of Antwerp station, when Belgium [...] spread its sphere of influence to the African continent with its colonial enterprises, when deals of huge proportions were done on the capital markets and raw-materials exchanges of Brussels, and the citizens of Belgium [...] believed that their country [...] was about to become a great new economic power—at that time, now so long ago although it determines our lives to this day, it was the personal wish of King Leopold, under whose auspices such apparently inexorable progress was being made, that the money suddenly and abundantly available should be used to erect public buildings which would bring international renown to his aspiring state.[40]

The definition and the integrity of the architectural imprint of Leopold's rail-station elude Jacques Austerlitz as he traverses Europe in search of hints at and clues to his maternal and paternal origins. Yet, the barely buried links between the background to Austerlitz's ethnic and familial isolation, and the tyrannical extraction techniques of Leopold's *Force Publique* in the Congo, are part of Sebald's subtext at this point. Equally important is the coincidence of Casement's research in and his 1903 report on Leopold's Congo, as well as the decade-long construction project, which was funded by the inhumanity witnessed and documented by Casement. Moral turpitude, then, shadows such decadent and narcissistic architectural assertions. The passage just quoted is notable for an implicit ironic commentary on the brutal intensity and lingering influence of capitalist colonialism and its derivatives. And here, Sebald reveals, and ironizes, the moral calculus informing Belgium's self-fashioning as an emergent colonial player, referred to by Sebald in *The Rings of Saturn* as Belgium's "dark Congolese secret." [41]

While *Austerlitz* navigates *MittelEuropa* as a site of personal loss and forgetting, touching upon national and ethnic violence as it proceeds, *The Rings of Saturn* is, at one level, rooted in rural East Anglia, but is peppered with copious digressions into spatially and temporally distant lives and events. In this text, Sebald corrals a gallery of canonical writers—Kafka, Flaubert, Coleridge, Borges—alongside a variety of historical curiosities, including Thomas Browne and Edward Fitzgerald. But it is his chapter centered on Joseph Conrad and Casement that is of most relevance here, and that offers a point of comparison to McKendrick's equivalent literary treatment of the pair. *The Rings of Saturn* is formally and thematically continuous with much of Sebald's other work—critical of politico-economic hegemonies, and associative in its narrative progression. But it is far more direct in its exposition of historical accounts of global imperialism. Yet this apparent depth and range of historical detail actually belies the fact that Sebald's text is far more concerned with how such historical narratives are authored than achieving historical veracity. In other words, the text openly plays with its own verifiability and draws attention to its contingency and artificiality.

In Chapter V, devoted to Conrad and Casement, Sebald's narrator recalls visiting the touristic curiosity, The Waterloo Panorama, a visual—3D and 2D—rendering of the famous battle. The narrator finds the combination of visual representations slightly disorienting, but, at the same time, reflects: "This, then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do know how it was." [42] This conceit addresses

familiar questions pertaining to the politics of memory and historical representation at a general level, and is one of the principal preoccupations of *The Rings of Saturn*.^[43] But akin to McKendrick, Sebald expounds upon these representational conflicts and dynamics through the historical and memorial debates surrounding Casement. Employing both interpolated visual and verbal texts, alluding to patriotism, sexuality, and humanitarianism, Sebald enlists Casement, and Casement's memory, as exemplary of the false perspectivalism of historical representation.

Chapter V opens with Sebald's narrator recumbent in an armchair in a hotel in the Norfolk town of Southold: "After the late news, the BBC broadcast a documentary about Roger Casement, who was executed in a London prison in 1916 for high treason. The images in this film, many of which were taken from rare archive footage, immediately captivated me; but nonetheless, I fell asleep in the green velvet armchair."^[44] The narrator's subsequent reflection on Conrad's revolutionary family history and his own Congo experiences, which overlapped with Casement's, are catalyzed by an audio-visual prompt, mediated and popular history—a common feature of Sebaldian narratives. Yet, in a further Sebaldian technique, there is something blackly humorous, oxymoronic, about his initial captivation soon followed by sound sleep. When the narrator emerges from his somnolent state, the only recollection of the documentary film he retains is its "account of Casement's meeting with the writer Joseph Conrad in the Congo."^[45] We then read a by-now familiar version of Conrad's Casement, which highlights his moral integrity and his comfort in the hostile geography of the Congo—details which, at this point, amount to the narrator's total knowledge of these briefly intersecting lives. Almost immediately, and as a self-conscious acknowledgement of the tenuous nature of his narrative's historical anchorage, Sebald's narrator admits that "Since I had lost the rest of the narrator's account of the lives of Casement and Conrad, except for these few words and some shadowy images of the two men, I have since tried to reconstruct from the sources, as far as I have been able, the story I slept through that night in Southold."^[46] The admission acts as a preface to the successive narrative accounts of Conrad and Casement in Chapter V, but also self-reflexively exposes the provisionality of these same accounts. The factuality of these lives is openly relegated in these brief prefatory comments, as the narrator gestures to the limits of the information presented on foot of his research. From scraps of retained personal memories of a documentary—of mediated history—together with some limited historical research, Sebald offers us versions of Conrad and Casement that are far less about the fine details of their lives than about the ways in which such lives are, to use his own term, "reconstructed." In fact, the references to "shadowiness" and "sleep" in this prefatory reflection further impress the insubstantial nature of historical record and memory for Sebald and for his narrator. And, in the current context, part of Casement's significance for Sebald is in the fact that his historical "reconstruction(s)" have been assigned to the realms of the shadowy and the marginal. For many historians, Casement spotlights, and troubles, the ways in which disciplinary history is managed according to presiding moral and political agenda.^[47]

Sebald inserts a familiar, late image of Casement in the second sentence of Chapter V, quoted above. Now, the particular image may be suggestive in itself, but it also represents a well-established Sebaldian blending of the visual and the verbal in his texts. As we shall discuss further below, the placement of the photograph points to a number of possible readings within the thematic context of the novel. Firstly, it coalesces with the initial visual prompt via the BBC documentary, thus apparently investing the visual record with some degree of representational accuracy and historical verifiability. Yet, as in most of Sebald's interpolated visual texts in the novel, the image remains uncaptioned, undated, unmediated—we have to

infer it is Casement from the surrounding verbal text. This may seem facile to an Irish reader, but Sebald's refusal to confirm and to conform to conventional photographic presentation does engender a level of ambiguity in this chapter, as well as across the broader narrative. If one comes to a Sebaldian text looking for the use of visual texts as confirmatory adjuncts to verbal records, one is left wanting. And this is one of the ways in which Casement becomes a part of the author's larger concern with the nature and functions of historical writing and related strategies and techniques of remembrance. In the context of the chapter, this is one of four images related to Casement: in sequence, we see a picture of Casement departing the law courts after his appeal has been dismissed; entries from his Letts Pocket Book and Almanac Diary from the 29th, 30th, and 31st of March, and April 1, 1903; and a reproduction of his signature dated April 14, 1916.[48] The four artifacts encompass Casement's work in the Congo, his time in Germany, his execution for treason, and his homosexuality—more abstractly, sexual morality, humanitarianism, and patriotism/revolutionary nationalism. Thus, the very selectivity in operation in choosing these precise images are revealing of Sebald's "version" of Casement that can embody, and speaks to, the politics and the ethics of representation under scrutiny across *The Rings of Saturn*—most acutely, and divisively within German literary studies, the narrator's assertion that "We may draw from this the conclusion that it was precisely Casement's homosexuality that sensitized him to the continuing oppression, exploitation, enslavement and destruction, across the borders of social class and race, of those who were furthest from the centres of power." [49] Quite apart from any possible reductionism evident here, such sentiments contribute to what Finch again terms "Sebald's concern to stylize Casement as an isolated advocate of oppressed colonial peoples, whether this stylization bears a close relationship to the historical record or not." [50] Casement's sexuality, then, is read as contradictory of mainstream, heteronormative historiography by Sebald. The postmodernist edges of his co-location of visual and verbal texts are then not simply confined to testing the boundaries of literary representation and historical representation, but are facets of a politics that endorses a "queer" challenge to colonialist, historicist norms.[51] For Anne Fuchs Sebald's iteration of Casement is hagiographic, in that it presents Casement as a "tragic hero, a solitary figure who undertakes an heroic attempt to intervene to change the bad course of history." [52]

Just as the textually committed historical archive is now open to discursive, theoretical, and historiographical interrogation in the wake of post-structuralism, feminism, postcolonial studies and deconstruction, the natural or literal evidence of visual correspondence is interrogated with equal vigor. As Raphael Samuel urges, "It is a curious fact that historians, who are normally so pernickety about the evidential status of their documents, are content to take photographs on trust. [...W]e do not feel obliged to question, or for that matter to corroborate the picture's authenticity, to inquire into its provenance, or to speculate in why some figures are there and others [...] are not." [53] Whereas history and its narration are often affiliated with its commitment to textual representation and memory, and whereas the inculcation of popular consent is perhaps more associated with the articulacy of the visual image, equally, the indexicality and the "composure" of the photographic referent lend themselves to the construction and the maintenance of narrative and also sanction remembrance through narrative continuity. Photographic images are too often treated as evidence of history and their own historical *situation* is elided. In other words, to distill Samuel's argument still further, the photograph plays a secondary, confirmatory role in the narration of history; it is a prop to the main historical drama. If photographic images are confined to mere confirmation, they are of depressed value to the historian or cultural critic.

But there is an inevitable unpredictability to the photographic moment; the photographer may be assumed to be the dominant representative authority in this exchange, but unlike paintings or drawings, photography is always infiltrated by an element of contingency. As Chris Pinney argues, there is always an excess waiting to appear from beneath the surface of the photographic image. He suggests:

No matter how precautionary and punctilious the photographer is in arranging everything that is placed before the camera, the inability of the lens to discriminate will ensure a substrate or margin of excess, a subversive code present in every photographic image that makes it open and available to other readings and uses. Thus we might understand photography's indexicality to be the guarantee not of closure and fixity, but rather of multiple surfaces and of the possibility of 'looking past'. It is precisely photography's inability to discriminate, its inability to exclude that makes it so textured and so fertile.[54]

Pinney's argument problematizes the facile confirmatory duties of photographic images as historical evidence and, consequently, renders such images of less value to the operations of dominant political constituencies. While photography was employed as a form of social surveillance and of social homogenization, these functions depend on the exclusionary devices of narrative representation. In reading photographic images in this way, we can partake of "photography's other histories." It opens the door to chance, randomness, and the dissolution of self-perpetuating narrative codes. And this seems to be the way in which photography is employed in *Austerlitz* and in *The Rings of Saturn*: as readers, we cannot, and should not, assume that these photographs are irrefutable evidence. They are not; they are, rather, further narrative devices that purport to give us facts and reality, but that ultimately are equally open to interpretation and dispute. Just as the chapter-less text of *Austerlitz* hints at, but ultimately fails to provide, continuity through discontinuity, likewise the inclusion of photographs hints at, in both narratives, objective truth, or an accurate representation of reality. But they actually reveal nothing more than further ambiguity, disjunction, and randomness. He presents the reader with "visual images not because they underscore the written narrative," but "because they present the reader with that which the text alone cannot." [55] In simple terms, with both verbal and visual texts, selection means presence for some details but absence for others, and it is the absences and the reasons and consequences for these absences that in the end are the focus for Sebald.

In his most recent critical study, *The Virtues of Poetry*, James Longenbach opens with the assertion that "The best poems ever written constitute our future. They refine our notions of excellence by continuing to elude them. [...] No great poem ever stood in the way of the future, foreclosing imaginative possibilities by asking us to endorse a narrow vision of the past or a sectarian arrangement of our contemporaries." [56] Longenbach's contention prefaces a protracted study of linguistic, formal mechanics of poets such as Donne, Blake, Yeats, Dickinson, Pound and Bishop, yet it can just as effectively illuminate the literary iterations of Casement considered here. While McKendrick's and Sebald's works spotlight the historical, in terms of their engagement with Casement, neither resorts to crude nostalgia; nor do they retreat to the paranoid dichotomies that have blighted Casement's historical reception, particularly in Ireland. Their aesthetic and ethical versions of Casement cast him as complex and flawed, certainly, yet, more importantly—and in tune with the essence of Longenbach's argument—exemplary in his humanitarianism. Retrieved from the past, Casement becomes an ethical reference point in the present, and for the future; though he is historically absent, we gain through his aesthetic presence. [57]

[1] Lucy McDiarmid, "The Posthumous Life of Roger Casement," in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, eds. Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 129. Also see McDiarmid's *The Irish Art of Controversy* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2005).

[2] In the Irish context, for an excellent discussion of memory and remembrance, see Emilie Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).

[3] Angus Mitchell, *Casement* (London: Haus Publishing, 2003), 2.

[4] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations: Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory* 26 (Spring 1989), 9.

[5] Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," 9.

[6] McDiarmid lists, among others, novels such as Eimear O'Duffy's *The Wasted Island* (1929), Stevie Smith's *Over the Frontier* (1938), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and Terence de Vere White's *Lucifer Falling* (1966); poems such as, Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* and Paul Durcan's "The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian," from *Daddy, Daddy* (1990); and plays such as, *The Challengers* by Padraic Colum (1966) and *Prisoner of the Crown* by Richard F Stockton (1973); see McDiarmid, "The Posthumous Life," 154, n. 7.

[7] For a discussion of Casement in Joyce's *Ulysses* that deals with sexuality, nationalism, and colonialism, see Patrick Mullen's "Ruling Passion: James Joyce, Roger Casement and the Poor Bugger's Tool," *Critical Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2004), 95-118. See also, Mullen's more recent *The Poor Bugger's Tool: Irish Modernism, Queer Labor, and Postcolonial History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[8] Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Lost World* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912).

[9] Arthur Conan Doyle to Casement, August 1910, cited in Angus Mitchell, *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1997), 378.

[10] Another character in the novel, the journalist Edward Malone, was based on Casement's friend and fellow campaigner in the *Congo Reform Association*, the journalist Edmund Dene Morel. Conan Doyle was a keen supporter of the work of the CRA.

[11] Mario Vargas Llosa, "Foreword," in *Roger Casement in Brazil: Rubber, the Amazon and the Atlantic World 1884-1916*, ed. Angus Mitchell (Sao Paulo: Humanitas, 2010), n.p.

[12] On Casement's poetry and interest in Irish history, see Margaret O'Callaghan, "'With the Eyes of Another Race, of a People once Hunted Themselves': Casement, Colonialism and a Remembered Past," in *Ireland in Transition, 1867-1921*, eds. George Boyce and Alan O' Day (London: Routledge, 2004), 159-77.

[13] Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Dream of the Celt* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012).

[14] For a deeply critical review of the novel see Colm Tóibín, "A Man of No Mind," *London Review of Books* 13 (September 2012), 15-16.

[15] McKendrick's work has always been particularly attentive to the relationship between human and natural worlds. For instance, see his first collection *The Sirocco Room* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), while his most recent collection *Out There* (London: Faber and Faber: 2012) alights on both this latter concern and issues related to historical and contemporary politics.

[16] Polina Ivanova, "Jamie McKendrick: On Crocodiles, Obelisks and the Blank Page," *The ISIS*, (February 8, 2013), <http://isismagazine.org.uk/2013/02/jamie-mckendrick-on-crocodiles-obelisks-and-the-blank-page/>

[17] Ailsa Hunt, "Pozzuoli of the Heart: Overlapping Fragments of the Classical Past in the Poetry of Jamie McKendrick" *Classical Reception Journal* (November 2013), <http://crj.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2013/11/07/crj.clt028.full.pdf+html>

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ivanova, “Crocodiles, Obelisks and the Blank Page.”

[20] Jamie McKendrick, *Crocodiles and Obelisks* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 3.

[21] In this vein, Helen Finch argues: “Hence, the utopian aspect of Sebald’s secular metaphysics departs from his Benjaminian project of bushing history against the grain and discovering the forgotten stories of histories victims. [...] Ultimately, the only place in which these metaphysical utopias can be realised at all is in the ‘literary time’ or landscape of the prose itself”; see Finch, “‘Die irdische Erfüllung’: Peter Handke’s Poetic Landscapes and W. G. Sebald’s Metaphysics of History,” in *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, eds. Anne Fuchs and Jonathan Long (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), 182.

[22] McKendrick, *Crocodiles and Obelisks*, 46.

[23] Both poems are collected in Yeats’s *New Poems* (1938). For the textual histories of the poems, see W.B. Yeats, *New Poems: Manuscript Materials*, eds. J.C.C. Mays and Stephen Parrish (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2000), 133-66.

[24] Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Pan MacMillan, 2006 [1998]), 195-208. An earlier exposure of Leopold’s Congo is Neal Ascherson, *The King Incorporated: Leopold the Second and the Congo* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963).

[25] McKendrick, *Crocodiles and Obelisks*, 25.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] William J. Maloney, *The Forged Casement Diaries* (Cork and Dublin: Talbot Press, 1936).

[28] Quoted in, for one, B.L. Reid, *The Lives of Roger Casement* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976), 460-61.

[29] McKendrick, *Crocodiles and Obelisks*, 26.

[30] For a recent treatment of Casement’s investigations in South America, see Jordan Goodman, *The Devil and Mr. Casement: One Man’s Struggle for Human Rights in South America’s Heart of Darkness* (London: Verso, 2009).

[31] McKendrick, *Crocodiles and Obelisks*, 26.

[32] Maya Jaggi, “The Last Word—an interview with W.G. Sebald,” *The Guardian* (21 December 2001), <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2001/dec/21/artsandhumanities.highereducation>.

[33] Helen Finch, *Sebald’s Bachelors: Queer Resistance and the Unconforming Life* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), 1.

[34] In a postcolonial critical context, see Lucienne Loh, *The Postcolonial Country in Contemporary Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 31-56.

[35] Sebald, *Vertigo* (London: Harvill Press, 1990), *The Emigrants* (London: Harvill Press, 1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (London: Harvill Press, 1999), *Austerlitz* (New York: Random House, 2001).

[36] J.J. Long, “History, Narrative and Photography in W. G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten*,” *Modern Language Review* 98, no. 1 (2003), 117. See also, Long’s *W.G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 130-48.

[37] Barbara Hui, “Mapping Historical Networks in *Die Ringe des Saturn*,” in *The Undiscover’d Country: W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, ed. Markus Zisselsberger (New York: Camden House, 2010), 284. Hui concludes that “the spatial imaginary of *Die Ringe des Saturn* expands to include a cosmological view of the earth, and in investigating the multiple, complex networks that fill these layers of space, we can better understand Sebald’s commitment to an investigation of place that is inextricably linked to its multiple global pasts”; see Hui, 296 [my emphasis].

[38] Jacques Austerlitz bears the hallmark characteristics of a traumatized victim of history, and fits the profile described by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub: “Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect”; see their *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 69.

[39] W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (New York: Random House, 2001), 5-6.

[40] Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 9.

[41] W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London: Harvill Press, 1999), 122.

[42] *Ibid.*, 125.

[43] Surveying the landscape as he flies from Amsterdam to Norwich, the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* reflects: “If we view ourselves from a great height, it is frightening to realize how little we know about our species, our purpose and our end [...]”; *ibid.*, 92.

[44] *Ibid.*, 103.

[45] *Ibid.*, 104.

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] This is particularly true of the work of Angus Mitchell.

[48] For the 1903 diaries and report see Séamas Ó Síocháin and Michael O’Sullivan, ed., *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement’s Congo Report and 1903 Diary* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2004).

[49] Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 134.

[50] Finch, *Sebald’s Bachelors*, 74.

[51] See Anne Fuchs and J.J. Long, ed., *W.G. Sebald and the Writing of History* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007).

[52] Anne Fuchs, *Die Schmerzesspuren der Geschichte: Zur der Erinnerung in W. G. Sebalds Prosa* (Vienna and Cologne: Bohlau, 2004), 200. Cited in Helen Finch, “‘Like refugees who have come through dreadful ordeals’: The Theme of the Anglo-Irish in *The Rings of Saturn*,” in *A Literature of Restitution: Critical Essays on W. G. Sebald*, eds., Jeannette Baxter, Ben Hutchinson, and Valerie Henitiuk (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013), 115.

[53] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, Volume I: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), 329-30.

[54] Christopher Pinney, “Introduction: ‘How The Other Half...,’” in *Photography’s Other Histories*, eds., Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2003), 6.

[55] Stefanie Harris, “The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W.G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten*,” *The German Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (2001), 379-91.

[56] James Longenbach, *The Virtues of Poetry* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2013), ix.

[57] *Ibid.*, 157.