

Sebald or *Gevalt*?

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Translated by Shir Alon

The back cover of W. G. Sebald's newly translated novel, *The Rings of Saturn*, boasts a citation from the *New York Times*, the world's most responsible newspaper: "Stunning and strange. . . . This book is like a dream you want to last forever." A quote from the *New York Review of Books* bestows the novel with even greater superlatives, while the publicity brief that accompanies the book states that it is Sebald's third book to be translated into Hebrew, and that the earlier two "were hugely successful in Israel."

No one takes these things seriously, for the most part; publicity is a layer of thin dust one brushes off the book before opening it. However, this time it is not dust and definitely not a petty matter. I, too, approached this book with the awe, anticipation, and reverence reserved for the greatest of writers. In my view, Sebald's previous two titles translated into Hebrew—*The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*—are summits of modern prose.

Originally published in *Yedioth Ahronoth* (Tel Aviv, Israel) in 2009. *Gevalt* (or *Oy, gevalt!*): a Yiddish exclamation of worry, misfortune, or alarm.—Trans.

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I am not alone; Sebald was a breakthrough discovery for many. He not only wrote unique and impressive personal prose, he also broke new ground of narration and storytelling. In Hebrew letters, for instance, authors with an essayistic bent like Ronit Matalon and Dror Burstein adopted Sebald as a mentor. They absorbed his style into their deepest facets, the same way that, one generation earlier, the novelist A. B. Yehoshua found his artistic voice when he absorbed William Faulkner into his prose, and the poets Nathan Zach and David Avidan authored themselves through dialogue with T. S. Eliot.

So there was reason to expect a great many things of *The Rings of Saturn*. But great expectations turned into great disappointment—not only in Sebald but also in the critics whose praise or slander is automatic. And this since Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* is a particularly bad text; bad precisely because it features his idiosyncratic and excellent style but lacks the content to justify it. It is an empty style, like the painter Salvador Dalí, who in his youth paved the way for art's new surrealist path but in his later years became a serial producer of the "Dalí style."

The Rings of Saturn recounts a journey Sebald undertook between 1992 and 1995 along England's eastern shoreline. But, as Sebald is prone to do, the travel narrative is only a very loose framework for long digressions to other chapters of his own biography; to meetings with other people; to studies on past writers and scientists; to ancient and modern books; and to excerpts of encyclopedic information, real or dreamed up, on the architecture of the temple in Jerusalem or the silkworm industry.

Sebald had cultivated a unique style that was both important and influential—despite the drawback of sexuality's absence in his writing, as there is something depressing and false in a world without sex—because he offered answers to questions that many readers and writers have been struggling with. For instance, is it possible for the author's authority to remain as it was in the works of Kafka or Faulkner in a world where so many authorities have collapsed? Sebald reestablished a trust in prose. In a world without heroes, it is difficult for us to accept the figure of the author-hero who creates worlds in his own mind. Sebald won our trust by beginning with the nonfictional, with himself and his biography. But that was only the starting point: from there he sailed on to characters he had invented, to stories utterly different from his own.

It is impossible to detach the force of his style from the residues of World War II. The German past pursued him and his prose. He asked the reader to trust his autobiographical voice because so many other voices

had lied or silenced the horrors they had committed or had been subjected to. Sebald created a place for people, most of them refugees, who were left without a place, without a memory, without an anchor. In this way, he set up an unforgettable tension between the voice of a man telling quiet facts about his life and the voices of survivors. What began as a personal diary went on to become elaborate, boldly drawn portraits of other, nearly erased figures. Austerlitz, for example, will never abandon Sebald's readers.

Where are these powerful portraits in *The Rings of Saturn*? Where are the figures that must be approached with utmost humility but nonetheless radiate survival's potency? Who will the reader remember after reading *The Rings of Saturn*? Some blurry-lined pensioner dedicating his time to growing rare flowers? Some burned-out academic who specialized in German literature but spends his days studying Japanese? Sebald's diary-like style embarks on a journey but does not arrive at any station.

In his previous books, Sebald combined his diary chapters with both fictional chapters as well as esoteric factual knowledge drawn from the most forsaken corners of various archives and encyclopedias. The combination of the fictive and the documentary was refreshing and aided many writers in forging a prose style in which fictional stories flourish alongside fragments of reality. Unlike Gabriel García Márquez, who made the entire world into one endless legend, Sebald allowed us to ask, What is more fantastic: the facts of the twentieth century, or its fictions? Sebald enveloped Austerlitz's character, for example, in rich and detailed information about the architecture of European train stations. Austerlitz, who emerged from the train to Auschwitz a shattered and broken man, preferred to spend the rest of his life between train stations, refusing to settle down. Thus, there was a substantial reason for Sebald's inclusion of detailed accounts of train stations. In contrast, the reader of *The Rings of Saturn* is confronted with a digression on the British herring industry, another on an episode of Chinese history, and yet another on silk production in Germany.

As a fan of Joseph Conrad, I greatly enjoyed reading the fascinating chapter on his life, but the encyclopedic portions are associative digressions on the part of the diary writer that lack strong connections to anything he has set out to say. In his other novels, Sebald's drifting between landscapes and encyclopedic fragments emerged out of a deep necessity and constituted an ingenious literary innovation. But here this style exists in a void. When an author becomes enslaved to his own style, when form is empty of content, the result is not merely boring. In his previous books Sebald was a great writer of the German trauma, but in *The Rings of Sat-*

urn he makes that national trauma banal. All of his fragments and digressions eventually lead him to the Nazi horrors. As a result, we are asked to believe that the economic decline of East Anglia is a mini-Holocaust, that raising silkworms is a model of a racialized political order, and that Conrad was also, in one way or another, one of Hitler's refugees.

These analogies are absurd. If only the problems of the Third Reich were similar to those of East Anglia. If only the ills of the silk industry were similar to those of scientific racism. Sebald was a writer who studied, evaluated, and measured the German horror. In *The Rings of Saturn*, he has become one of its tedious and banal writers. The tendency to award writers a permanent position in the domain of geniuses or graphomaniacs is one of the deeply ingrained pathologies of the literary world. Its first victim is the writer himself, who becomes chained to his own image. The second is the reader, who does not read the novel but rather the aura that surrounds it.