



W. G. SEBALD

THE RINGS OF SATURN

'A great, strange and moving work'
JAMES WOOD; *GUARDIAN*

VINTAGE

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W.G. Sebald

THE RINGS OF SATURN

Translated from the German by Michael Hulse

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Published by Vintage 2002

8 10 9 7

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Frankfurt am Main, 1995

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First published with the title *Die Ringe des Saturn* by
Vito von Eichborn Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1995

First published in Great Britain in 1998 by
The Harvill Press

Vintage
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney,
New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited
18 Poland Road, Glenfield
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House (Pty) Limited
Isle of Houghton, Corner of Boundary Road & Carse O'Gowrie,
Houghton 2198, South Africa

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

www.randomhouse.co.uk/vintage

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 9780099448921 (from Jan 2007)
ISBN 0099448920

Papers used by Random House are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin

Printed in the UK by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4TD

CONTENTS

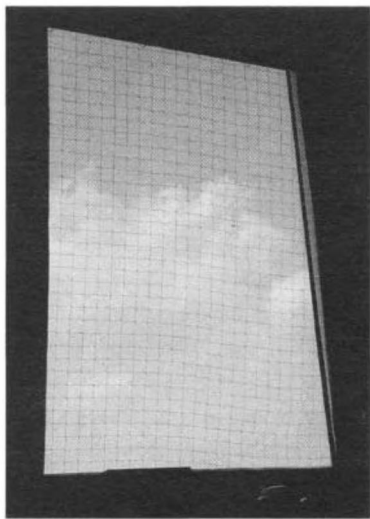
- I In hospital – Obituary – Odyssey of Thomas Browne’s skull – Anatomy lecture – Levitation – Quincunx – Fabled creatures – Urn burial I
- II The diesel train – Morton Peto’s palace – Visiting Somerleyton – The cities of Germany in flames – The decline of Lowestoft – The former coastal resort – Frederick Farrar and the court of King James II 27
- III Fishermen on the beach – The natural history of the herring – George Wyndham Le Strange – A great herd of swine – The reduplication of man – Orbis Tertius 49
- IV The Battle of Sole Bay – Nightfall – Station Road in The Hague – Mauritshuis – Scheveningen – The tomb of St Sebolt – Schiphol airport – The invisibility of man – The Sailors’ Reading Room – Pictures from the Great War – The concentration camp at Jasenovac on the Sava 73
- V Conrad and Casement – The Boy Teodor – Exile in Volgda – Nowofastów – Death and interment of Apollo Korzensiowski – Sea- and love-life – A winter journey – The heart of darkness – The panorama of Waterloo – Casement, the slave economy and the Irish question – Casement tried and executed for treason 101
- VI The bridge over the Blyth – The Chinese court train – The Taiping rebellion and the opening of China – Destruction of the garden of Yuan Ming Yuan – The end of Emperor Hsien-feng – The Dowager Empress Tz’u-hsi – Mysteries of power – The town beneath the sea – Poor Algernon 135

- VII Dunwich heath – Marsh Acres, Middleton – A Berlin childhood – Exile in England – Dreams, elective affinities, correspondences – Two strange stories – Through the rainforest 167
- VIII A conversation about sugar – Boulge Park – The FitzGerald's – The Bredfield nursery – Edward FitzGerald's literary ventures – A Magic Shadow-Show – Loss of a friend – Year's end – Last journey, summer landscape, tears of happiness – A game of dominoes – An Irish memory – On the history of the civil war – Arson, impoverishment and decline – Catherine of Siena – The entrepreneurial spirit and the cult of the pheasant – Through the desert – Secret weapons of destruction – In another country 191
- IX The Temple of Jerusalem – Charlotte Ives and the Vicomte de Chateaubriand – Memoirs from beyond the grave – In Ditchingham churchyard – Ditchingham Park – The hurricane of 16th October, 1987 239
- X Thomas Browne's *Musæum Clausum* – The silkworm moth, *Bombyx mori* – Origins and spread of sericulture – The Norwich silk-weavers – The melancholy of the weavers – Pattern books: nature and art – Sericulture in Germany – The extermination business – Mourning silk 269

I

In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work. And in fact my hope was realized, up to a point; for I have seldom felt so carefree as I did then, walking for hours in the day through the thinly populated countryside, which stretches inland from the coast. I wonder now, however, whether there might be something in the old superstition that certain ailments of the spirit and of the body are particularly likely to beset us under the sign of the Dog Star. At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralysing 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. Perhaps it was because of this that, a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility. It was then that I began in my thoughts

to write these pages. I can remember precisely how, upon being admitted to that room on the eighth floor, I became overwhelmed by the feeling that the Suffolk expanses I had walked the previous summer had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot. Indeed, all that could be seen of the world from my bed was the colourless patch of sky framed in the window.



Several times during the day I felt a desire to assure myself of a reality I feared had vanished forever by looking out of that hospital window, which, for some strange reason, was draped with black netting, and as dusk fell the wish became so strong that, contriving to slip over the edge of the bed to the floor, half on my belly and half sideways, and then to reach the wall on all

fours, I dragged myself, despite the pain, up to the window sill. In the tortured posture of a creature that has raised itself erect for the first time I stood leaning against the glass. I could not help thinking of the scene in which poor Gregor Samsa, his little legs trembling, climbs the armchair and looks out of his room, no longer remembering (so Kafka's narrative goes) the sense of liberation that gazing out of the window had formerly given him. And just as Gregor's dimmed eyes failed to recognize the quiet street where he and his family had lived for years, taking Charlottenstraße for a grey wasteland, so I too found the familiar city, extending from the hospital courtyards to the far horizon, an utterly alien place. I could not believe that anything might still be alive in that maze of buildings down there; rather, it was as if I were looking down from a cliff upon a sea of stone or a field of rubble, from which the tenebrous masses of multi-storey car parks rose up like immense boulders. At that twilight hour there were no passers-by to be seen in the immediate vicinity, but for a nurse crossing the cheerless gardens outside the hospital entrance on the way to her night shift. An ambulance with its light flashing was negotiating a number of turns on its way from the city centre to Casualty. I could not hear its siren; at that height I was cocooned in an almost complete and, as it were, artificial silence. All I could hear was the wind sweeping in from the country and buffeting the window; and in between, when the sound subsided, there was the never entirely ceasing murmur in my own ears.

Now that I begin to assemble my notes, more than a year after my discharge from hospital, I cannot help thinking of Michael

Parkinson who was, as I stood watching the city fade into the dying light, still alive in his small house in the Portersfield Road, busy perhaps, preparing a seminar or working on his study of Charles Ramuz, which had occupied him for many years. Michael was in his late forties, a bachelor, and, I believe, one of the most innocent people I have ever met. Nothing was ever further from his thoughts than self-interest; nothing troubled him quite so much as the dire responsibility of performing his duties, under increasingly adverse conditions. Above all, he was remarkable for the modesty of his needs, which some considered bordered on eccentricity. At a time when most people have constantly to be shopping in order to survive, Michael seemed to have no such need. Year in, year out, as long as I knew him, he wore either a navy blue or a rust-coloured jacket, and if the cuffs were frayed or the elbows threadbare he would sew on leather trims or patches. He even turned the collars of his shirts himself. In the summer vacations, Michael would make long walking tours of the Valais and the area around Lake Geneva, in connection with his Ramuz studies, and sometimes in the Jura or the Cévennes. It often seemed to me, when he returned from these travels or when I marvelled at the degree of dedication he always brought to his work, that in his own way he had found happiness, in a modest form that is scarcely conceivable nowadays. But then without warning last May Michael, who had not been seen for some days, was found dead in his bed, lying on his side and already quite rigid, his face curiously mottled with red blotches. The inquest concluded that he had died of unknown causes, a verdict to which I added the words, in the deep and

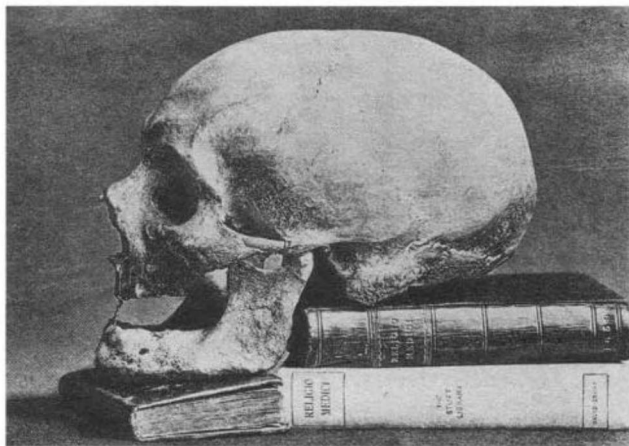
dark hours of the night. The shock that went through us at this quite unexpected death affected no one more deeply than Janine Dakyns, who, like Michael, was a lecturer in Romance languages and unmarried too. Indeed, one might say that she was so unable to bear the loss of the ingenuous, almost childlike friendship they had shared, that a few weeks after his death she succumbed to a disease that swiftly consumed her body. Janine, who lived in a lane next to the hospital, had, like Michael, studied at Oxford and over the years had come to a profound understanding of the nineteenth-century French novel that had about it a certain private quality, wholly free of intellectual vanity and was guided by a fascination for obscure detail rather than by the self-evident. Gustave Flaubert was for her by far the finest of writers, and on many occasions she quoted long passages from the thousands of pages of his correspondence, never failing to astound me. Janine had taken an intense personal interest in the scruples which dogged Flaubert's writing, that fear of the false which, she said, sometimes kept him confined to his couch for weeks or months on end in the dread that he would never be able to write another word without compromising himself in the most grievous of ways. Moreover, Janine said, he was convinced that everything he had written hitherto consisted solely in a string of the most abysmal errors and lies, the consequences of which were immeasurable. Janine maintained that the source of Flaubert's scruples was to be found in the relentless spread of stupidity which he had observed everywhere, and which he believed had already invaded his own head. It was (so supposedly once he said) as if one was sinking into sand. This

was probably the reason, she said, that sand possessed such significance in all of Flaubert's works. Sand conquered all. Time and again, said Janine, vast dust clouds drifted through Flaubert's dreams by day and by night, raised over the arid plains of the African continent and moving north across the Mediterranean and the Iberian peninsula till sooner or later they settled like ash from a fire on the Tuileries gardens, a suburb of Rouen or a country town in Normandy, penetrating into the tiniest crevices. In a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary's winter gown, said Janine, Flaubert saw the whole of the Sahara. For him, every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas mountains. Many a time, at the end of a working day, Janine would talk to me about Flaubert's view of the world, in her office where there were such quantities of lecture notes, letters and other documents lying around that it was like standing amidst a flood of paper. On the desk, which was both the origin and the focal point of this amazing profusion of paper, a virtual paper landscape had come into being in the course of time, with mountains and valleys. Like a glacier when it reaches the sea, it had broken off at the edges and established new deposits all around on the floor, which in turn were advancing imperceptibly towards the centre of the room. Years ago, Janine had been obliged by the ever-increasing masses of paper on her desk to bring further tables into use, and these tables, where similar processes of accretion had subsequently taken place, represented later epochs, so to speak, in the evolution of Janine's paper universe. The carpet, too, had long since vanished beneath several inches of paper; indeed, the paper had begun climbing from the floor, on which, year after year, it

had settled, and was now up the walls as high as the top of the door frame, page upon page of memoranda and notes pinned up in multiple layers, all of them by just one corner. Wherever it was possible there were piles of papers on the books on her shelves as well. It once occurred to me that at dusk, when all of this paper seemed to gather into itself the pallor of the fading light, it was like the snow in the fields, long ago, beneath the ink-black sky. In the end Janine was reduced to working from an easychair drawn more or less into the middle of her room where, if one passed her door, which was always ajar, she could be seen bent almost double scribbling on a pad on her knees or sometimes just lost in thought. Once when I remarked that sitting there amidst her papers she resembled the angel in Dürer's *Melancholia*, steadfast among the instruments of destruction, her response was that the apparent chaos surrounding her represented in reality a perfect kind of order, or an order which at least tended towards perfection. And the fact was that whatever she might be looking for amongst her papers or her books, or in her head, she was generally able to find right away. It was Janine who referred me to the surgeon Anthony Batty Shaw, whom she knew from the Oxford Society, when after my discharge from hospital I began my enquiries about Thomas Browne, who had practised as a doctor in Norwich in the seventeenth century and had left a number of writings that defy all comparison. An entry in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had told me that Browne's skull was kept in the museum of the Norfolk & Norwich Hospital. Unequivocal though this claim appeared, my attempts to locate the skull in the very place where

until recently I had been a patient met with no success, for none of the ladies and gentlemen of the present administrative staff at the hospital was aware that any such museum existed. Not only did they stare at me in utter incomprehension when I voiced my strange request, but I even had the impression that some of those I asked thought of me as an eccentric crank. Yet it is well known that in the period when public health and hygiene were being reformed and hospitals established, many of these institutions kept museums, or rather chambers of horrors, in which prematurely born, deformed or hydrocephalic foetuses, hypertrophied organs, and other items of a similar nature were preserved in jars of formaldehyde, for medical purposes, and occasionally exhibited to the public. The question was where the things had got to. The local history section of the main library, which has since been destroyed by fire, was unable to give me any information concerning the Norfolk & Norwich Hospital and the whereabouts of Browne's skull. It was not until I made contact with Anthony Batty Shaw, through Janine, that I obtained the information I was after. Thomas Browne, so Batty Shaw wrote in an article he sent me which he had just published in the *Journal of Medical Biography*, died in 1682 on his seventy-seventh birthday and was buried in the parish church of St Peter Mancroft in Norwich. There his mortal remains lay undisturbed until 1840, when the coffin was damaged during preparations for another burial in the chancel, and its contents partially exposed. As a result, Browne's skull and a lock of his hair passed into the possession of one Dr Lubbock, a parish councillor, who in turn left the relics in his will to the

hospital museum, where they were put on display amidst various anatomical curiosities until 1921 under a bell jar. It was not until then that St Peter Mancroft's repeated request for the return of Browne's skull was acceded to, and, almost a quarter of a millennium after the first burial, a second interment was performed with all due ceremony. Curiously enough, Browne himself, in his famous part-archaeological and part-metaphysical treatise, *Urn Burial*, offers the most fitting commentary on the subsequent odyssey of his own skull when he writes that to be gnaw'd out of our graves is a tragical abomination. But, he adds, who is to know the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?



Thomas Browne was born in London on the 19th of October 1605, the son of a silk merchant. Little is known of his childhood, and the accounts of his life following completion of his

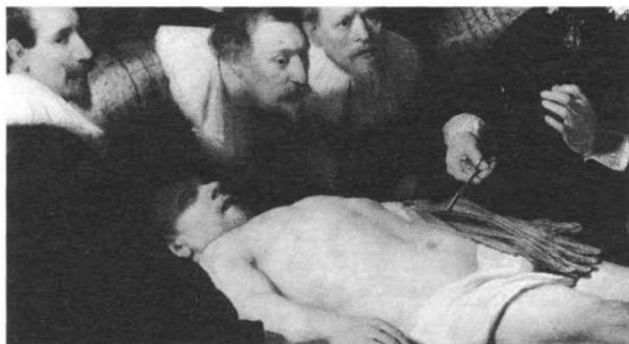
master's degree at Oxford tell us scarcely anything about the nature of his later medical studies. All we know for certain is that from his twenty-fifth to his twenty-eighth year he attended the universities of Montpellier, Padua and Vienna, then outstanding in the Hippocratic sciences, and that just before returning to England, received a doctorate in medicine from Leiden. In January 1632, while Browne was in Holland, and thus at a time when he was engaging more profoundly with the mysteries of the human body than ever before, the dissection of a corpse was undertaken in public at the Waaggebouw in Amsterdam – the body being that of Adriaan Adriaanszoon alias Aris Kindt, a petty thief of that city who had been hanged for his misdemeanours an hour or so earlier. Although we have no definite evidence for this, it is probable that Browne would have heard of the dissection and was present at the extraordinary event, which Rembrandt depicted in his painting of the Guild of Surgeons, for the anatomy lessons given every year in the depth of winter by Dr Nicolaas Tulp were not only of the greatest interest to a student of medicine but constituted in addition a significant date in the agenda of a society that saw itself as emerging from the darkness into the light. The spectacle, presented before a paying public drawn from the upper classes, was no doubt a demonstration of the undaunted investigative zeal in the new sciences; but it also represented (though this surely would have been refuted) the archaic ritual of dismembering a corpse, of harrowing the flesh of the delinquent even beyond death, a procedure then still part of the ordained punishment.

That the anatomy lesson in Amsterdam was about more than a thorough knowledge of the inner organs of the human body is suggested by Rembrandt's representation of the ceremonial nature of the dissection – the surgeons are in their finest attire, and Dr Tulp is wearing a hat on his head – as well as by the fact that afterwards there was a formal, and in a sense symbolic, banquet. If we stand today before the large canvas of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* in the Mauritshuis we are standing precisely where those who were present at the dissection in the Waaggebouw stood, and we believe that we see what they saw then: in the foreground, the greenish, prone body of Aris Kindt, his neck broken and his chest risen terribly in rigor mortis. And yet it is debatable whether anyone ever really saw that body, since the art of anatomy, then in its infancy, was not least a way of making the reprobate body invisible. It is somehow odd that Dr Tulp's colleagues are not looking at Kindt's body, that their gaze is directed just past it to focus on the open anatomical atlas in which the appalling physical facts are reduced to a diagram, a schematic plan of the human being, such as envisaged by the enthusiastic amateur anatomist René Descartes, who was also, so it is said, present that January morning in the Waaggebouw. In his philosophical investigations, which form one of the principal chapters of the history of subjection, Descartes teaches that one should disregard the flesh, which is beyond our comprehension, and attend to the machine within, to what can fully be understood, be made wholly useful for work, and, in the event of any fault, either repaired or discarded.



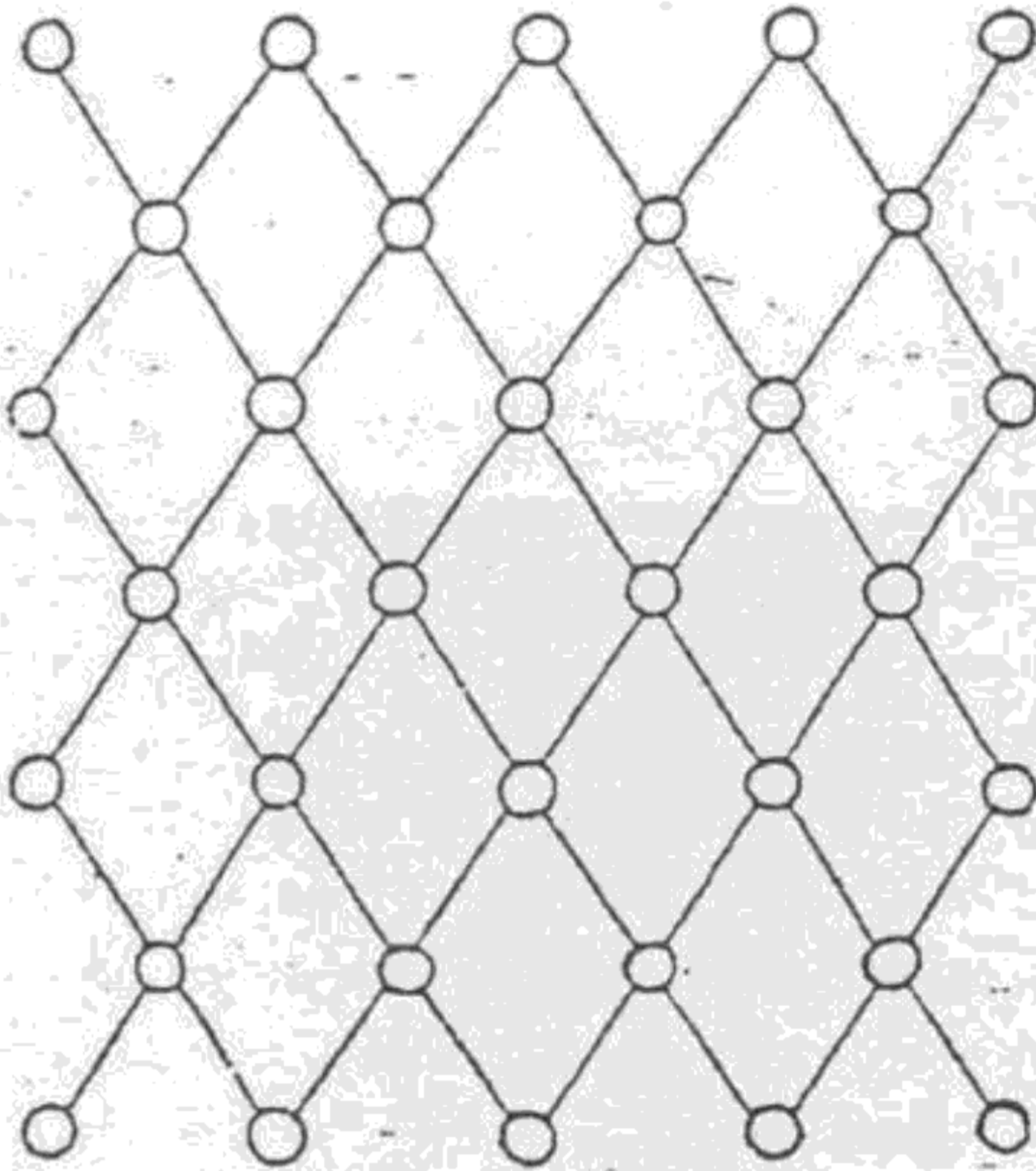


Though the body is open to contemplation, it is, in a sense, excluded, and in the same way the much-admired verisimilitude of Rembrandt's picture proves on closer examination to be more apparent than real. Contrary to normal practice, the anatomist shown here has not begun his dissection by opening the abdomen and removing the intestines, which are most prone to putrefaction, but has started (and this too may imply a punitive dimension to the act) by dissecting the offending hand. Now, this hand is most peculiar. It is not only grotesquely out of proportion compared with



the hand closer to us, but it is also anatomically the wrong way round: the exposed tendons, which ought to be those of the left palm, given the position of the thumb, are in fact those of the back of the right hand. In other words, what we are faced with is a transposition taken from the anatomical atlas, evidently without further reflection, that turns this otherwise true-to-life painting (if one may so express it) into a crass misrepresentation at the exact centre point of its meaning, where the incisions are

universe, with the eye of an outsider, one might even say of the creator. His only means of achieving the sublime heights that this endeavour required was a parlous loftiness in his language. In common with other English writers of the seventeenth century, Browne wrote out of the fullness of his erudition, deploying a vast repertoire of quotations and the names of authorities who had gone before, creating complex metaphors and analogies, and constructing labyrinthine sentences that sometimes extend over one or two pages, sentences that resemble processions or a funeral cortège in their sheer ceremonial lavishness. It is true that, because of the immense weight of the impediments he is carrying, Browne's writing can be held back by the force of gravitation, but when he does succeed in rising higher and higher through the circles of his spiralling prose, borne aloft like a glider on warm currents of air, even today the reader is overcome by a sense of levitation. The greater the distance, the clearer the view: one sees the tiniest of details with the utmost clarity. It is as if one were looking through a reversed opera glass and through a microscope at the same time. And yet, says Browne, all knowledge is enveloped in darkness. What we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow-filled edifice of the world. We study the order of things, says Browne, but we cannot grasp their innermost essence. And because it is so, it befits our philosophy to be writ small, using the shorthand and contracted forms of transient Nature, which alone are a reflection of eternity. True to his own prescription, Browne records the patterns which recur in the seemingly infinite diversity of forms; in *The Garden of Cyrus*, for instance, he draws the quincunx,



*Quid Quincunce Speciosius, qui, in
quam cuncta partem Spectaueris,
rectus est. Quintilian; //*

which is composed by using the corners of a regular quadrilateral and the point at which its diagonals intersect. Browne identifies this structure everywhere, in animate and inanimate matter: in certain crystalline forms, in starfish and sea urchins, in the vertebrae of mammals and the backbones of birds and fish, in the skins of various species of snake, in the crosswise prints left by quadrupeds, in the physical shapes of caterpillars, butterflies,

silkworms and moths, in the root of the water fern, in the seed husks of the sunflower and the Caledonian pine, within young oak shoots or the stem of the horsetail; and in the creations of mankind, in the pyramids of Egypt and the mausoleum of Augustus as in the garden of King Solomon, which was planted with mathematical precision with pomegranate trees and white lilies. Examples might be multiplied without end, says Browne, and one might demonstrate *ad infinitum* the elegant geometrical designs of Nature; however – thus, with a fine turn of phrase and image, he concludes his treatise – the constellation of the Hyades, the Quincunx of Heaven, is already sinking beneath the horizon, and so 'tis time to close the five ports of knowledge. We are unwilling to spin out our waking thoughts into the phantasmes of sleep; making cables of cobwebs and wildernesses of handsome groves. Besides, he adds, Hippocrates in his notes on sleeplessness has spoken so little of the miracle of plants, that there is scant encouragement to dream of Paradise, not least since in practice we are occupied above all by the abnormalities of creation, be they the deformities produced by sickness or the grotesqueries with which Nature, with an inventiveness scarcely less diseased, fills every vacant space in her atlas. And indeed, while on the one hand the study of Nature today aims to describe a system governed by immutable laws, on the other it delights in drawing our attention to creatures noteworthy for their bizarre physical form or behaviour. Even in Brehm's *Thierleben*, a popular nineteenth-century zoological compendium, pride of place is given to the crocodile and the kangaroo, the ant-eater and the armadillo, the seahorse and the pelican; and nowadays we are shown on the television

screen a colony of penguins, say, standing motionless through the long dark winter of the Antarctic, with its icy storms, on their feet the eggs laid at a milder time of year. In programmes of this kind, which are called *Nature Watch* or *Survival* and are considered particularly educational, one is more likely to see some monster coupling at the bottom of Lake Baikal than an ordinary blackbird. Thomas Browne too was often distracted from his investigations into the isomorphic line of the quincunx by singular phenomena that fired his curiosity, and by work on a comprehensive pathology. He is said to have long kept a bittern in his study in order to find out how this peculiar bird could produce from the depths of its throat such a strange bassoon-like sound, unique in the whole of Nature; and in the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, in which he dispels popular errors and legends, he deals with beings both real and imaginary, such as the chameleon, the salamander, the ostrich, the gryphon and the phoenix, the basilisk, the unicorn, and the amphisbaena, the serpent with two heads. In most cases, Browne refutes the existence of the fabled creatures, but the astonishing monsters that we know to be properly part of the natural world leave us with a suspicion that even the most fantastical beasts might not be mere inventions. At all events, it is clear from Browne's account that the endless mutations of Nature, which go far beyond any rational limit, and equally the chimaeras produced by our own minds, were as much a source of fascination to him as they were, three-hundred years later, to Jorge Luis Borges, whose *Libro de los seres imaginarios* was published in Buenos Aires in 1967. Recently I realized that the imaginary beings listed alphabetically in that compendium include the creature

Baldanders, whom Simplicius Simplicissimus encounters in the sixth book of Grimmelshausen's narrative. There, Baldanders is first seen as a stone sculpture lying in a forest, resembling a Germanic hero of old and wearing a Roman soldier's tunic with a big Swabian bib. Baldanders claims to have come from Paradise, to have always been in Simplicius's company, unbeknownst to him, and to be unable to quit his side until Simplicius shall have reverted to the clay he is made of. Then, before the very eyes of Simplicius, Baldanders changes into a scribe who writes these lines,

Ich bin der Anfang und das End
und gelte
an allen Orten.

Manoha-gilos, timad, ifaser, fale, iacob, falet,
enni nacob idil dadele neuaco ide eges Eli neme
meodi eledid emonatan desl negogag editor goga
naneg eriden, hohe ritatan auilac, hohe ilamen
riden diledi lifac usur sodaled atar, amu salifono-
nor macheli retorant; Vlidon dad amu ossoffon,
Gedal amu bede neuavv, alijs, dilede ronodavv
agnoh regnoh cni tata hyn lamini celotah, isis to-
lostabas oronatah affis tobulu, VViera saladid egri-
vi nanon ægar rimini lifac, heliofole Ramelu o-
nonor vvindelishi timinitur, bagoge gagoe hana-
nor elimitat.

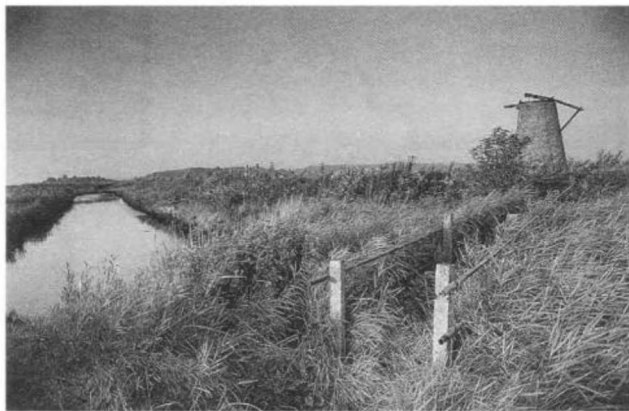
and then into a mighty oak, a sow, a sausage, a piece of excrement, a field of clover, a white flower, a mulberry tree, and a silk carpet. Much as in this continuous process of consuming and being consumed, nothing endures, in Thomas Browne's view. On every

a variety of curiosities: the circumcision knives of Joshua, the ring which belonged to the mistress of Propertius, an ape of agate, a grasshopper, three-hundred golden bees, a blue opal, silver belt buckles and clasps, combs, iron pins, brass plates and brazen nippers to pull away hair, and a brass jew's-harp that last sounded on the crossing over the black water. The most marvellous item, however, from a Roman urn preserved by Cardinal Farnese, is a drinking glass, so bright it might have been newly blown. For Browne, things of this kind, unspoiled by the passage of time, are symbols of the indestructibility of the human soul assured by scripture, which the physician, firm though he may be in his Christian faith, perhaps secretly doubts. And since the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man is to tell him he is at the end of his nature, Browne scrutinizes that which escaped annihilation for any sign of the mysterious capacity for transmigration he has so often observed in caterpillars and moths. That purple piece of silk he refers to, then, in the urn of Patroclus – what does it mean?

II

It was on a grey, overcast day in August 1992 that I travelled down to the coast in one of the old diesel trains, grimed with oil and soot up to the windows, which ran from Norwich to Lowestoft at that time. The few passengers that there were sat in the half-light on the threadbare seats, all of them facing the engine and as far away from each other as they could be, and so silent, that not a word might have passed their lips in the whole of their lives. Most of the time the carriage, pitching about unsteadily on the track, was merely coasting along, since there is an almost unbroken gentle decline towards the sea; at intervals, though, when the gears engaged with a jolt that rocked the entire framework, the grinding of cog wheels could be heard for a while, till, with a more even pounding, the onward roll resumed, past the back gardens, allotments, rubbish dumps and factory yards to the east of the city and out into the marshes beyond. Through Brundall, Buckenham and Cantley, where, at the end of a straight roadway, a sugar-beet refinery with a belching smokestack sits in a green field like a steamer at a wharf, the line follows the River

Yare, till at Reedham it crosses the water and, in a wide curve, enters the vast flatland that stretches southeast down to the sea. Save for the odd solitary cottage there is nothing to be seen but the grass and the rippling reeds, one or two sunken willows, and some ruined conical brick buildings, like relics of an extinct civilization. These are all that remains of the countless wind pumps and windmills whose white sails revolved over the marshes of



Halvergate and all along the coast until in the decades following the First World War, one after the other, they were all shut down. It's hard to imagine now, I was once told by someone who could remember the turning sails in his childhood, that the white flecks of the windmills lit up the landscape just as a tiny highlight brings life to a painted eye. And when those bright little points faded away, the whole region, so to speak, faded with them. – After Reedham we stopped at Haddiscoe and