»earth's slow turning into the dark«

Global Networks of Decay in W.G. Sebalds *The Rings of Saturn*

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What is the role that literary fiction plays when it comes to imagining earth and concepts of global wholeness? One might think that in an age of advanced media technologies and scientific theories, in the age of Google Earth and Ecocriticism, narrative prose no longer provides a relevant perspective of our home planet. The rise of geodesy in the course of the 18th century established scientific methods to measure planet Earth[1], and perhaps it is not by coincidence that literary fiction switched from holistic representations of the external world and the adventurous perils it provided to the internal psychology of fictional characters during the same time.[2] But until then, narrative literature had strongly contributed to what was known as ›the world‹ at a given time; and the age of colonialism produced a vast archive of travel literature: more or less empirical reports such as Georg Forster's *Voyage Around the World* that he conducted with James Cook and published in 1777, but epic fiction from Homer's *Odyssee* to Jules Verne's *Travel Around the World in 80 Days* also created physical as well as mental maps of the known world by circumtraveling its boundaries and linking geographical places with individual biographies of the travelers on the one hand and the topology of newly discovered cultures on the other.[3]

In these texts, one might say that the complexity of the world is reduced by temporalization, individualization, and localization. The im-

1 | Cf. Karnath/Sharrer 2008, 125, as well as Daniel Kehlmann's popular novel *Measuring the World* 2007.

2 | Cf. Watt 2001.

3 | Cf. Speake (ed.) 2003.

possibility of an external viewpoint on the world's totality is compensated by a step-by-step exploration of the traveling subject. And yet the unity of the world's complex structure is maintained within the travel's teleological setting, i.e. the fact that the traveling protagonists from Ulysses to Phileas Fogg return home in the end and thus close the circle.

But can contemporary literature still claim the stability of these geographical and hermeneutical circles when it attempts to imagine earth as a whole? Considering that avant-garde and postmodern aesthetics emphasize the fragmentary, subjective, and hybrid natures of the artwork as well as of the recipient, the answer will have to be negative. Therefore, my initial question has to be rephrased slightly: what kinds of representation of our home planet result from descriptions in literature that question narrative constructions of wholeness and totality?

The example I am going to use to tackle these questions is W.G. Sebald's semi-autobiographical novel *Die Ringe des Saturn* (*The Rings of Saturn*), published in 1995 with the subtitle *Eine englische Wallfahrt* (*An English Pilgrimage*). Thus, Sebald quotes the tradition of travel reports but at the same time dramatically reduces the scope and significance of the genre insofar as *The Rings of Saturn* takes the narrator on a walk along the coast of Norfolk and Suffolk.[4] This setting is unspectacular, to say the least. The walk is slow, the narrator who recovers from depression is weary and contemplative, the fog rises from the ocean, and there are hardly any sights or landmarks along the way. And yet, as I will try to elaborate, it is precisely this atmosphere of contemplation and banality – a prosaicness of both the landscape and the text, as it were – that serves as groundwork for the conception of the world as a whole in Sebald's text.

In order to reconstruct this concept, I will start with a quote from chapter four, in which the narrator spends an evening at the coast and refers to a specific constellation between the dawn's growing darkness and his perception of planet earth:

> As I sat there that evening in Southwold overlooking the German Ocean, I sensed quite clearly the earth's slow turning into the dark. The huntsmen are up in America, writes Thomas Browne in *The Garden of Cyrus*, and they are already past their

4 | For the route, cf. Schütte 2011, 126-175, and Christian Wirth's cartographic and photographic illustrations: www.wgsebald.de/wege/ringe.html. See also Patt (ed.) 2007, as well as Grant Gee's film *Patience (After Sebald).*

first sleep in Persia. The shadow of night is drawn like a black veil across the earth, and since almost all creatures, from one meridian to the next, lie down after the sun has set, so, he continues, one might, in following the setting sun, see on our globe nothing but prone bodies, row upon row, as if levelled by the scythe of Saturn – an endless graveyard for a humanity struck by falling sickness. I gazed farther and farther out to sea, to where the darkness was thickest and where there extended a cloudbank of the most curious shape, which I could barely make out any longer, the rearward view, I presume, of the storm that had broken over Southwold in the late afternoon.[5]

Although *The Rings of Saturn* seems to be reduced to an insignificant portion of northeastern England, the narrator does extend this limited view to a globalized vision of planet Earth. This extension refers to space and time: although he cannot see the opposite shore, he knows that on the other side of the ocean lies Germany, his home country and England's enemy in World War II – the war during which planes took off from airfields in Norfolk to fly to Germany across the very coastline the narrator walks along. Parallel to this manmade catastrophe, he reads the shape of the clouds as remainders of a storm earlier in the day which – on a smaller scale when compared to war – alludes to destruction, too.

In this way the ›darkness‹ of the vision is not only due to the setting sun but also to the catastrophic dimension of nature (the storm) and history (World War II). This metaphorical dimension corresponds with the allegorical vision of earth viewed from an outside perspective that the narrator takes from Thomas Browne's essay *The Garden of Cyrus* from 1658. Browne's account of the time difference between Native Americans, English scientists, and inhabitants of Persia might be one of the earliest examples of an attempt to imagine earth as a configuration of global time zones.[6]

Sebald's narrator, of course, is rather interested in the image of the wandering shadow that covers the hemisphere averted from the sun as the world turns. Imagining earth presupposes an extraterrestrial observer here who is not restricted to his relative viewpoint in America, Persia, or

5 | Sebald 1998, 78f. All page numbers after quotes in the following refer to this edition.

6 | For similar examples from Early Modern Science Fiction, cf. Hania Siebenpfeiffer's contribution to this volume.

along the Norfolk coast, for that matter. This extraterrestrial observer does indeed have a total image of »our globe«. But this total image is not one of colorful beauty, but rather one of permanent darkening: to see »our globe« in its entirety means to perceive of the wandering shadow that darkens the earth and rules human life. Before the invention of electric light humanity would lay down at sunset, so that the image of »our globe« as permanent darkening corresponds with the vision of a ›reclining‹ mankind: as in the case of domino stones, the outside observer who follows the wandering shadow sees humans only in the state of recumbence – and therefore, insofar as sleep is a brother to death, in a deadlike state, struck by falling sickness and creating the image of a permanent graveyard.

The price for a holistic vision of the globe, in other words, is the death of earth's inhabitants. Taking into account the metaphor »scythe of Saturn« that refers to the god as well as the planet of melancholy that the title of Sebald's book recalls from the beginning[7], one might consider the vision of the globe as a graveyard as part of a baroque topos of *vanitas* and transitoriness – in the sense that Walter Benjamin pointed to the significance of saturnic melancholy within the ruinous world of seventeenth-century German tragedies.[8] And indeed, Thomas Browne, whom Sebald allegedly quotes here, was a natural philosopher in the 17th century who lived as a medical practitioner in Norwich from 1636 to 1682.

Thus, Sebald's reference to Browne is not accidental but located within the geographical region of his walk that starts and ends in Norwich where Sebald himself lived and taught at the University of East Anglia from 1970 to his death in 2001. Thus, *The Rings of Saturn* explores the relevance of Browne's metaphysical reflections for the narrators perception of Norfolk through the entire book, and Sebald subsequently refers to Browne's collection of essays entitled *Hydriotaphia, or: Urn-Burial* and *Garden of Cyrus* from 1658. Interestingly, however, upon looking into the latter, one only finds the first part of the quote cited above. The last chapter of Browne's *Garden of Cyrus* closes with the observation:

7 | Cf. Klibansky et al. (ed.) 1968.

8 | Cf. Benjamin [1928] and [1929]. Sebald's interest in the theory and iconography of melancholy as well as in Benjamin's theory of history has been analyzed intensively: Cf. the editors' contributions in Niehaus/Öhlschläger (ed.) 2006, as well as Barzilai 2007, 73-89; Mosbach 2008, 122-156; Schmucker 2012, 240-354.

The huntsmen are up in America, and they are already past their first sleep in Persia. But who can be drowsy at that hour which freed us from everlasting sleep? or have slumbering thoughts at that time, when sleep itself must end, and as some conjecture all shall awake again?[9]

Significant as this quote might be, Browne does not »continue«, as Sebald continues in *The Rings of Saturn*, with the vision of a ›falling‹ humanity following the shadow of darkness. But indeed Browne, in other parts of his work, provides extensive material for Sebald's interest in the earth's turning into the darkness. As we read in *The Rings of Saturn*:

Much as in this continuous process of consuming and being consumed, nothing endures, in Thomas Browne's view. On every new thing lies already the shadow of annihilation. For the history of every individual, of every social order, indeed of the whole world, does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but rather follows a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail into the dark. (23f.)

The reason for this destructive essence of nature in general is that, according to Browne, the entire world is structured by one single and recurring pattern, the

quincunx, 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 […]; 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 Hyades, the Quincunx of Heaven, is already sinking beneath the horizon, and so 'tis time to close the five ports of knowledge. (19ff.)

9 | Browne 1852, 489-563, quoted from 563. The quincunx-pattern that Sebald reprints in *The Rings of Saturn* (p. 20) can be found on page 490. On the influence of the quincunx on the narrative structure of Sebald's text, cf. Horstkotte 2005, 25-44, esp. 33.

To put it somewhat simpler, in Browne's view everything is connected, but the element that establishes this connection is the universal destructibility of all things. Thus, the world is the unity of the opposition of structure and dissolution: Everything is structured according to the quincunx, but the quincunx itself is already in decline.

That is why the only way to perceive of the wholeness of the earth is through the process of darkening as well as the image of mankind as falling. But as I want to argue here, the constellation of universal pattern and universal dissolution is also the structure of Sebald's travel report that, by its own means, attempts to create a different view of the world. Instead of searching for geographical and historical elements that account for the significance of ›the world‹, Sebald chooses the opposite method: starting out from an insignificant point, he reconstructs the network of references that nevertheless connects this insignificant point with the geographical and historical entirety of the world. This results, of course, in an entirety that exists beneath the sign of destruction and darkness. The walk along the English coast represents the quincunx of modern history.

Thus, *The Rings of Saturn* stage the quincunx as a geo-historiographical network: due to its interconnectedness, one might start at any given point in space or time to reach any other. At the beginning of chapter six, e.g., the narrator crosses the river Blyth, a passage that seems unspectacular and insignificant in itself. But the narrator remarks:

> The bridge over the Blyth was built in 1875 for a narrow-gauge railway that linked Halesworth and Southwold. According to local historians, the train that ran on it had originally been built for the Emperor of China. (138)

Thus, the Norfolk province suddenly turns out to be global. Though the train was never actually delivered to China, it still establishes a connection between northeastern England and the Chinese Empire – an empire that displays an intense tendency towards destruction, as the narrator recollects with regard to the siege of Nanking and the mass suicide of its inhabitants in 1864, fostered by the British East India Company. Both the eastern empire and its western colonizers display immense cruelty that results in the annihilation of Chinese culture. On the one hand we learn:

> The mass suicide of the Taipingis is without historical parallel. When their enemies broke through the gates on the morning of the 19th of July, they found not a soul alive.

But the city was filled with the humming of flies. The King of the Celestial Realm of Eternal Peace, according to a despatch sent to Peking, lay face-down in a gutter. (141)

On the other hand, the reign of terror of the emperor's widow a decade later is reported:

Travellers who were in China between 1876 and 1879 report that, in the drought that had continued for years, whole provinces gave the impression of expiring under prisons of glass. Between seven and twenty million people – no precise estimates have ever been calculated – are said to have died of starvation and exhaustion. (150)

The murderous destruction that connects Britain and China thus goes both ways. On the one hand, there is colonial invasion of the East India Company; on the other hand there is a decadent monarchy that prefers to feed its silk worms than its human subjects:

These pale, almost transparent creatures, which would presently give their lives for the fine thread they were spinning, she saw as her true loyal followers. (151)

Moreover, this decadent status of the silk industry has a feedback effect on the colonizers insofar silk worms have been imported to Europe ever since modern times – and in England especially to Norfolk, with Norwich being the silk capital of England and Thomas Browne the son of a breeder of silk worms in the 17th century. Random as they seemed at first glance, the dots of the narrator's seemingly free-floating associations start to connect like the pattern of a quincunx – or the texture of a silk worm's web.

Thus, reading *The Rings of Saturn* means to follow the many threads that connect the Norfolk coast with global history. But by following these threads it becomes clear that the aspect that connects this global reference network is the ubiquitous tendency of destruction of mankind throughout history as well as in the evolution of nature. Dunwich, another center of the English silk production that the narrator passes on its way south, is a town that in the meantime »has gone under, quite literally, and is now below the sea, beneath alluvial sand and gravel, over an area of two or three square miles«, so that for a long time the shafts of what once were the city's wells rose »like the chimney stacks of some subterranean smithy, as various chroniclers report, until in due course these symbols of the vanished town also fell down.« (155f.)

A little further down the coast, among the ruins of the former military station of Orford Ness, the narrator imagines himself »amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe.« (237) And earlier on, shortly before his vision of the earth turning into the darkness in the bay of Southwold, he recalls the horrible destruction during England's battle against the Dutch fleet in 1672 at the same place:

> The agony that was endured and the enormity of the havoc wrought defeat our powers of comprehension, just as we cannot conceive the vastness of the effort that must have been required – from felling and preparing the timber, mining and smelting the ore, and forging the iron, to weaving and sewing the sailcloth – to build and equip vessels that were almost all predestined for destruction. (78)

That is to say every human effort to construct aims at destruction. This observation is not reduced to seventeenth-century ship-building. It is part of the colonial history of imperial Europe, present at the English coast, beside the train for China, due to Joseph Conrad's landing in Lowestoft in 1878 – a voyage that preceded Conrad's subsequent travels to the Belgian colonies in central Africa and into what he later labeled the *Heart of Darkness*. And it is most evidently visible through World War II that the narrator evokes by referring to the airfields of Norwich that served as a basis for the Royal Air Force in the bombing of Germany. Based on an article from an officer who was part of the liberation of the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen and who now lives in Suffolk that Sebald retrieves from a local newspaper and reproduces in the text (63), the scenery is also connected to the Holocaust – a connection that is underlined by the notorious montage of two photographs in chapter three, the first of which shows heaps of dead herring to document the cruelty of fishery in the North Sea (54), whereas the second shows bodies in the birch groves of Bergen-Belsen (60f.), thus subsuming both pictures to general human history and the economy of mass murder.[10]

Along these lines, the narrator finally links the Norfolk silkworm-industry with his recollections of an educational film on herring fishing produced in a series of educational films from the late 1930s that he watched in elementary school.[11] This series also contained a documen-

10 | Cf. Öhlschläger 2006, 187.

11 | Cf. Friedrichsmeyer 2007, 11-26.

tary on the silkworm industry. Upon looking it up while visiting Germany, the narrator finds an accompanying pamphlet that connects silk production with German preparations for war:

> According to Professor Lange, the author of the educational pamphlet F213/1939, the significance of silk cultivation in Germany lay not only in obviating the need to buy from abroad, and so easing the pressure on foreign currency reserves, but also in the importance silk would have in the dawning area of aerial warfare and hence in the formation of a self-sufficient economy of national defense. (293)

Thus, the seemingly harmless economy of silk cultivation is infected by its relation to imperial cruelties, the suffering of laborers in nineteenth-century factories the narrator recalled somewhat earlier, and modern militarism that exploits both humans and animals for its destructive ends. It is therefore no accident that *The Rings of Saturn* quotes the term »holocaust« (25) from Thomas Browne's writings very early in the book. And in consequence to the literal meaning of the term holocaust, in another passage that again envisions an external perspective on planet earth, it appears as a place of permanent consumption by fire ever since the first human civilization was established by the clearing away of primeval forests.[12]

> In Norfolk and Suffolk, it was chiefly oaks and elms that grew on the flatlands, spreading in unbroken waves across the gently undulating country right down to the coast. This phase of evolution was halted when the first settlers burnt off the forests along those drier stretches of the eastern coast where the light soil could be tilled. Just as the woods had once colonized the earth in irregular patterns, gradually growing together, so ever more extensive fields of ash and cinders now ate their way into that grean-leafed world in a similarly haphazard fashion. If today one flies over the Amazon basin or over Borneo and sees the mountainous palls of smok[e] hanging, seemingly motionless, over the forest canopy, which from above resembles a mere patch of moss, then perhaps one can imagine what those fires, which sometimes burned on for months, would leave in their wake. Whatever was spared by the flames in prehistoric Europe was later felled for construction and ship-building, and to make the charcoal which the smelting of iron required in vast quantities. […] Our spread over the earth was fuelled by reducing higher species

12 | Cf. Harrison 1993.

> of vegetation to charcoal, by incessantly burning whatever would burn. […] Combustion is the hidden principle behind every artefact we create. The making of a fish-hook, manufacture of a china-cup, or production of a television programme, all depend on the same process of combustion. [...] From the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no one can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away. For the time being, our cities still shine through the night, and the fires still spread. In Italy, France and Spain, in Hungary, Poland and Lithuania, in Canada and California, summer fires consume whole forests, not to mention the great conflagration in the tropics that is never extinguished. (169ff.)

The unifying principle of earth is its glowing demise. There is no positive principle of ›wholeness‹; rather, Sebald's travel report stages Thomas Browne's cosmological vision in contemporary terminology (and also by means of the airplane and technology) and thus establishes a constellation between pre- and postmodern worldviews that is similar to the one Walter Benjamin emphasizes in his aforementioned study on seventeenth-century German drama. Instead of anticipating or trusting the *grand récit* of progress from the 18th and 19th century, early and late modern literature coincides in their melancholic reflection of the loss of wholeness and transitoriness.

The reference to Benjamin is not only helpful for understanding the premodern poetics of a postmodern novel such as Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* because as thesis VII of Benjamin's posthumous *On the Concept of History* claims: »There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.«[13] More importantly, Benjamin conceptualizes his theory of culture's permanent decay as a »movement from history to nature« in his earlier work.[14] *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* from 1925 introduces allegory as the key element of seventeenth-century literature because it implies the transitoriness of both natural life and cultural meaning. Opposed to symbolic art of the 18th and 19th century which presupposes the presence of meaning within the symbol, the fragmented and ruinous character that is typical for allegorical representation refers to the mortality of every natural being and cultural construction alike:

13 | Benjamin [1940], 389-400, quoted from 392.

14 | Benjamin [1928], 182.

And although such a thing lacks all ›symbolic‹ freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity – nevertheless, this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance. But if nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is also true that it has always been allegorical.[15]

From this point of view, neither artworks nor history partake in a teleological development, but are to be considered ongoing processes of dissolution, dying, and fading away. Closely following Benjamin's analysis, Theodor W. Adorno deduces in his essay on *The Idea of Natural History* from 1932:

The basic quality of the transience of the earthly signifies nothing but just such a relationship between nature and history: all being or everything existing is to be grasped as the interweaving of historical and natural being. As transience, all original-history is absolutely present. It is present in the form of signification. ›Signification‹ means that the elements of nature and history are not fused with each other; rather, they break apart and interweave at the same time in such a fashion that the natural appears as a sign for history and history, where it seems to be most historical, appears as a sign for nature.[16]

Adorno's observation that the attempt to distinguish nature and history along the lines of biological processes and cultural formations is no longer valid in the light of the destructive energies of modern civilization is especially helpful to understand Sebald's image of the world illuminated by continuous combustion. This image serves as an allegory for the destructive tendencies of human civilization that reverse the distinction and relation between nature and history. In the course of the 20th century, World War II is the most evident example for this reversion. In his lectures on the role of aerial warfare in German literature from 1999, Sebald quotes Solly Zuckerman, a British war correspondent

15 | Ibid., 166.

16 | Adorno 1984, 104-124, quoted from 121.

who had planned an essay on *The Natural History of Destruction* after witnessing the bombings of German cities in 1945. Musing about this unwritten essay, Sebald defines »natural history of destruction« as the reverse process of human civilization, i.e. the takeover of nature in shape of creaturely life – similar to the humming flies over the human bodies in *The Rings of Saturn* when recalling »the mass-suicide of the Taipingis«, but explicitly implying counter-civilizing tendencies in the context of modern warfare:

> Apart from the distraught behavior of the people themselves, the most striking change in the natural order of the cities during the weeks after a devastating raid was undoubtedly the sudden and alarming increase in the parasitical creatures thriving on the unburied bodies. […] This is the necropolis of a foreign, mysterious people, torn from its civil existence and its history, thrown back to the evolutionary stage of nomadic gatherers.[17]

The regression of humans and the rule of lower animals are accompanied by the regrowth of plants and trees in Sebald's vision – the very features that were once extinguished in favor of settlements and artifacts and that now seem favored by the fiercest of all fires of human history:

> At the end of the war, some of the bomb sites of Cologne had already been transformed by the dense green vegetation growing over them [...]. In contrast to the effect of the catastrophes insidiously creeping up on us today, nature's ability to regenerate did not seem to have been impaired by the firestorms. In fact, many trees and bushes, particularly chestnuts and lilacs, had a second flowering in Hamburg in the autumn of 1943, a few months after the great fire. If the Morgenthau-Plan had ever been implemented, how long would it have taken for woodland to cover the mountains of ruins all over the country?[18]

In this vision, the concept of history as a process of natural decay is intensified by its dialectical counterpart, the replacement of human civilization by the exuberant growth of organic nature. It is a vision familiar also from fictional movies like *I am Legend* (USA 2007) that presents actor Will Smith in the jungle that grows back on Times Square after

17 | Sebald 2004, 34 and 36.

18 | Ibid., 39. Cf. Pethes 2009, 169-187.

New York has been abandoned by humanity due to a virus. And popular science journalist Alan Weisman dedicated an entire book as well as a TV series to similar thought experiments about *The World Without Us* – a study that explores scenarios of nature's reaction to the supposed end of humanity:

> [T]hings will begin to fall apart during the first month of March after humans vacate Manhattan. […] As pavement separates, weeds like mustard, shamrock and goosegrass blow in from Central Park and work their way down the new cracks, which widen further. In the current world, before they get too far, city maintenance usually shows up, kills the weeds, and fills the fissures. But in the post-people world, there's no one left to continually patch New York.[19]

Whether this is a realistic scenario or not, what connects Benjamin's and Adorno's concept of natural history with Sebald's and Weisman's imaginations of the comeback of nature is the fact that they all introduce a specific narrative of decay in order to present a holistic image of the earth that is freed from the myth of progression. In all four scenarios, the unity of the world is represented by the omnipresence of its destruction.

What makes Sebald's contribution so remarkable within this discourse on destructibility is the way *The Rings of Saturn* highlights the dialectical structure of the process in question: Human history is not simply overcome by the forces of nature, nor is it subdued to some fateful revenge of the forces it exploited and fought for so long. Rather, the forces of human civilization themselves – mainly military and industrial – keep fueling the fire that, on the one hand, burns away the forests and plants and is to be accounted for the exploitation of silkworms, the heaps of dead herring, and the enslavement of humans.

But on the other hand, the fire of civilization not only burns away nature as its counterpart but in doing so also destroys itself. The history of human civilization is a self-destructive process that by the very means that replace nature creates space for nature's regrowth. The illumination of planet earth that makes it visible from space results in the famous photograph of the ›Blue Marble‹ from the Apollo 17 mission on account of the same fires and technological devices that also account for our home planet's »slow turning into the dark«, insofar everything that

19 | Weisman 2007, 30f.

humanity builds rests upon and leads to exploitation and destruction. As a whole, earth is a dark place because of its history of illumination.

Therefore, the view that Thomas Browne's unnamed extraterrestrial visitor is presented when he approaches our home planet is the view of a planet continually turned into darkness by the very attempt of its inhabitants to enlighten it – by charcoal and reason.

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