

Witnessing the Past in the Work of W. G. Sebald

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Artist and photographer Jan Peter Tripp was a key figure in the career of German writer and critic W. G. Sebald, cut short when the author perished in a car accident in eastern England, his home for more than thirty years. He died during a period of “crisis in [his] life and work, full of enigmas, conflicts, and contradictions he chose not to clarify” (Hamburger 2004: 7). Sebald dedicated “As Day and Night,” the culminating piece of his final collection of essays, *Unrecounted*, to Tripp, a lifelong friend (Sebald 2004: 85–96). In the early pages of the author’s final novel, *Austerlitz*, a photograph of Tripp’s eyes gaze at the reader-viewer, appearing alongside those of Ludwig Wittgenstein and two nocturnal animals, all bearing that “fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek

This article was published in 2008 in Отечественные записки (*Notes from the Homeland: A Journal for Slow Reading*) as an introduction to the Russian translation of Sebald’s essay on Tripp by Marina Koreneva. Since then, Sebald has attracted more attention in Russia with the translation of *On the Natural History of Destruction* in 2015 and a major essay by Maria Stepanova.—Trans.

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to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking” (Sebald 2001: 4–5). Sebald’s posthumously published *Unrecounted* consists of thirty-three miniatures (he refers to them as “etchings”) and thirty-three of Tripp’s engravings that resemble photographs of the eyes of various people, including those of the collection’s coauthors. English poet Michael Hamburger, another German emigrant whose eyes appear in *Unrecounted*, included his translation of Sebald’s 1998 essay on Tripp in the English edition of the collection. In doing so, he provides a graphic display of the evolution of the role of the visual in Sebald’s poetics from photographs of objects, faces, landscapes, architecture, and paintings, to depictions of the very organ of sight, the mechanism of vision: eyes, fixed directly on the reader-viewer, demanding a reciprocal gaze, an ethical reaction.

The essay on Tripp is not one of those essential works that won Sebald fame—a fame that was widespread, if short-lived, and resounded primarily throughout the English-speaking world rather than his native Germany. Popularity came with the 1996 publication of the English translation of *The Emigrants* and reached its apogee in 2001 with the appearance of *Austerlitz*. It began to fade after his death, and since then interest in his work has been predominantly academic.

The chasm between our native Russian reception of Sebald, which is practically nonexistent, and the complicated history of his European (especially German) and American reception (*New York Times* reviewer Richard Eder called him “memory’s Einstein”) is so hopelessly vast that Russian scholars, except perhaps those who aim to enlighten the reading public or study trends in the reception of various authors, need not concern themselves with it. We will thus focus our attention on the essay on Tripp, only recently made available in English and therefore the recipient of little critical scrutiny. Formally, the essay resembles Sebald’s fiction, insofar as the text is accompanied by an abundance of illustrations. That Sebald included a piece about an artist in *Logis in einem Landhaus (A Place in the Country)*, an anthology devoted to men of letters, points to his view of literature as a synthesis of the verbal and the visual, and allows us, moreover, to read the essay as a kind of self-commentary on the workings of cultural memory, as well as related terms such as *photorealism* and *the representation of reality*.

As he outlines the development of Tripp’s aesthetics from a tradition of “surrealism, of the Vienna school of fantastic realists, and of photorealism” to a “radical objectivity which, by simply representing life in all its mani-

festations, seeks to establish what gives rise to its particular evolution and expression,” Sebald pinpoints Tripp’s month-long residency at a psychiatric hospital as a transformative moment (2013: 167). In this facility, “the art of portraiture [became] an exercise in pathography,” and the artist perceived the essence of human existence. He saw in each person “an aberrant creature, forcibly removed from its natural and social environment” (167). In Tripp, the world surrounding this creature appears in the form of landscapes “devoid of all human presence” or still lifes composed of motionless objects that “bear witness to the former presence of a strangely rationalistic species” (167) and serve as an allegory for the past.

The theme of finding new perspective through mental suffering, through immersion in pathological melancholy, comes to the fore in the author’s last novel, *Austerlitz*, the only significant Sebald text currently available in Russian. In *Austerlitz*, visual allegories of the past can be found in objects falling under the saturnine gaze of the hero, objects that no longer serve their intended purpose. They can also be found in the author’s preoccupation with material surfaces, revealing the “flip side of things” (the title of Tripp’s first catalog), or their metaphysical underside. The objects on display at the “Antikos Bazar” in the Czech village of Terezín, where Jacques ends up, are all remnants of the past:

What was the meaning of the festive white lace tablecloth hanging over the back of the ottoman, and the armchair with its worn brocade cover? What secret lay behind the three brass mortars . . . the little box of seashells, the miniature barrel organ, the globe-shaped paperweights . . . the model ship . . . the Japanese fan, the endless landscape painted round a lampshade in fine brushstrokes, showing a river running quietly through perhaps Bohemia or perhaps Brazil? And then there was the stuffed squirrel, already moth-eaten here and there, perched on the stump of a branch in a showcase the size of a shoebox, which had its beady button eye implacably fixed on me, and whose Czech name—*veverka*—I now recalled like the name of a long-lost friend. What, I asked myself, said Austerlitz, might be the significance of the river never rising from any source, never flowing out into any sea but always back into itself, what was the meaning of *veverka*, the squirrel forever perched in the same position, or of the ivory-colored porcelain group of a hero on horseback turning to look back, as his steed rears up on its hindquarters, in order to raise up with his outstretched left arm an innocent girl already bereft of her last hope, and to save her from a cruel fate not revealed to the

observer? They were all as timeless as that moment of rescue, perpetuated but forever just occurring, these ornaments, utensils, and mementoes stranded in the Terezín bazaar, objects that for reasons one could never know had outlived their former owners and survived the process of destruction, so that I could now see my own faint shadow image barely perceptible among them. (2001: 195–97)

Why is Sebald so determined to find meaning in this still life of random objects from the past? On a referential level, the answer is clear: the provincial town of Terezín, located sixty kilometers from Prague, was transformed during the Second World War into a concentration camp for Jews, many of whom were subsequently transferred to Auschwitz and exterminated—including the mother of Jacques Austerlitz, the protagonist of the novel. *Austerlitz* is devoted to the painful process of both preserving and *redeeming* (in Walter Benjamin's sense) this past, which, for all its unfathomable monstrosity, informs the identity of the hero. Under his melancholic gaze, the scattered objects in the antique store window become silent witnesses to the “cruel fate not revealed to the observer”—in all likelihood the objects were, as critics have observed, confiscated from Jews and carefully sorted by the Germans, with their manic obsession for order and precision.

Yet Sebald's work does not belong to the tradition of Holocaust literature—not least of all because his own experience, which he integrated into many of his texts, was as the son of a man who from 1929 served in the *Wehrmacht*, staying on after the Nazis came to power and participating in the war before returning from a French POW camp in 1947. His father did not talk about the war, so when Sebald saw documentary footage of Bergen-Belsen shot by British troops (whose inmates included Anne Frank), neither he nor his friends discussed what they saw or knew what to think about it. They were more familiar with details of the aerial attacks on German cities committed by the Allies, including the mass destruction of Dresden. Sebald, in fact, drew attention to this issue through a series of public lectures he gave in Zurich in 1997, provoking controversy in Germany at the time. Sebald believed that only survivors, like Primo Levi, had a right to write about Auschwitz; otherwise, one might either freeze in the face of terror, succumb to the aestheticized and politically correct Holocaust industry—like Thomas Keneally's safely sentimental *Schindler's Ark*, famously adapted by Steven Spielberg—or rely on conventions of sadness and remembering animated by the national imperative to forget, an accusation Sebald regularly hurled at contemporary Germany. To avoid these pitfalls, the German author forges his own aesthetic cosmos, in which he

imbues himself openly and casts the contemporary world as one plagued by the specter of the Shoah—the unnamed, repressed, and unfathomable catastrophe that requires new vision, a new set of eyes. And Sebald insists on the universality of this historical experience, citing in his novel *Lamentations on the fall of Jerusalem*: “He has besieged and encompassed me with bitterness and hardship. In dark places He has made me dwell, like those who have long been dead” (3:6). This experience has been imprinted on the lives of all “die Ausgewanderten” (the emigrated), whose fate is one of isolation, depression, solitude.

The essay on Tripp juxtaposes this universality with the metaphysical underside of objects, the latter exposed by the artist. “Things outlast us,” writes Sebald (2013: 169), and thus they, like the suitcase in Tripp’s painting, reveal the past; they become fragmented clues to the past contained within a still life. The artist attempts to fixate these objects with maximum accuracy and detail, but where, to borrow Benjamin’s phrase in reference to Proust, is the end to “opening the fan of memory” (1986: 6)? Immersion in material surfaces together with a commitment to fixating on the surface in a way so as to make use of *trompe l’oeil*, thereby paradoxically revealing the underside of the object, engenders that familiar, for Jan Peter Tripp, “state of utmost concentration in which the breath grows ever shallower, the silence ever greater, the limbs gradually grow numb and the eyes grow dim” (Sebald 2013: 175). The artist is engaged in a “dangerous,” deadly game—he looks into the “terrifying abyss” (177) that lies just beneath the surface. Every object, depicted with maximum realism, reveals its allegorical meaning by becoming an emblem of death; looking at Tripp’s grapes in a vase on top of a white linen cloth, we can vaguely discern that they are all “spread out not for a wedding breakfast, but on a bier or a catafalque” (177). Here it is worth recalling a question posed by the hero of *Austerlitz*: “What was the meaning of the festive white lace tablecloth hanging over the back of the ottoman?” In a more general, universal sense, objects from Terezín, a Jewish ghetto, are allegories of death. It should come as no surprise, then, that Tripp found a dead mouse to be an appropriate object for his art; the artist painted the mouse over the course of the seven biblical days in order to preserve “the silent message of this unexpected guest,” all the while breathing in the “chloroform stench of decomposition” (176). A stuffed squirrel that Austerlitz sees in the window of the antique store serves much the same function.

The theme of death, of fixating the transient and ephemeral, is connected with the idea of “redeem[ing]” objects “forever by the painstaking,

impassioned precision of the artist,” or what Benjamin called the citation of the past in the present. One finds in the “Antikos Bazar” in Terezín, therefore, objects that “contain the whole of time within themselves” (179).

Sebald’s visual allegories are invariably resolved through the reflection of the human gaze. In striving to capture reality with maximum realism so that the metaphysical inner layer—death—shines through, Tripp himself outlives death as the artist. In observing objects from the past in the antique store display window in Terezín, Austerlitz suddenly sees his own self and transforms into a “shadow image” belonging to the past: “I could now see my own faint shadow image barely perceptible among them” (Sebald 2001: 197). Citing Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s essay “L’Oeil et l’Esprit,” Sebald writes in his work on Tripp about “le regard préhumain,” the gaze of inanimate objects on us, and when “the role of the observer and the observed object are reversed” (2013: 169). Sebald opposes the Cartesian imagination of Roland Barthes’s “effect of reality,” which maintains the essentially discursive nature of artistic realism divorced from referentiality, with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to artistic vision, at the heart of which lies an interaction between viewer and viewed, artist and object, and their mutual “respiration” allowing for the “secret and feverish genesis of things in our body” and, conversely, “the labour of vision” carried out within things (1993: 128–29).

In Sebald’s later work, this dialogue between object and self, rooted in his personal involvement with work of sight and represented in the gaze, in eyes, has played a far more important role than his trademark technique of incorporating in-text photographs—although in their markedly amateurish, “exquisite index of the pastness of the past” (Sontag 2000: 4), he consciously eschewed the quotidian repertoire of visual forms of suffering that have been imposed by mass media and that replaced individual memory. This trajectory becomes especially pronounced in the posthumous collection *Unrecounted*, where every plotless poem is paired with one of Tripp’s engravings, each depicting only eyes and the gazes of various people and one dog. What do these eyes want from us? What occurs in readers and viewers when they encounter this look, targeted directly at them and expressing suffering or terror? In the words of Benjamin, “His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past” (1969: 257). The angel, like the blond boy of about five years on the cover of *Austerlitz*, is turned with his face toward us.

The reflected gaze—the reciprocal gaze of the past—re-creates the

viewer, constituting him anew through the poignant necessity and impossibility of answering this emphatic, beseeching gaze. It is precisely for this reason that Austerlitz, in discussing the gaze of the boy from an old photograph, says that the boy implores—“notwithstanding that in the past, everything already happened—us to “avert the misfortune lying ahead of him” (2001: 184).

Sebald transitions from a view of memory as quotation, in a literal sense, of cultural realia of the past—expressed in the Tripp essay in the form of a wooden sandal from Van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Portrait* that the dog depicted by Tripp brought over to the present—to a radically acultural, corporeal representation of the gaze that in one way or another points to death. This movement can be discerned already in *Unrecounted*, and it represents not just a gesture of despair and skepticism of the very possibility of literary representation but also the evolution of motifs always present in his work. In earlier periods, too, Sebald frequently describes eyes looking at the viewer, but in *Unrecounted*, he minimizes prose for the first time and incorporates into text the images themselves: the “left (domesticated) eye” of the dog from Tripp’s painting, who “leaps easily over the dark abysses of time” and “looks straight at us; the right (untamed) eye has just a shade less light, seems remote and strange. And yet, we feel, it is precisely this eye in shadow which can see right through us” (2013: 184). The gaze of Rabbi Heshel, whose story concludes *Austerlitz*, appears in the same way: “His one eye . . . is shaded . . . in the other it is just possible to make out a white fleck, the light of life” (2001: 297). In the “circular eye” of the mirror hanging behind the couple in Van Eyck’s painting, the couple and the artist painting them, a witness to their union, are visible, confirming the words written on the mirror’s frame, “Johannes de Eyck hic fuit.” The symbolic metanarrative function of the famous painting, writes Merleau-Ponty, can be read as iconography of “prehuman way of seeing things” (1993: 129). Sebald, who devoted all his work to memory and forgetting, gazes at us from the cover of *Unrecounted*—and in Russian culture, this look does not find an answer.

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