

The Sebald Case

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The collective bewilderment over the unexpected passing of Winfried Georg Maximilian Sebald, also known as W. G. Sebald or “Max” Sebald, had not yet subsided when the well-oiled machinery of his literary canonization sprang into motion. Born March 18, 1944, in Wertach, Germany, and dying December 14, 2001, in East Anglia, England, from an aneurysm while driving his car, Sebald leaves this world at the precise moment of his international triumph—namely, the translation of his works into English, Spanish, and other languages. He reappears, however, with renewed glow from *The Beyond* to enjoy, as one of the chosen few, the status of “instant classic.”

The reasons for his immediate admission to such an elite club are as logical as they are inevitable. Namely:

1. Sebald was an academic respected by his peers. Furthermore, he wrote “mixed” fictions straddling the essay and narrative fic-

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tion, making him beloved among certain critics and readers, they who have already passed through Kundera, Eco and Co. That is to say, Sebald is an intelligent writer for readers yearning to be made to feel as intelligent as they'd like to be. But take heed: Sebald is not a writer "of ideas" but a writer "with good ideas."

2. Sebald was the consummate European: first, a German *Lektor*¹ at the University of Manchester, then a professor of literature at the University of East Anglia for over thirty years. At the same time, he was a writer who largely kept to his native tongue (although he worked closely with his English translators), and the synthesizer cum laude of his continent's natures.
3. Sebald was an accomplished agonist. Without falling into Ernesto Sábato's whining or José Saramago's broadsides, he denounced the slow-motion apocalypse in which we are all entrenched, expressing his belief in the impossibility of writing "from a compromised moral position" (Jaggi 2001b). Thus with ominous good humor, he enjoyed the best of both worlds: the noncommittal commitment of the pessimistic bon vivant.
4. Sebald functioned as an elegant disseminator, offering accounts of the lives and works of others in order to, subliminally or otherwise, relate them to his own life and work, and insinuate—again, subliminally and not-so-subliminally—that Stendhal, Casanova, Browne, Conrad, Napoleon and Co. were, in some way, an inseparable part of a Sebald who never tired of repeating two things: he didn't read much contemporary writing, and he couldn't stand the "grinding noises" of modern novels (quoted in Homberger 2001).
5. Sebald was a devoted photographer and archive aficionado who supposedly "discovered" a new form of "nonfictional fiction." Through this method, the autobiographical is infused with the biographical through images—photographs, maps, drawings—and can triumph through a free association of ideas to manufacture a seemingly rigorous documentary apparatus. But take heed: it is intentionally full of "errors" for the narcissistic pleasure of connoisseurs and the happy few who have the education necessary to detect them.
6. His Great Theme was the battle of memory ("the moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory") against

1. Senior language teacher; many are junior academics or trained teachers.—Trans.

oblivion, and his compulsion—perfect for a perfect and progressive reader—was to shine a light on memories, on what is intentionally forgotten, disappeared, to dredge those “seas of silence” (Jaggi 2001a, 2001b). For Sebald, guilt exists to be felt and not negated—something that explains a certain reticence on the part of his compatriots to acknowledge Sebald’s grandeur. And yet, this did not preclude his profound distaste for the Holocaust industry à la Spielberg and for any kind of confessionalism.

7. Sebald died just after publishing his outstanding and most conventionally novelistic book, *Austerlitz*. In this work, indisputably his best, the author finally creates a character *outside* his own person: the troubled, nomadic Jacques Austerlitz, constructed from “two or three, or perhaps three-and-a-half, real persons” (Jaggi 2001a). *Austerlitz* achieves a perfect distillation of plot, history, memory, and amnesia, simultaneously obligating readers to think about all that could have been and will not be—and which, by omission, makes Sebald greater from the moment of his death, a man at the height of his powers.

A marketing genius could not have come up with something better.

The New Order

Death categorizes and puts things where they belong. In a writer as “funereal” as Sebald, death pays another defining dividend: a new vision of his books as seen from career’s end, unexpectedly promoting the work-in-progress to final work completed. A landscape where the Sebaldian (the continuous movement of body and culture) changes signs and polarities, where the nomadic shifts to the sedentary. The Spanish reader was until now obligated to read Sebald through the well-traveled paths of English editions but soon will have the opportunity to access the works of Sebald in toto. And in the correct order! Namely, the prose poem initiating 1988’s *After Nature* (first appearing in English last year), *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, *Austerlitz*, Hamish Hamilton’s recent *On the Natural History of Destruction* (an edited collection that includes a polemical series of lectures on the Allied bombardment of German cities and the responsibility and irresponsibility of Germans in the matter, a view his compatriots did not take kindly to), and *For Years Now*, a collection of poems illustrated by Tess Jaray. Add two essays on Austrian literature—*Die Beschrei-*

bung des Unglücks (*The Description of Misery*), and *Unheimliche Heimat* (*Unhomely Home*)—as well as *Logis in einem Landhaus* (*A Place in the Country*), a combination of “reflections” on Gottfried Keller, Johann Peter Hebel, and Robert Walser. And that, it seems, is all she wrote, until someone inevitably is compelled to compile his academic papers, seminar notes, et cetera. Later, of course, after the enthusiasm over the discovery of a new celestial being has passed, we will see if Sebald continues to shine alongside those to whom one routinely compares him (Borges, Proust, Calvino, James, Nabokov, Conrad, Kafka, and Bernhard, the latter Sebald considered as one of his influences). Or whether, after his dazzling moment in the sky, he becomes yet another of the thousands of interesting but dead stars. Will his absence inspire a legion of facile imitators? Sebald is easy to imitate in appearance but not in quality. A few months ago in Barcelona, the Italian writer Roberto Calasso expressed his astonishment at Sebald’s bafflingly rapid ascension to those mythic-maniac territories of a James Dean poster. Calasso compared Sebald’s postmortem to the same compulsion that marks Bruce Chatwin as a traveler from the beyond. Whatever the reason that, from time to time, the intellectual world seems to require the services of a sacred and blessed icon, one thing is yet again clear: any swift judgments prompted by the arrogance of an untimely death is, inevitably, a hurried judgment. In a summary fashion, the obituaries and memoirs of friends and colleagues have elevated Sebald to an altar of vertiginous heights.

The Previous System

Vertigo clouds common sense as much as it does the physical senses. Once again, Sebald is not at fault, but rather those fans that prefer not to see in his supposedly indisputable originality any antecedents or contemporaneous representatives of the form. I am not referring here to Stendhal’s *Henry Brulard*, Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*, or the ever-so-Sebaldian novel before Sebald complete with photographs and maps, André Breton’s *Nadja*. I refer instead to all Sebald’s contemporaries that many of the *Sebaldmaniacos* prefer to ignore, either out of basic idolatry or simply because given the choice, they would rather read a single author and not several. This includes names and titles as diverse as Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*, Rick Moody’s *The Black Veil*, Enrique Vila-Matas’s *A Brief History of Portable Literature*, Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude*, Pierre Michon’s *Small Lives*, Douglas Coupland’s *Polar-*

oids from the Dead and *Life After God*, Javier Cercas's *Soldiers of Salamis*, James Ellroy's *My Dark Places*, Haruki Murakami's *Underground*, Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Javier Marías's *Todas las almas* and *Negra espalda del tiempo*, Jack Finney's *Time and Again* and *From Time to Time*, and many others.

"Yes, we remember and write about ourselves through the memories and writings of others," Sebald explained, somewhat obviously *but* functionally epigrammatic. This hasn't prevented his acolytes, as so often happens in these cases, from willingly turning a blind eye to reading and celebrating his ingenuity instead of his undeniable and much more discriminating genius. Specifically, the *tempo* and the tone that make each and every one of his phrases perfect examples of narrative effectiveness and syntactical goldsmithing that perform well in harmony but which also, at the same time, can be admired individually, as if all could begin and end in each.

In this context of unanimous, absolute apologia and of the solitary search for a style between the ascetic and the exquisite, the English publication of *After Nature*—a cornerstone of the Sebaldian construct and a transitional work between essay and narrative that arrived around the time of the release of *Austerlitz* in Spanish—perhaps clears up some things because, paradoxically, *it is not* one of Sebald's great books, but an interesting one when it comes to cataloging the celebrated German's subsequent *nonfictional-fiction*. For starters, it is somewhat debatable to tag *After Nature* as one of Sebald's "prose poems." Equally doubtful are Sebald's stated intentions to lyrically reflect on humanity's destruction of nature. Similar to the encyclopedic *zapping* of the songs of Italian Franco Battiato (as well as the format used by Roberto Bolaño in *Tres* or Hans Magnus Enzensberger in "The Sinking of the Titanic"), Sebald divides his poetic cycle into three sections, stipulating from the outset that the aesthetic of his system is permanently anchored in the confusion "between history as historiography and history as experienced history" (quoted in Bigsby 2001: 161). The first part of *After Nature* is about the painter Matthias Grünewald; the second about Georg Wilhelm Steller, a member of the Bering expedition; and the third and best of all is about W. G. Sebald inaugurating his character and his walk. It is a movement that recalls Mick Jackson's *Connections*, the formidable television series exploring how everything is connected and which for Sebald is the perfect manifestation of miniaturism as the perfect alibi for transforming himself into the ultimate historian: the proprietor of Universal History based on its debt to individual history. "Dark Night Sallies Forth," the title of the third poem, inaugurates that sense of dizzying ver-

tigo that will mark his later explorations. Journeys where—as tends to happen with supposedly reincarnated souls always derived from Cleopatra or Leonardo da Vinci and never a humble Theban pastor or Renaissance beggar—Sebald walks casually through the most transcendent terrain, leaving the inferior boroughs of the anonymous for another day.

That early Sebald speaks to us through frayed verses rather than prose doesn't much change what is, in truth, the irritatingly capricious result of comparing him to the Sebald of *The Rings of Saturn* or *Vertigo*. Consequently, Sebald arrives at this, say, "universal autobiography" while searching for a form of writing "where the art manifests itself in a discreet, not too pompous fashion." He took inspiration from German documentaries that became very popular in the 1970s but were never considered important works of art, specifically how they manufactured "an effect of the real" while inventing certain details (Jaggi 2001a). When all is said and done, *After Nature* (unlike the mature, wise *Austerlitz*) reads almost like a detective's deduction made too late or a murderer's confession blurted out before the crime. In any case, both motivations—searching for fingerprints on the knife's grip or plunging it in to the hilt—are marked by an obsession with the effects of the past on the present and the somewhat proud admission that "the dead have always interested me more than the living" (Sebald 2011: 78).

In the here and now, the departed Sebald is very, very interesting for those who have survived him, for the many that quietly concede in hushed tones, perhaps out of fear of falling victim to a Pharaoh's curse, his somewhat exaggerated prestige, and for the many more that swear by his divine name they continuously invoke in vain—to remain in good standing and to have a ready response to the question, *What are you reading at the moment?* Sebald serves, functions, protects, and refreshes best, and is so fashionable, so useful for the *nouveaux riche* of the intelligentsia. Sebald is practical and legible; he grants a certain prestige to his user and his consumer. Sebald is not only learned but also produces the agreeable effect, or impression, of cultivating and producing evangelical astuteness.

Again, to be clear, so that no one is angry: the best of Sebald is that his books can be considered satisfying steps of a long journey. The worst of Sebald are those that think that he is, suddenly and inevitably, the best of the best and the final, definitive destination after which point reside only monsters—and his death confirms as much. It remains to be seen how long Sebald's ghost will reside in the library of our haunted mansion. We'll revisit

the subject. Max, if you're there, please knock three times—in one, three, five, or ten years, OK?

Postscript 2016: Twelve years after its publication in *Letras Libres*, this piece continues to provoke the most reactions, equal parts interesting reflections and hate mail, of everything I've written. It is surprising that many continue to misread or intentionally misconstrue my article as an attack on Sebald's writerly talents. Rather, it questions the effect he produces in a specific type of "hip" reader ever anxious to taste the flavor of the week. Many of Sebald's better readers continue to reread him. Many of those with an incidental interest in Sebald later emigrated to the lands of other highly esteemed authors like Haruki Murakami, Michel Houellebecq, Roberto Bolaño, Karl Ove Knausgård, César Aira, and . . . who's next? Come in, please, there's plenty of room inside, get comfy and stay a while! It's a shame, of course, that none of these transients and passing readers aren't *also* concerned with authors such as Marcel Proust, Vladimir Nabokov, Henry James, or Adolfo Bioy Casares simply for not being fashionable or the "talk of the town." In any case, it will always be better to read something by someone than nothing by no one.

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