

Reading W. G. Sebald
Adventure and Disobedience

Deane Blackler

Studies in German Literature Linguistics and Culture

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We live in our own souls as in an unmapped region.

Edith Wharton, *The Touchstone*, 1900

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Preface

THIS BOOK ARGUES THAT Sebald's unusual and idiosyncratic prose fiction, which privileges the use of language and the imagination, engages the reader in ways that encourage "disobedience," licensing the reader, as it were, to step outside the elided or effaced textual boundaries into her own empirical otherness, and to bring into what Rupert Sheldrake describes as the contiguity of morphic fields that generative and transactional connectivity that is a form of dialogism and an antidote to the essential human condition of isolation or loneliness. Plato's invention of the philosophical dialogue, growing out of the need for an interrogative other to ask the questions that Plato could explore, underpins the transactional nature of the dialogue between the reader and the text, the author and the text, which reflects this need for critical engagement, a condition brought to a kind of crisis in an age where the collapse of the old illusions and meta-narratives (in Jean-François Lyotard's estimate) has engendered a state of anxiety about our lack of future manifest in our preoccupation with the past and its consoling sense of identity, as Peter Conrad avers.

In the introduction I begin by sketching the circumstances in which I came to Sebald, mapping some of the ways in which we can be engaged by this fascinating writer, whose unusual books and idiosyncratic approach to writing caused such a stir in the popular media when they first appeared.

In chapter 1, I map the life of the man and the emerging profile of the writer as he was constructing himself in the production of his texts. I deal with some of the biographical details of Max Sebald that were made available in interviews over the comparatively short period of time between the first translation into English in 1996 and his death in 2001. A full-length biography is, at the time of this writing, still forthcoming. I also consider the emergence of the writer, both creative and academic, and the language choices he had made.

In chapter 2, I engage with the task of establishing a critical position from which to forge a set of keys with which to unlock some of the writing that has produced a seductive and intriguing reading problematic or "reception dilemma" (Hoesterey's term). Employing aspects of the palimpsest-effect of Sebald's own writing, I have argued that it can be read by a postmodern, skeptical, contestatory, and disobedient reader as an intriguing new kind of fiction that cannot be contained by the conventional notion of the novel and yet, in the tradition of prose fiction, affords that thoughtful and imaginative reader serious play.

In chapter 3, I argue that three aspects of Sebald's practice manifest in the four works of prose fiction, his use of a writerly narrator figure, the insertion of black-and-white photographs into the text, and his construction of place as poetic space confirm the fictional nature of his literary enterprise and produce a disobedient reader. In stage 1 I argue that the Sebaldian narrator is a constructed figure through which the texts are mediated and not the author himself, as in nonfiction discourses such as travel writing or memoirs or the essay. In stage 2 I argue that Sebald's use of photographs is not illustrative or evidential so much as images appropriated within a fictional context and therefore part of the deceptive exercise of beguiling the reader, and more particularly, of engaging the disobedient reader's capacity for thought and imagination. In stage 3 I argue that the construction of place in Sebald's work constructs a textual space within which the narrator's subject is able to remember, think, and imagine, and with which the reader can then engage collaboratively to produce an unbounded textual imaginary.

Finally, this book contends that Sebald's prose fiction represents a new way of writing about experience, of describing our engagement with the world, of constructing in the metaphorical language of literary discourse an imaginative and thoughtful resonance which accommodates the possibility of mystery that escapes the rational systems and institutions and conventions we construct to impose a sense of meaning on our experience of the world. Sebald's engagement with the patterns discernible in the coincidences and contiguities of one kind and another suggests that his primary position is one of wonder rather than the melancholy one he ironizes in the lighter caricature of the ubiquitous writerly narrator figure constructed in his own image. Above all, Sebald's poetics foreground the disobedient, adventurous reader in whose subjective, interrogatory, and imaginative response the creative connectedness of our being in the world takes on a moral resonance, one which valorizes reading as the educative means by which we might become more civilized, less predisposed to our natural tendency to destruction, able to resist unthinking obedience to institutional imperative.

As much as he dwells on the appalling litany of destruction and catastrophe that is the human story, Sebald considers also the beauty and diversity of the natural world and the human capacity for feeling, for sensation, for critical thought, for imagination in what we create. His prose style is highly crafted, considered with the meticulous attention of a poet and the scrupulous conscience of a man whose deep humanity is afflicted by the "luggage he carries" (Zeeman 1998), his German background and his literary task of "restitution" (Sebald 2005), which his prose fiction then situates within a broader cosmography.

A scholarly, sensitive, and private man, profoundly reflective and wittily imaginative, Sebald has left behind books that will come to be seen as

offering a bridge of hope from a century scarred by persecution, folly, and a paralyzing sense of anxiety about the future into a more humane, modest, attentive way of living and being in the world reflected in the lives of the writers and painters he admired and loved, and whose traces are caught in the butterfly net woven by his own connecting or networked texts, which celebrate our common humanity, *multa membra corpus unum*, many parts of one body.

Notes Toward an Itinerary

I always try to write *pour ceux qui savent lire*.

— Max Sebald to Arthur Williams

You need that tension between documentary evidence and questioning in the reader's mind: "Can it really have been so?"

To read with vigilance is to question authority.

— Max Sebald and Maya Jaggi, *The Guardian*, London

22 September 2001

A traveller's chief aim should be to make men wiser and better, and to improve their minds by the bad as well as good example of what they deliver concerning foreign places.

— Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*

SEBALD WROTE A BRIEF ESSAY on Vladimir Nabokov, "Dream Textures" (Sebald [1996] 2005: 146–55), which distills an understanding of the poetic rhythms of Nabokov's prose, the finest instance of which, in Sebald's assessment, is drawn from his memoir, *Speak, Memory*. In this essay Sebald observed: "Nabokov repeatedly tried, as he himself has said, to cast a little light into the darkness lying on both sides of our life, and thus to illuminate our incomprehensible existence" (147). We can reflect what Sebald admired in the Russian writer back to what we admire in Sebald's own prose.

In Sebaldian poetics the business of writing, that Proustian memorializing activity, is a means of arresting time, of slowing down to walking pace our inevitable movement toward death, to reclaim as writers and as readers, in the numinous intensity of some transcendental experience, the illusion that Kafka also described, where we "seem to stand on the threshold of the revelation of an absolute truth." It was the arduous creation in language of something beautiful that "releases the ideas that are shut inside our heads" held in the gravitational field of our subjective consciousness out into the "universe" as the art of literature that was, I believe, the matrix of Sebald's own fictional poetics, a writing enterprise whose ambition was to refocus the art of reading at the end of the ever-accelerating twentieth century, and to do so writing in the language the world had reason to "forget," his native German, the language he was to use to make us mindful.

The passage from Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* that Sebald quotes as his "finest" was originally written in Russian. I do not know whether Sebald

read it in its English translation or in its German one, but I can be fairly certain that he did not read it in the Russian original. Those of us who read Sebald in translation might also, as Sebald does of Nabokov, express our admiration for his prose which balances, like Nabokov's, its montages of *kinesis* and *stasis*, that *bricolage* that memory resolves into the vivid imagery of painterliness, with its "touch of the surreal" (152), its "touch of humour" (154), and above all, its "*claritas*" (151) in the four works of prose fiction regarded as his major achievement.

Our position as readers is to disobey the coordinates of our own present reality and to pursue the adventure of reading which takes us out of our spatial and temporal moment into "another realm," one created by the writing of another. Perhaps this too is "a tiny spiritual movement which releases the ideas that are shut inside our heads" (152) into the curiously hallowed space of mind in which the writer and the reader are demarcated, the self and the other, in a dialogical space of encounter, an imagined and imaginative space which is mapped by the text itself, that *salle des pas perdus* framed by the art of carefully wrought prose, in which our historical selves take flight, set off on some *vagabondage*, an adventure which disobeys the coordinates of our predestined journey, a different itinerary.

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D. B.
Melbourne, Australia
March 2007

Introduction: A Pre-amble

Paradigmatically postmodern writers are often operating on linguistic borderlines.

— Sebald to James Atlas, 1999

. . . an Opportunity of employing that wonderful Sagacity, of which he is Master, by filling up these vacant Spaces of Time with his own Conjectures; for which Purpose, we have taken Care to qualify him in the preceding Pages.

— Henry Fielding on the reader, *Tom Jones*, 1749

Generic Coordinates

THE EVOLUTION OF European literary prose fiction out of classical and vernacular epic poetry and romances which privilege imagination has become a familiar story. Ian Watt and other scholars begin with Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605, first translation into English 1612). It is the tale of a picaro who is plunged into a melancholy state by reading fiction. His cure entails setting out on a journey — accompanied by his steady companion — and engaging sober philosophical questions about the nature of reality, not least his own. Cervantes, a voracious reader, created a Menippean dialogical text full of incongruities and self-reflexive ironies, which was purportedly a factual tale written in Arabic and discovered in a Spanish marketplace. Jorge Luis Borges appropriated it in his postmodern fashion. Bakhtin reminds us that history shows that fiction lends itself to the *carnavalesque* or the ludic. In one sense at least it is intrinsically ludic. The distinctions between art and nature, artifice and the real, as well as imagination and historical fact, have become less distinct in various individual practices, even as they underpin Cervantes's own text and the history of the European novel. In our own period the rise of fiction which draws in very explicit ways on historical events or persons has caused not a little debate about the distinction between historical and fictional discourses.

After Cervantes, the novel continued to evolve, reaching a narrative apogee in the realist novels of the nineteenth century. It changed again as language was increasingly foregrounded, as one kind of fiction evolved even more into metafiction of the kind Sterne had practiced in *Tristram Shandy*, and as visual culture became a dominant medium for imaginative and reflective self-expression.

Sebald's relationship with the literary might well be described as post-modern and appropriative. Contemporary Austrian and Swiss writers attracted his critical interest, and Sebald was also interested in the technical innovations of Alexander Kluge and New German Cinema as well as the photographic hyperrealism of the paintings of his friend Jan Peter Tripp and the European paintings he alludes to in his own books. He draws upon the classical authors he encountered during his years at the Gymnasium in Oberstdorf, the German and French writers he studied while at university in Germany, Switzerland and England, and the writers from the broader European and British traditions that he read deeply in throughout his adult life. Sebald's embrace of a variety of media that he has allowed to shape and influence the form of his texts as well as the development of his style is concomitant with his desire to give voice to something that would otherwise remain silent. It is not just an expression of a second-generation German sense of guilt about the European tragedy of the twentieth century or bafflement at the human capacity for destruction; it is also an expression of the subjectivity that is Winfried Georg Maximilian Sebald (1944–2001), the richly cultivated mind and very human voice which is articulated in texts which he described always as “prose books,” just “writing” in a postmodern sense, eschewing the generic category of “novel.”

Sebald's texts elicit what I term a “disobedient reader,” namely, a reader who exercises his or her own imagination in a manner typical of postmodern reading that blurs the boundaries of traditional academic literary discourse and other kinds of writing, and engages historical referents and other references in imaginative and poetic ways, making creative links for him or herself. This term, the “disobedient reader,” will be expanded on as the arguments in the book unfold.

Kluge's theory of montage, the “cut” which “opens up a space for the spectator to enact her or his own imagination” (Langford 2003) might illuminate how the Sebaldian reader can be likened to the spectator of Kluge's cinematic practice, both enacting their own imaginations in the spaces afforded by these kinds of texts. In this way the Sebaldian reader is active rather than passive, operating in the spaces that Sebald, like Kluge, has opened up for that imaginative and intellectual response to occur by resisting the linearity of narrative, the causality of plot, the theatrical artifice of characterization and so on, rather than being confined in a prescriptive or proscriptive role created by the directive author/auteur. His text displaces that authority in such a way that the reader, like Kluge's spectator, has an imaginative and collaborative constructing role to play, not one determined by an authoritarian *auteur* or author and shaped rigidly by the form of the text.

The notion of a disobedient reader resulted, in part, from speculation about reading the apostle Luke's account of the Annunciation story independently from the conventional interpretation mandated by the church in

the broadest sense, as the historical foundation of its discourse. We are used to reading this narrative and to seeing it expressed visually so often that it seems to resist interrogation or contestation. Thus we seem to accept it as documentation of a prior historic reality, either because we accept it as a literal record of an historical event or because it has become so embedded in our cultural memory that it has acquired that status over time, not least because, if we are believers, we have made that imaginative leap of faith which itself sets reason to one side. By bringing a degree of postmodern skepticism to our reading of that portion of text, believers or not, stripping away from it the authority of the institution which has preserved it (the Church), we can read the text as literary — that is, as something constructed in human language that in poetic terms is unstable (in T. S. Eliot's poetic sense), something that resonates unexpectedly and offers up meanings in the reader's mind beyond the literal denotation of fact or event that can be proved by evidential means.

Luke claims historical veracity or authenticity for his narrative in the four-verse preface to his Gospel modeled on classical rhetoric, and proceeds to tell a poetically charged story which confronts our very notion of reality. In part this is what faith in a transcendent reality invites us to do. This embedded contestation requires the reader "to question the authenticity" of the narrative at his or her own peril: believe or die, believe and be saved, question and suffer the consequences. If a greater number of God-fearing Christians in Germany had perhaps been less obedient, less passive, or more prepared to interrogate and contest the authority of the "authorized" or "standard version" of the truth about the Jews and other "enemies of the state," then who knows what changes might have been rung? If more members of the Bomber Command, or the Allied civilian populations, had questioned the morality of the annihilating strikes against the inhabitants of Dresden and Hamburg and the authority of those who gave the orders, like the lightning strikes against London and Coventry, would lives have been saved and horrors and destruction of cities averted?

Our capacity to question, and to engage in dialogue with one another, to be "disobedient" to what we construe as authority, or the "Authorized Version" (a translation and therefore interpretation after all), our capacity to see for ourselves, is one safeguard at least against passively allowing what Sebald calls the "litany of destruction" that is human history to keep repeating itself in a way that he construes as our "genetic flaw," our predisposition to destruction. His writing is an artist's response to that horrific history: the creation of something beautiful, and something that has the potential to change us for the better if we "know how to read." Is it coincidence that we can hear in that private note of Sebald to Williams, "For those who know how to read," the echo of another Gospel, Mark's recording of Christ's saying "Let those who have ears to hear, let them hear?"

I am grateful to Jonathan Long for the suggestion that led me to reconsider Kluge's links with Sebald in my formulation of the "disobedient reader," and it led me to the Australian academic Michelle Langford who notes Fassbinder's understanding of Kluge's iconoclasm. "One of his chief aims [is] to call every kind of institution into question, particularly those of the state — if I interpret half way correctly — and if his work is not indeed even more radical, that is, designed to prove that basically Alexander Kluge is interested in the destruction of every type of institution" (2003).

I do not mean to suggest that Sebald was as radical as Fassbinder suggests Kluge is; however, we might surmise that Sebald's rejection of the institutional conventions concerning the novel draws a little on Kluge's theory and practice of montage and fantasy. Langford observes:

Kluge's theories of the cinema are founded on the conception that mainstream narrative cinema — not only Hollywood, but also importantly, "Papa's Kino" (the post-war German cinema denounced in the *Oberhausen* manifesto) — works by a process of closing off the ability for the spectator to engage their imaginative faculties while watching a film. Kluge does not simply take for granted the notion of spectator as passive observer. For him, under the right circumstances — that is, those circumstances created by the right kind of film — the spectator can assume a much more active role during the screening of a film.

Kluge aspires consciously in his various roles as filmmaker, theorist, and activist to develop new modes of constructing films that will in turn provide the spectator with new and more active ways of engaging with such films; ways of activating the spectator's own capacity to make connections between vastly disparate images. (2003)

In his 1982 essay "Between History and Natural History: On the Literary History of Total Destruction" (Bell's translation was published in 2005), Sebald refers to Nossack's "documentary tone," and writes of the "culture of contingency that breaks the mould of the culture of the novel," as well as "the mutation in mankind that makes the author an anachronistic figure," and "the wide distance between the subject and object of the narrative process" (77). These are qualities reflected in Sebald's own works in his adventurous determination to shake off the generic conventions of the novel's form to the extent that he does while continuing to assert the literary qualities of fictional poetics, not least in providing the reader with an imaginatively rich collaborative experience by extending an invitation to an unusual reading adventure in an unfamiliar textual space.

Sebald quotes Nossack who notes, "we come from a fairy tale and shall return to a fairy tale again" (78). This is one of Nossack's observations about the timeless beauty of the natural landscape that he made from the periphery of Hamburg just prior to witnessing its destruction. "Collective catastrophe marks the point where history threatens to revert to natural history." We are doomed, predisposed by our genes to a cyclical repetition

of catastrophe. Nossack “breaks out of the novel form that owes its allegiance to bourgeois concepts” (89) by focusing on our capacity for delusion, as exemplified by the consoling stories we tell to deceive ourselves. These are not the stories Sebald wants to tell, so he destabilizes the reader’s perception of the boundary between fiction and nonfiction and puts the imaginative and intellectual responsibility on the reader by focusing on the opportunity for asking, “Can it really have been so?” In Sebald’s work, this positioning of the reader as interrogatory is both political and moral. The reader’s imagination is not to be exercised in some bourgeois escapist fantasy, but in a profoundly disturbing way that unsettles our complacency and our passivity.

Sebald goes on here to trace the narrative shift toward documentation in the “West German” tradition (89) and focuses on how Kluge “resists the temptation to integrate that is perpetuated in traditional literary forms by presenting the preliminary collection and organization of textual and pictorial material, both historical and fictional, straight from the author’s notebooks, less to make any claim for the work than as an example of his literary method” (84–85). Sebald’s literary enterprise is also resistant to the artifice of integration, but not because he imitates Kluge. He appropriates Kluge’s method, itself derived from Eisenstein, to his own metafictional purpose. While Eisenstein’s dialectical notion of montage, “what is juxtaposed is not phenomena but chains of associations connected with the given phenomena for the given audience” (Leyda and Voynow, 17), Kluge, in contrast to Eisenstein’s Soviet ideology of shaping the audience’s response, wanted to liberate its imaginative potential. Thus, eliciting the reader’s own subjectivity without seeking to direct it in an authoritarian way, he engages that reader as an individual subject so that he or she becomes a dialogical partner in the text’s construction. As such, that reader is free to be disobedient, that is, capable of imaginative and intellectual *envol* and *vagabondage* of his or her own (these are Julia Kristeva’s terms), allowing the text thereby to have a life and shape beyond the author’s thinking and imagining in the reader’s collaboratively constructing mind.

Sebald explains: “If this procedure undermines the traditional idea of a creative writer bringing order to the discrepancies in the wide field of reality by arranging them in his own version, that does not invalidate his subjective involvement and commitment, the point of departure for all imaginative effort” (85). Written in 1982, these words resonate for us now as indicative of what was to become Sebald’s assertion of the individual subject. By foregrounding the “point of departure for all imaginative effort,” Sebald creates the space where “human beings can actually think,” rather than merely “drawing their own self-image” from literary productions which he quotes Stanislaw Lem as deploring because they deny the reader’s free will or responsibility, just as he deplores thinking machines or laboratory rats (90). This “subjective involvement and commitment” is

what Sebald elicits in his disobedient and adventurous reader, activating the integrity of the individual, that site of creativity, knowledge and imagination in Sebald's sense of the man alone in a room writing — or reading, as a prelude to acting for the good, remembering the past in an authentic and truthful way.

Sebald makes it very clear that “Kluge reminds us all the time, and in every nuance of his complex linguistic montages, that merely maintaining a critical dialectic between past and present can lead to a learning process which is not fated in advance to come to a ‘mortal conclusion’” (93). Sebald had recognized in the early 1980s that “Kluge’s way of providing his documentary material with vectors through his presentation of it transfers what he quotes into the context of our own present.” He cites Andrew Bowie to explain that “history is no longer the past but also the present in which the reader must act” (95). Those who remember or take on “the risk of remembering” (87) are the ethical and moral custodians of civilization; we try to preserve and learn from the fragments we keep within the orbit of our consciousness.

Sebald, like Kluge, makes the past both coeval with and the matrix of the present through the medium of the narrator’s memory in his fiction. Our relationship with the past is determined by our capacity to engage with it gladly, as in our celebration of its rich cultural legacy to us, as in our admiration of the landscape and environment we have been good stewards of, but also in our capacity to be affrighted by the “traces of destruction” for which we are responsible, those things which are our burden in the present and which haunt us, leaching the life from us just as it is leached from the Sebaldian narrative spectres wandering in some field of asphodel in his fictional spaces.

Sebald’s text generates a discourse with the reader so that a critical and creative space can evolve and enable a dialogical encounter between the “I” of the nameless narrators of Sebald’s constructed fiction, which is and is not the “I” of the author or the ontological Sebald, and the “I” of the reading subject.

Rather than putting these fragments together with a final “ideal meaning” in mind, Kluge places the emphasis on the role of the spectator in the production of meaning. The looser the logical connection, or wider the gap between consecutive images, the more space is left for the spectator to activate her or his own *Phantasie*. Kluge is therefore, not interested in “conquering the spectator” or directing them toward a predetermined series of associations, as was the case with Eisenstein’s dialectical approach, but his theory of montage is interested in involving the spectator in the production of meaning, effectively making them “co-producers” of the film. (Langford 2003)

Readerly disobedience entails a sense of adventure. It is experienced when Sebald frees the reader from the protocols of reading in a conventional or

passive way that is subject to the authority of the text. This focus on the reader's subjective and imaginative capacity to construct the text is post-modern. It is applicable to both the viewer who stands before a painting in a gallery and to the spectator in the cinema.

According to Langford, "Kluge believes that the aesthetic and political possibilities of cinema should and can be based on subjective modes of experience" (2003). Similarly, Sebald relies on the reader's creativity and ability to make connections between fragments:

This is what Kluge calls the "film in the mind of the spectator," a capacity which he believes has existed for thousands of years, long before the technological invention of cinema. Kluge writes: "film takes recourse to the spontaneous workings of the imaginative faculty which has existed for tens of thousands of years." This capacity to make connections is an ability to edit together images and experiences into something meaningful, to see the hidden correspondences between diverse things, a capacity that is not unlike Walter Benjamin's notion of "involuntary memory." Montage, for Kluge, which is certainly not equivalent to the editing of the filmstrip, occurs between the film and the spectator, and within the spectator's own mind. (Langford 2003)

This "film in the mind of the spectator" is the way in which a film, or a work of fiction like Sebald's, becomes imbricated within that "film in the mind" of the spectator — that is, his or her consciousness. This is the repository of photographs, images, snatches of sound and dialogue, fragrances and tastes, the instances of ideas waiting for triggers and connections, that vast collection, in short, of what we store in our mind and of which our individual consciousness is composed — the raw material of our thought and imagination. The "ability to make connections," to "edit together" to "make something meaningful," to "see the hidden correspondences between diverse things" that is "montage" for Kluge is in fact both Benjamin's appropriation of Proust's appropriation of Henri Bergson's idea of involuntary memory, and Sebald's means of composition which also engages the mind of his reader. It is an extraordinarily adventurous synergy because it allows for the unexpectedness of disobedience, of the creativity of the mind's imagining. For Proust there was some pattern of connectedness or design behind our lives that we glimpsed from time to time, and for which we yearned all our lives. For Sebald the connection between his mind and that of others, mediated through the literary language of his texts, is the moral connectedness whose lack leads to destruction.

In his book *Loiterature* (1999), Ross Chambers observes that "the reading relation is regularly cited as one that questions rigid distinctions of subject and object, self and other, and substitutes for them a relation of split. The text-reader relation is one of mutual dependence: discourse becomes text, that is meaningful, only by virtue of its being read, but the

reading subject is the site of a self-recognition that is mediated by the otherness of a text" (273–74).

Chambers goes on to discuss the way in which reading itself "can be described as the production of (just such) a split between an *énoncé* and an *énonciation*," that is, what it "says" is not what it "means in, in context, as *énonciation*" (275). This is another space in which the reader's imagination is given subjective space to construct. Reading too is essentially a rupture, an interruption of space between the author's determination of language in the past and the future of possibilities that the reader, and a multiplicity of readers, opens up. This is the dialogism embedded in all texts, and the hope of the "radiant possibility" of *claritas* (Sebald's term) that the writer creates in the arduous labor of crafting language. In this paradigm the reader is always disobedient and adventurous, because that "split" — foregrounded in Sebald's writing — emancipates the reader from adherence to narrative protocols which solicit obedience, even in the reading of postmodern texts which challenge the reader to question diegetic playfulness not just in a prescriptive theater of mimesis but in memoir, essay, and history too, and in fiction which presents itself as non-fiction, or at least as more documentary than we are accustomed to expect.

Mapping

Since I began this project, W. G. Sebald's prose fiction has won an international readership and his celebrated work is enjoyed both in its original German and also in translation. This study evolved out of an engagement with Sebald's texts in their English translations and I make no claim to German-language scholarship. I am interested in Sebald as a writer of literary fiction, rather than specifically as a German writer. While I accept Arthur Williams's observation that "the multi-layered precision of his language is inevitably at its richest and sharpest in the original German" (*The Literary Encyclopedia*, 24 April, 2002, *The Literary Dictionary Company*), the experience of Sebald in translation is so rich and rewarding that it also merits consideration.

Some of the early critical writing on Sebald available in English argues that his writing is particularly reflective of German culture and Germans during the twentieth century. As many have remarked, the Holocaust is a spectral presence that haunts Sebald's books. After all, Sebald was born in the second generation of postwar Germany, retained his German passport and taught and wrote about German literature, theater, and film. Moreover, he wrote nearly all his academic and literary texts in German. In many ways, Sebald's works helped restore and demonstrated the capacity of the German language to create aesthetic beauty, in the way that Klopstock (whom Sebald quotes in *After Nature*) wanted German to be

regarded as we regard Latin and Greek, capable of expressing literary verities at the core of our humanity. It is not always noted that Sebald did this work in England, where he had placed himself in voluntary exile at the age of twenty-two, more or less permanently. In the anglophone world, Susan Sontag, James Wood, Peter Craven, Anita Brookner, John Banville, and J. M. Coetzee drew critical attention to this curious writer who had seemingly sprung from nowhere. He was a middle-aged German academic from a provincial English university, whose critical work in German on Austrian and Swiss writers was unlikely to have been read by many outside the academy.

A few readers of German poetry, however, had read the long poem, *Nach der Natur* (*After Nature*), which focused on the lives of an artist, a scientist/theologian, and the poet as writer. There was also the strange prose text, *Schwindel. Gefühle* (*Vertigo*) with bizarrely comic images. The first book was published by the small press, Greno. Although Greno Verlag is relatively small, Sebald's works were published in a series known as "Die Andere Bibliothek," which was selected by Hans Magnus Enzensberger and received attention even before it moved to Eichborn Verlag in 1989. *Schwindel. Gefühle* was published by Eichborn but it was *The Emigrants* (*Die Ausgewanderten*), a collection of four loosely related stories with black-and-white photographs, which appeared in English first and launched W. G. Sebald into the wider public view. The anglophone world quickly embraced him as a very accomplished writer and *The Emigrants* appeared on reading lists in universities and schools in places as culturally diverse as South Africa, Australia, Canada, and the United States, where the various waves of European diaspora had been received.

The impressive writing in *The Emigrants* that was evidenced by the autobiographical and essayistic elements and the dualism of personal and academic voices developed out of the writing in *After Nature* and *Vertigo*. Germanists have identified specific elements in Sebald's early writing that invoke cultural discourses such as survivor-victim pathologies, Freud's theories of the uncanny and of desire, German guilt about the persecution and genocide of Jewry, the suffering of the German civilian population, the autobiographical turn in German writing, and the narrative of war in Europe in the twentieth century. Anglophone readers have responded differently to these topics. The unspeakable horror precipitated by a system of destruction perpetrated by one of the most civilized of nations reflected a pessimism that focused on a heart of darkness in mankind that Sebald draws explicitly from Joseph Conrad's 1901 novella as prophetic of mankind's continuing capacity for barbarism under the guise of civilization, as well as historically documenting colonial destructiveness and exploitation in both *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*, along with a hope for salvation or redemption. Moving forward or away from that past is considered curiously affirming.

Readers of the English translations tend to find that they voice a profound and wide-ranging understanding of human experience rather than a specifically German expression of cultural and social anxieties and pathologies. For many, the Germanness was mediated by the elegant translations of Hulse, Bell, and Hamburger as a vector for a universal perspective. Sebald is preoccupied with human nature, literary language, memory, the past and the nature of history, trauma, the use of photographs, and a catholic allusiveness to a shared cultural archive that was cosmopolitan rather than national, human rather than German. He seems to suggest that the crimes committed throughout history are a matter of a failure to acknowledge the humanity of the other.

Writing on Sebald has reflected both the culturally specific reading of Sebald and the situation of his writing within a universal literary context. Sebald was keen to question institutional orthodoxy of various kinds and was also concerned about the beauty created by human intellect and imagination. We know that Sebald read and valued Sontag's book on photography (Sheppard 2005), while Sontag herself thought that Sebald dared to voice the unutterable in oblique, masterly, and unusual literary ways. Sontag states explicitly that she does not consider him a post-Holocaust writer (2002, 41) and contends that Sebald's writing belongs among the literary giants to be revered and remembered because his vision is generous and profound. Her claim is framed as a rhetorical question and intended, perhaps, to assemble a broad spectrum of readers. Sontag observes that "the awareness of the solitary narrator is the true protagonist of Sebald's books" (2002, 45). It is the articulated consciousness of the *promeneur solitaire* (Rousseau's solitary walker; 44) that invites a dialogical relationship with the reader. The gesture is mediated by a highly allusive and self-consciously literary use of language, and is inflected, in my view, by a more subtle form of irony and self-reflexivity than Sontag perhaps allows (41). It is one that elicits an awareness of the solitary reader.

Sebald deliberately destabilizes that reader and thwarts the nostalgic romantic and realist desires for identification with the text. There is some ordered and benign Nature that refuses the postmodern desire for, in Sontag's slightly contemptuous phrase, "undermining or undignified self-consciousness or irony" (41). By deliberately thwarting the contemporary demand for the *hic et nunc* (Williams 2002, 2006), the instant gratification of the moment in the moment, Sebald promotes the cultural value of reading as our connection with the minds of the past and the legacy on which we might build in the present for the future without recourse to sermonizing about it. There is in this something of the educator.

Sebald doesn't offer conventional consolation or solace in the form of some benign transcendental order that is beyond our view but to which we might aspire. McCulloh and others suggest that Sebald's texts are ultimately too complex, too unsettling, or too destabilizing for the reader to

provide consolation, or a sense of being at home in the world. Sebald relentlessly returns our attention to the discomfort, the unsettledness, the sense of self and the world as fragmented, as well as the gap between the way things seem and the way they are. Our condition is transient, and we transform fleeting experiences into words and pictures with metaphors of construction and architecture that define space; however, the mind, as the realm of thought and imagination, remains a mysterious space where we might catch a glimpse of our real being and its creative and destructive potential. His texts also create that space.

Sebald's wily self-reflexiveness is even more audacious than Sontag asserts. Perhaps she avoids the issue in order to ensure that readers take responsibility for their reading. It is not a question of forcing readers to obey or to be obediently disobedient, since the *gravitas* of Sebald's text is ironized from time to time through a Menippean excess of melancholic lifelessness. Rather, the text emancipates readers from the tyranny of that conventional authority and makes them responsible. Sebald creates uncertainty in his texts that each reader must confront in the journey of reading. The reader becomes responsible for the trajectory of her thought and imagination as it arises out of that engagement. Reading Sebald cultivates and enriches the subject through the connection that evolves. It becomes a matter of education, of civilization and, as Williams observes, the "integrity of the individual" (2002). Sebald's poetics posit consciousness as a place where one is "at home" but also wandering, unable to map the space in which one dwells because there is no godlike perspective of its beginning and its end.

Writers including Cynthia Ozick (United States writer and critic), Randolph Stow (Australian writer, long-time resident in the UK), Brian Castro (Australian novelist), Ali Smith (in the United Kingdom), Delia Falconer (Australian novelist and critic), Michael Ondaatje (Sri Lankan-born writer who lives in Canada), Nicholas Shakespeare (British writer who divides his time between the UK and Tasmania), and J. M. Coetzee (South African Nobel-Prize-winning novelist, now an Australian citizen) have reviewed Sebald's books, expressing curiosity about and admiration for the form of his writing as well as his complex poetics. They are readers who approach Sebald with different understandings of what constitutes a literary text that can't be described, or categorized, as a novel.

Anita Brookner, celebrated London-born novelist and critic of long standing with Polish-Jewish forebears, emphasizes the German and Jewish elements in Sebald's texts, but she too underscores the poetics of fiction, Sebald's curious style, his use of photographs, his peculiar narrators, and the question of whether his writing is fact or fiction. How is one to read the books by W. G. Sebald? Writers like Brookner, who asks this question more than once, are interested in writing that invites engagement with a cosmopolitan and a metaphysical notion of civilization in a different way.