

A Reception of Britain in Tacitus' *Agricola* and W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*

Studies in the reception of classical texts often tread a familiar path: demonstrating how a post-classical text has interpreted and transformed an earlier classical text (Martindale's "weak thesis," Martindale 1992). Naturally, reception scholars tend to study post-classical texts that explicitly signal their own relationship to classical texts. Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, for example, clearly offers the classicist insights into Homeric epic. However, a fruitful avenue of inquiry remains in the margins of reception studies as usually practiced. This avenue is to look further afield for post-classical texts that seem to engage with classical texts but not in such a way that we would call the relationship "reception." In juxtaposing two such texts, the reception scholar facilitates a dialogue between them. She takes an active role in constructing the reception between them, and, in the process, interrogates the definition and limits of the term "reception."

This paper will offer a short exploration of this second kind of reception study and demonstrate the larger questions such a study can offer about the nature of reception. I will present a case study of the relationship between two texts about Britain: Tacitus' geography of the island in the *Agricola* and W. G. Sebald's text *Die Ringe des Saturn*, translated into English as *The Rings of Saturn* (Sebald 1998). Sebald was a German academic and writer who lived in England's coastal region of East Anglia, where he taught literature and writing. *The Rings of Saturn* describes a year-long walking tour he took around the coastal region of East Anglia, where he was a lecturer. The landscape and the traces left there by the lives of people long ago affect Sebald with frequent horror and vertigo. Through a brief analysis of two passages, one involving a visit to a secret weapons facility on an island off the coast, and the other a labyrinthine maze of thicket, I show that the torturous confusions of the landscape are intertwined with the historical destruction that affects the author.

A reading of Sebald's text, I argue, throws into sharp relief the political character of the British landscape that Tacitus describes in *Agricola* 10. Several scholars have shown how the geography of the *Agricola*'s Britain and the island's relation to Rome is connected in different ways to political power (e.g. Ash 2010, Clarke 2001). I focus on 10.6, where Tacitus pronounces that the Ocean nowhere else rules (*dominari*) more widely. The shore does not present a barrier to the Ocean, but is instead penetrated as the water flows in as if in its own domain (*uelut in suo*). As Sebald negotiates such paradoxical landscapes, he is overcome not only by the strange land itself but also by the historical traces of destruction he finds there. Sebald connects the dominant, omnipresent Ocean of Tacitus with the ruler Domitian, whose name Tacitus hints at in the verb *dominari*. But Sebald's horror does not find expression in Tacitus' geography. The landscape poses no threat to Agricola, who successfully navigates it. Instead, the horror is deferred to Tacitus' reader, who recognizes this Domitianic power ruling even at the ends of the earth.

In this paper, I play an active role in facilitating the contact between these two works: I create, or realize, the reception. This is not to say that Sebald was ignorant of the *Agricola*. We can suspect, but cannot know, that it was familiar to Sebald, a German emigrant to England (cf. Catling and Hibbitt 2011). Sebald's silence about the *Agricola*, I argue, presents itself to the reception scholar as an opportunity to fulfill Tacitus' intention at his work's end that Agricola and the *Agricola* will survive, handed down to posterity (*Ag.* 46.4). It becomes the job of the reception scholar to keep the *Agricola* conversant: speaking to new texts about the presence of Domitianic power where it continues to live, in Sebald's Britain.

Bibliography

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