

Obituary: W. G. Sebald (1944–2001)

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Obituary

W. G. Sebald (1944–2001)

Long before W. G. Sebald came to prominence as one of the most important contemporary writers in German, he had been well known in academic circles for his essays on twentieth-century Austrian literature. The more literal-minded of his colleagues at German universities could sometimes make little of these essays, however. His approach to literature was more closely akin to an Anglo-Saxon style of literary criticism that hovers between formidable specialist scholarship and a more readily accessible appreciation of literature, and which, at its best, approaches its subject with almost mimetic precision, yet without ever jostling it importunately.

There were biographical reasons for Sebald's affinity with Austrian literature. Growing up in a village in the Allgäuer Alps, not far from the border with Vorarlberg, he was in some senses closer to Austria than to the Bavarian capital, Munich. What he was later to read in novels about conditions in rural Austria could not help but remind him of his own experiences on the fringes of southern Germany. Like many of the provincial Austrian authors who emerged in the 1960s and afterwards, Sebald was a man from modest family circumstances who used the middle-class institution of literature to liberate himself from the constraints of a background at the lower end of the social spectrum. And like them, he was forced to acknowledge how emigration from the provinces can be both an act of self-emancipation and a condition of exile.

In Norwich, at the University of East Anglia, Sebald spent nearly thirty years, first as a PhD student, then as Lecturer, and finally as Professor of German Literature. His office was in the rather gloomy basement that housed the School of European History and Modern Languages. The corridor was not exactly inviting, and its brick walls were for the most part bare, but here and there they were enlivened by posters of Bernhard, Wittgenstein, and Beckett. British colleagues were for a long time ignorant of the gradual but consistent development that was to make Sebald a major author. He was first noticed in his adopted country as a writer in 1997, when *Die Ausgewanderten* appeared in English translation with the Harvill Press. *The Emigrants* was Waterstone's Book of the Month, and all Sebald's other novels were to take the Book of the Year lists in British newspapers by storm. Susan Sontag's euphoric reviews in the *New York Review of Books* and elsewhere soon ensured that Sebald became well known on the other side of the Atlantic, too.

Whilst the well-deserved fame and success that his books earned him in the 1990s was flattering to Sebald, it did nonetheless lead to a noticeably

distanced attitude to the monopolizing tendencies of the media and the book industry. In his adopted country he was less concerned with securing his own fame than with securing greater attention for other foreign-language authors on the British book-market. In 1989, after considerable efforts and with great organizational skill, he founded the British Centre for Literary Translation, of which he was Director until 1994. The Centre quickly developed into an important site of cultural exchange between isolationist Great Britain and the rest of the world, not least because it provided eight-week residential scholarships at UEA for translators from former Eastern-bloc countries.

The fact that Sebald emerged as a writer relatively late, at the age of forty-four, had much to do with what, at the beginning of *The Rings of Saturn* and in connection with the sudden death of his UEA colleague Michael Parkinson, he called 'the increasingly adverse conditions' prevailing at the university over the past few years. In the face of the progressive bureaucratization and intellectual degeneration of the British university system since the neo-liberal reforms of Margaret Thatcher and her Tory and Labour successors, the writing of literature became more and more a place of escape and a compensatory source of satisfaction. From the mid-nineties onwards, the number of languages offered in UEA was gradually reduced, the teaching of history came under increasing pressure, and Sebald's department was eventually *de facto* dissolved. Of necessity he was steered towards the School of English and American Studies, where he was made Professor of Creative Writing and European Literature.

Sebald consistently opposed attitudes that judged education exclusively in terms of economic viability and financial profitability, and did so not merely in words but with actions. In a gesture I believe to be unique in the British university system, he had the courage of his convictions and expelled an official Teaching Quality Assessor from his seminar room, with severe consequences. It was also telling that he was the only academic in the entire university who refused to have a computer in his room. He did not wish to be contactable by email, or to spend his time in front of a flickering screen dealing with health and safety regulations and other administrative nonsense. Such behaviour was of course futile, and ultimately turned into a self-destructive battle against the Kafka-esque proliferations of bureaucracy. Sebald fought it defiantly and in the full knowledge of its futility, and it was inevitable that it should take its toll.

The literature that was the subject of Sebald's research was not the least of the sources of the energy he needed for this battle. His essays on Austrian literature began to appear in the mid-1970s and were collected and published by the Salzburg Residenz Verlag in 1985 under the title *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*. A further collection appeared in 1991, entitled *Unheimliche Heimat*, and like its predecessor included essays 'on Austrian literature from Stifter to Handke'. In these volumes the early and the late

twentieth centuries are offset against each other, the Jewish in Austria counterposed with the non-Jewish, a master of small form such as Altenberg contrasted with the great epic writers Stifter and Broch. Sebald studied post-war Austrian literature principally with an eye to what it offered by way of solutions for the *malaise* of the modern world. The melancholy conviction that the twentieth century had shown definitively that the history of humanity was on a downward slide, that the calamities of the two World Wars were therefore only preludes to the total catastrophe to come, and that moreover an insidious ongoing exploitation of the resources of the natural environment was undermining the very foundations of life — these were implicit messages running through his literary essays.

Sebald acknowledged Kafka as one of the literary antecedents of this sinister teleology and read Kafka's 'evolutionary' stories with a view to deriving from them a fuller understanding of the destabilizing factors in human history, and to finding in them where possible blueprints for combating these forces. He reads 'Ein Bericht für eine Akademie', for example, as only superficially about the evolutionary leap from animal to human nature. The report about Rotpeter's becoming human, or more precisely about his enforced conformity with the demands of humanity is in Sebald's view a paradigm for the evolutionary processes that humanity is imminently to complete: conforming ourselves to the primacy of machines and computers.

For Sebald there was no doubt that the margins and the marginalized were where what matters about a society can best be perceived. One of his most important essays, perhaps *the* most important, is devoted to a poet who operated from a position of extreme marginality — Ernst Herbeck, who was schizophrenic. Sebald was introduced to him by Gerhard Roth and often visited him in the 'Haus der Künstler' in Gugging, a psychiatric institution for mentally ill artists near Vienna. He wrote a moving memorial to Herbeck, in his prose work *Schwindel. Gefühle* (translated as *Vertigo*). The essay on Herbeck's poetic writings that appeared in 1981 is the academic counterpart to this literary portrait and remains the most important source for our understanding of the mysterious beauty of Herbeck's work. What made his poetry so fascinating for Sebald was Herbeck's skill in approaching 'true' insight via 'false' paths. Sebald neatly encapsulates the poetological principles underlying Herbeck's poems with reference to Lévi-Strauss's concept of *bricolage*, suggesting that Herbeck's improvisatory use of language is remarkably similarly to the mythopoeic constructions of so-called primitive peoples, who use an analogous process of extemporaneously combining fragmentary or disparate materials that happen to be at hand into startlingly new constructs.

Herbeck's schizophrenic literature is therefore revealed as a literary manifestation of what Lévi-Strauss calls *pensée sauvage*. It was Sebald's achievement to make literary criticism indirectly aware of one of its major

deficits: whilst art history had long found a place for artistically creative works under the heading *art brut*, the writings of patients in psychiatric institutions, like Herbeck, were disregarded as therapeutic exercises and therefore without aesthetic value. The ‘mad’ poet Herbeck provided for Sebald an authentic paradigm against which to measure the literary treatment of schizophrenia by so-called ‘normal’ authors. Time and again he worked on texts dealing with questions of psychopathology, and amongst the most important essays on these themes are those on Peter Handke’s *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* and Gerhard Roth’s great novel *Landläufiger Tod*.

Despite his pessimism about mankind’s reckless destructiveness, Sebald repeatedly demonstrates in his essays that he understands literature as protective of the *one* realm that has proved resistant to any attempt by the discourse of reason to annex it — the realm of metaphysics. A book that is in Sebald’s eyes unique amongst contemporary literature in granting readers an insight into what lies beneath the surface of things is Handke’s novel *Die Wiederholung* (1986). Sebald is passionate in defending Handke against his critics, and he praises ‘the metaphysics developed by Handke in his most recent work, which attempts to transfer occurrences and perceptions into writing. Nowadays there is obviously no longer any discourse in which metaphysics may claim a role. And yet art, wherever and wherever it is practised, has the closest relations to metaphysics. To gauge this closeness the writer needs a degree of courage that should not be underestimated, even though criticism and scholarship, which regard metaphysics merely as a kind of intellectual junk-room, find it easy to content themselves with the general notion that in the higher regions the air is thin and the danger of falling acute.’

Sebald understood literature as a sign of solidarity, as a challenge to overcome the gravity of contemporary circumstances and free up the potential that is written into great literature, and this is the lesson that he attempted to communicate in his readings of Austrian authors, not least in the obituary he wrote for Thomas Bernhard in Volume 1 of *Austrian Studies*. Sebald’s detailed knowledge of Austrian literature is manifest in his own writings. In these the cheerful melancholic repeatedly descended into the dark history of his German homeland, and he traced the oppressive fates of oppressed individuals attentively and with care. In December 2001 a tragic car accident took Winfried Georg Maximilian Sebald forever into the dark realm of shadows that he had so often contemplated in his literature and in his criticism.

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