

W.G. Sebald: A “Grenzgänger” of the 20th/21st Century

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To establish the twentieth-century German-language author W.G. Sebald as a "Grenzgänger," one must explore the borders that he crossed, challenged, and broke down. In considering the implications of his nationality, literary language, and the reception of his works, one also explores the borders of world literature itself. Relevant to this discussion is the claim of Sebald's "self-imposed/voluntary exile" in England, which has gained currency in recent research. This claim must, however, be challenged, for it collapses the historical perspective from which the status of "exile" needs to be considered, a perspective that Sebald's works precisely emphasize.

1. THE "GRENZGÄNGER" W.G. SEBALD

Sebald was born in 1944 as Winfried Georg, but from his time in England on he was known to his friends as "Max."¹ Although separated generationally from the tradition of postwar German authors, from an early age Sebald engaged with the questions surrounding Germany's past that these authors raised in their texts. His critical and literary texts offer a continuation of the question of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that was born out of the previous generation's literary productions. Sebald deeply felt the silence surrounding the Nazis' crimes and the complicity of ordinary people that dominated postwar Germany, often describing this as "a conspiracy of silence."² He recalls having seen in primary school newsreels with footage of the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and how the students were not given the chance to ask questions. The films were simply not discussed, perpetuating the silence around the atrocities of the not-too-distant past. While at the University in Freiburg in the early 1960s, Sebald's disillusionment crystallized, and he recalls having sensed an "atmosphere of falseness"³ in higher education. During his time as a university student, the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt highly publicized the crimes of the concentration camps, and professors were revealed as having been former Nazi party members. Sebald stated that the Auschwitz trials were "the first public ac-

¹ For detailed biographical accounts of Sebald's life, see Richard Sheppard, "Dexter – sinister: Some Observations on Decrypting the Mors Code in the Work of W.G. Sebald," *Journal of European Studies* 35 (2005): 419-463; and Sheppard's continuation piece "'Woods, trees, and the spaces in between': A Report on Work Published on W.G. Sebald 2005-2008," *Journal of European Studies* 39, 1 (2009): 79-128.

² W.G. Sebald, "W.G. Sebald," in *Writers in Conversation with Christopher Bigsby. Volume Two*, by Christopher Bigsby (Norwich, U.K.: Arthur Miller Centre for American Studies, 2001), 143.

³ *Ibid.*, 147.



knowledge that there was such a thing as an unresolved German past."⁴ Reproachful of Germany's *Gedächtnislosigkeit*, "lack of memory,"⁵ and frustrated by the "conspiracy of silence," Sebald took a teaching assistantship in England at the age of 22, where he remained until a tragic automobile accident took his life in 2001. The delay which dominates Sebald's exposure to the Holocaust can perhaps be read as a parallel to the slow excavation and revelation of the past in his literary works. This is most prominently seen in a form of reverse chronology in several of his works.

Sebald's decision to leave Germany in the 1960s and eventually to take up permanent residence in England has prompted scholars to suggest his "self-imposed" or "voluntary" exile,⁶ a designation which is both problematic and questionable. Although Sebald never explicitly referred to his living arrangement as one of exile, he expressed his awareness of the liminal status of his life and work in England, "In England nur gastweise zuhause, schwanke ich auch hier zwischen Gefühlen der Vertrautheit und der Dislokation."⁷ ["Only a guest in England, I still hover between feelings of familiarity and dislocation there too."⁸] In this same speech, made on the occasion of his acceptance into the German Academy, Sebald expressed a distance towards his homeland, his feelings of being "a traitor to [his] country and a fraud" and that only in a distance from Germany, while in England, was he able to form "ideas of [his] native country."⁹ Sebald was fluent in English, but his life in England nevertheless meant that he constantly dealt with issues of both linguistic and cultural translation, issues which in turn manifest themselves aesthetically and thematically in his literary works.¹⁰ On various occasions, Sebald reflected upon his relationship to the German language. Having grown up in Southern Bavaria, Sebald considered the Southern German dialect his mother-tongue, and he recounts having made his first efforts to learn, speak, and write High German when he entered the University in Freiburg in 1963. By contrast, even after thirty years in England, Sebald still consi-

⁴ Ibid., emphasis in original.

⁵ Sigrid Löffler, "Kopfreisen in die Ferne: ein Geheimtip; in Norwich, gar nicht hinter dem Mond, lebt und schreibt W.G. Max Sebald," in *W.G. Sebald*, ed. Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Ed. Isele, 1997), 34.

⁶ James Atlas, "W.G. Sebald. A Profile," *The Paris Review* 41, 151 (1999): 286; Arthur Williams, "W.G. Sebald: A Holistic Approach to Borders, Texts and Perspectives," in *German-Language Literature Today: International and Popular?*, ed. Arthur Williams, Stuart Parkes and Julian Preece (Oxford, New York: P. Lang, 2000), 103; Mark M. Anderson, "The Edge of Darkness: On W.G. Sebald," *October* 106 (2003): 103; John Zilcosky, "Sebald's Uncanny Travels. The Impossibility of Getting Lost," in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004), 116; Ronald H. McKinney, "W.G. Sebald and The Questionable Business of Post-Holocaust Writing," *Philosophy Today* 49, 2 (2005): 115.

⁷ W.G. Sebald, "Antrittsrede vor dem Kollegium der Deutschen Akademie," in *Campo Santo*, ed. Sven Meyer (München, Wien: Hanser, 2003), 250.

⁸ W.G. Sebald, "Acceptance Speech to the Collegium of the German Academy," *Campo Santo*, ed. Sven Meyer, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2005), 208.

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ See Lynn L. Wolff, "The "Solitary Mallard": On Sebald and Translation," Special Issue on W.G. Sebald, *Journal of European Studies* (forthcoming 2011).

dered English to be a foreign language, “I don’t in the least feel at home in it. I use it but it sounds quite alien to me.”¹¹

Rather than identifying Sebald as an “exile,” Sebald’s works could be discussed in terms of *expatriate writing*, but nevertheless with an eye to the linguistic specificity of his success. Gerhard Fischer asserts,

Sebald, after all, despite being an expatriate writer living in England for the better part of his life, wrote only in German [...]. His reputation rests primarily on his consummate mastery of the German language and the German literary tradition, which is quite unparalleled in contemporary writing.¹²

Fischer’s conceptual program for thinking of Sebald as an expatriate writer is helpful, insofar as he sees in Sebald’s works “a potentially emancipatory cultural memory that resists the push and pull of a single, hegemonic world culture.”¹³ The emphasis on the author’s origins and his texts’ linguistic material is therefore not a reactionary emphasis on national identity but rather an essential assertion of difference. I agree with Peter Madsen when he writes,

The construction of national identity, however, is in itself a mystifying (and potentially destructive) endeavour. The seemingly natural link between literature as a linguistic art form, national language and national identity is at odds with the fact that literature travels in translation and that all nations are heterogeneous culturally speaking. From the outset the idea of world literature goes against the grain of nationalism.¹⁴

I would, nevertheless, argue that the specificity of Sebald’s works in German—in particular the complex layering of visual and textual material, which I will outline below, as well as the various degrees of narrative mediation—cannot be denied and warrant an in-depth analysis, all in the spirit of situating his work within networks of world literature and world history.

2. WRITING ON THE BORDER: BETWEEN LITERARY CRITICISM AND LITERATURE

During his first years in England, Sebald earned both his Master’s and PhD in German literature, and some fifteen years later he was granted the Habilitation by the University of Hamburg. With these professional qualifications, Sebald taught courses in nineteenth- and twentieth-century German prose fiction for close to thirty years in the school of English and American Studies at the University of East Anglia

¹¹ Sebald in Bigsby, *Writers in Conversation*, 148. Furthermore, Sebald thought it unlikely that he would “become a Joseph Conrad,” as Bigsby suggests, feeling it was too late for him to change his “linguistic coat.”

¹² Gerhard Fischer, “Editor’s Note,” in *W.G. Sebald. Schreiben ex patria / Expatriate Writing*, ed. Gerhard Fischer (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2009), 12.

¹³ Gerhard Fischer, “Introduction: W.G. Sebald’s Expatriate Experience and His Literary Beginnings,” *W.G. Sebald. Schreiben ex patria / Expatriate Writing*, ed. Gerhard Fischer (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2009), 21.

¹⁴ Peter Madsen, “World Literature and World Thoughts: Brandes/Auerbach,” *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London; NY: Verso, 2004), 74.

in Norwich, England. As part of his professional duties, he also founded and directed the British Centre for Literary Translation in 1989, housed at the UEA, Norwich. In his last years he also taught creative writing. Sebald did not officially begin his literary career until the late 1980s. He was, however, already writing poetry as a high school student and working on a novel as a university student. Hence his literary and scholarly interests and endeavors ran side by side. Florian Radvan, one of Sebald's PhD students at the University of East Anglia, recalls that his strongest impression of Sebald was that of a "Grenzgänger," who not only crossed but blurred and dissolved borders between literary criticism and literature, English and German, words and images, fiction and reality, biography and autobiography.¹⁵

In an interview with Christopher Bigsby, Sebald described how he was drawn away from academic writing to writing in a "more tentative sort of way,"

I moved from the straight monograph to essayistic exploration, dealing with my subjects in an elliptical sort of way. But even so I constantly came up against a *borderline* where I felt, well, if I could go a little bit further it might get very interesting, that is, if I were allowed to make things up.¹⁶

Richard Weihe notes that the tension between being a scholar of literary studies and a writer was probably the most productive source for Sebald's fictional writing and how, as an author of fiction, Sebald was free and able, "Metaphern zu verwenden, Leben und Werk im Sinne des sonst verpönten Biografismus als Einheit zu verstehen, und vor allem die Subjektivität des Schreibenden zu betonen, indem er laut und deutlich "ich" sagt."¹⁷

This move from literary criticism to literature is not without its risks, however. Academics who make a "career change" to writing fiction are, to put it mildly, often viewed with suspicion. As Radvan notes, "Als Hochschullehrer, der auch literarisch schrieb, wäre [Sebald] in der deutschen Akademie wohl misstrauisch beäugt, wenn nicht belächelt und wären seine Texte als Professorenprosa abgetan worden."¹⁸ This clichéd image of an academic turned author has been used to describe Sebald, although he was working parallel on scholarly and literary projects. This skeptical, even dismissive, attitude towards professors turned authors is certainly a contributing factor to the slower reception of his works in Germany, as opposed to their positive reception outside of Germany, especially in England, the United States and France.

¹⁵ Florian Radvan, "W.G. Sebald—Schriftsteller und Scholar. Erinnerungen an einen Grenzgänger zwischen Literatur und Wissenschaft," *Kritische Ausgabe* 13, 18 (2010): 58.

¹⁶ Sebald in Bigsby, *Writers in Conversation*, 152; my emphasis.

¹⁷ Richard Weihe, "Wittgensteins Augen. W.G. Sebalds Film-Szenario *Leben Ws*," *fair- Zeitung für Kunst und Ästhetik* 7, 4 (2009): 12.

¹⁸ Radvan, "W.G. Sebald—Schriftsteller und Scholar," 58.

3. TRANSGRESSING THE BORDERS OF, AND WITHIN, THE TEXT: DISCOURSE, GENRE, MEDIUM

With the borderline between literary criticism and literature in mind, we now turn to Sebald’s literary texts and the way in which they demonstrate border crossing in several respects. At one and the same time imaginative fictions, biographical accounts, and autobiographical travelogues, Sebald’s texts blur not only thematic but also generic boundaries. They draw upon a variety of disciplines and discourses, such as literature, literary analysis, history, architecture, and archaeology, among others. This movement across the borders of discourse, genre, and also media inscribes itself in a complex form of layering in Sebald’s texts. It is the way in which Sebald explores and tests the borders between different discourses that provides new ways to reconsider the contentious and productive relationships between a number of issues and between literature and history in particular. With a vested interest in both representing the past and problematizing such representation—traditional forms of historiography in particular—a new form of literature-as-historiography, or “literary historiography,” as I have termed it, emerges in Sebald’s works.¹⁹

The problem of representation, in particular historical representation, is fundamental to Sebald’s *œuvre* as a whole and is treated both explicitly and implicitly in his literary and critical works. By incorporating images, photographs in particular, in a complex manner and simultaneously reflecting on this within the literary form of his texts, Sebald thematizes the acts of seeing, remembering, and knowing, and thereby raises fundamental questions about literature’s relationship to “truth” and “reality.”²⁰ Theoretical and aesthetic questions pertinent to photography in general, and relevant to Sebald’s unique text-image constellation in particular, are those of realism, authenticity, the documentation of history, and subsequently the writing of history.

In *Die Ringe des Saturn* (1995), a text that deals, among other things, with human atrocity and natural destruction, Sebald formulates an explicit critique of historical representation. The narrator in this book calls the purported truth of historiography into question, when he asserts, “schon zeigen sich in der Historiographie die unbestreitbaren Vorteile einer fiktiven Vergangenheit”²¹ [“in historiography, the indisput-

¹⁹ See Lynn Wolff, “Literary Historiography: W.G. Sebald’s Fiction,” in *W.G. Sebald: Schreiben ex patria / Expatriate Writing*, ed. Gerhard Fischer (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2009), 317-332.

²⁰ Various articles have treated Sebald’s use of photography from multiple theoretical perspectives while almost always commenting on his particular blend of verbal and pictorial discourses. See for example: Heiner Boehncke, “Clair obscur. W.G. Sebalds Bilder,” *W.G. Sebald. Text + Kritik* (2003): 43-62; Carolin Dutlinger, “Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*,” in *W.G. Sebald. A Critical Companion*, ed. J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004), 155-171; Silke Horstkotte, “Pictorial and Verbal Discourse in W. G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*,” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 2 (2002): 33-50.

²¹ W.G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn. Eine englische Wallfahrt* (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003) [1995], 91.

able advantages of a fictitious past have become apparent"²²]. This counter-logical formulation shows that to preserve the truth of historiography, extralinguistic reality must be, by necessity, fictitious. Since this cannot be true, the narrator points to a certain degree of fictionality that is inevitable in historical accounts. The role of both imagination and invention implied here comes to the fore when the narrator describes pictorial representations of great battles in history and asserts them to be "pure Fiktionen"²³ ["without exception figments of the imagination"²⁴]. The critique of historical representation, be it in historical texts or paintings, is consistent across Sebald's fiction and is thematized in essay form as well, such as in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999), the revised and published form of his lectures on poetics given in Zurich in 1997. Structurally and rhetorically reminiscent of passages in *Die Ringe des Saturn*, Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* presents the reader with facts and statistics as part of the historical record of the Allied air raids on Germany at the end of World War II. Yet, any degree of certainty we may gain through this historical proof is then undermined when we are confronted with Sebald's statement: "doch was all das in Wahrheit bedeutete, das wissen wir nicht"²⁵ ["but we do not grasp what it all actually meant"²⁶]. In critiquing historical representation, Sebald reveals and thus challenges the illusion that knowledge of the past can be easily, or directly, accessed through documents and accounts. Rather than discounting the truth value of such forms of evidence, Sebald is concerned with emphasizing the processes of mediation and interpretation that are involved in any form of historical representation.

Of further import to Sebald's critique of historical representation is the fact that official forms of historiography often overlook, and thereby silence, the "unimportant" figures of the past. Sebald puts this critical position towards historiography into practice in his literary works. Countering official historiography's erasure of individual fates, Sebald focuses on "emigrants," exiles, and, broadly stated, the victims of history. Furthermore, he endows his "factional"²⁷ stories with the weight usually attributed to historical accounts. *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992) and *Austerlitz* (2001) exemplify this process, for they blend "facts" and "fiction" while trying to cope with the problematic source of memory, be it individual or collective, and the repression, recovery, and representation of this memory.

Questions of authenticity and representation are at stake in this critique of historical representation and gain an increased immediacy through Sebald's particular use

²² W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1999) [1998], 71. This comment by the narrator is inserted at the end of a long passage in which he seamlessly quotes from Jorge Luis Borges' *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*.

²³ Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, 95.

²⁴ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 76.

²⁵ W.G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur. Mit einem Essay zu Alfred Andersch* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003) [1999], 11.

²⁶ W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003), 4.

²⁷ Peter Craven, "W.G. Sebald: Anatomy of Faction," *HEAT* 13 (1999): 212-224.

of images. The text-image relationship that is characteristic of Sebald’s works is also constitutive of his poetics of engagement in the way in which it engages the reader on various levels. The images used by Sebald are predominantly, though not exclusively, photographs. Interspersed in his narratives we also find reproductions of paintings, schematic maps, pages from journals, diaries, and other books. The types of photographs that are found in Sebald’s works include family snapshots and personal portraits as well as photographs of coincidental *objets trouvés* and personal possessions, ranging from the mundane to the significant. Contrasting these personal pictures are photographs of architectural structures, landscapes, and cityscapes, where individuals are strikingly absent. Sebald’s complex use of images does not follow one consistent strategy, and the relationship between the text and its images is not static, but rather it shifts and changes as we read, creating multiple layers to the story and thus requiring multiple levels of analysis. That is to say, the text-image relationship must be read intratextually: the relationship of the image to the story, extratextually: the relationship of the images to an extratextual reality, and intertextually: the images and text in relation to other texts, be they literary or documentary. Sebald’s use of *ekphrasis* as well as his characters’ theoretical questioning of how time and space are experienced and represented provide ways to consider the medial difference between the visual and the textual and the relationship among images, imagining and imagination. Just as Sebald places historical figures alongside fictional characters to explore the ontological status of the “real,” his use of photographs illustrates the multiple relationships among intra-, inter-, and extra-textual realities at play in fictional representations. Sebald’s works demonstrate the potential of the literary discourse to not only re-present something ontologically prior to the text but to also present something new that comes into being only with(in) the text. While making us reconsider the border that delineates the world of creation within the text from the world of reference outside of the text, Sebald’s fictional prose ultimately works against such clear distinctions.

Challenging the association of photography with authenticating an extratextual reality and the notion of photographs as a visual *aide-mémoire*, the photographs or, more broadly, the images in Sebald’s text activate the imagination of both the characters as well as the readers and provide an impetus for narrative. Susan Sontag, in her book *On Photography*, has shown how photographs have been seen as the “most realistic, therefore facile, of the mimetic arts,”²⁸ but she also works against this illusion of photography as a direct (i.e. “accurate”) objective representation of reality by reiterating the importance of angle and perspective. In short, a photograph is never neutral because there is already an interpretation implicit in the act of taking the photograph. In this way, we can understand Sebald’s *Austerlitz* in particular as a text that works against a simplistic understanding of *mimesis* as imitation or direct reflection; for the images, the photographs in particular, actually prove more deceptive than revealing. For example, the closer the eponymous character examines

²⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 51.

photographs and film stills, the more obscured his vision becomes and the further away he feels from the referents. It has been argued that Sebald's narratives reveal "the mendacity or mystery [...] of visual images."²⁹ I would agree and push this point further by saying that Sebald's fiction lays claim to a certain kind of truth that is only possible through literature. Sebald's writing reveals the potentiality of fiction and offers a rewriting of German history and the Holocaust in particular with an emphasis on individual experience, memory and imagination.

4. CONCLUSION: EXPANDING THE BORDERS OF KNOWLEDGE THROUGH WORLD LITERATURE

W.G. Sebald is an author who represents a cosmopolitan consciousness that does not reject the specificity of the nation. In transcending national concerns while at the same time putting particular emphasis on some very specific concerns of German history, Sebald's works possess an inner tension. It is this tension between the global and the local that marks these works as part of world literature. While Sebald's status as a "Holocaust" author has been fiercely debated, one cannot dispute the central position this atrocity holds in his works. However, as stated above, Sebald goes beyond the particular twentieth-century European atrocity of the Holocaust, in writing of the violence of the Belgian colonial oppression in the Congo, the capitalist exploitation of the Amazon forests, and the massacres caused by Napoleon's military campaigns. Furthermore, trauma is not limited to human experience. Sebald devotes much attention to conjecturing about the pain and suffering of animals and insects and considers the destruction of nature in general. He does not privilege the human being above all other forms of life. Rather, his concern is with life in all its forms and is, in this sense, as much an ecological as well as a global vision. Although we could see the limits of Sebald's "world" on a cosmic scope, we cannot broaden our view without any bounds, for a tension remains between the global and specific concerns of individuals and distinct moments in history. By examining Sebald as an author of world literature—an author writing "literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin"³⁰—while also accounting for the specificity of his texts,³¹ we can continue to work within the idea(l) of world literature, as Goethe envisaged, without dissolving it.

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²⁹ Russell J[ames] A[ngus] Kilbourn, "Architecture and Cinema: The Representation of Memory in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*," in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004), 152.

³⁰ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.

³¹ In his philology of *Weltliteratur*, Auerbach emphasizes the need to consider context, history, and culture in order to properly understand a body of literature. Erich Auerbach, "Philologie der Weltliteratur," in *Philologie der Weltliteratur. Sechs Versuche über Stil und Wirklichkeitswahrnehmung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1992), 83-96.