

‘AND SO THEY ARE EVER RETURNING TO US, THE DEAD’: THE PRESENCE OF THE DEAD IN W.G. SEBALD

Carole Angier¹

Abstract: This article follows a winding path, like the paths in Sebald’s great walking book, *The Rings of Saturn*. It begins in the mysterious images of ‘Dr Henry Selwyn’: in the narrator struggling to imagine how people can have oppressed others, barely hidden behind thin walls; and in the image of the dead returning, in the famous last line. It becomes clearer in ‘Max Ferber’, in which the narrator links the dead of the Holocaust to himself through his birthday, and through the pattern woven by the doomed Jewish girls, like the one in his home. And it ends in *Austerlitz*, which is one long search for the dead; and in which once again the dead of the Holocaust are linked to the narrator, through his visions of home in the fortress of Breendonck, and through his birthday again, and his name. The path leads from the dead of the Holocaust to the narrator, and through him to the author, Sebald himself.

My title comes from the last lines of ‘Dr Henry Selwyn’ in *The Emigrants*, which are perhaps the most beautiful of all the many beautiful lines that W.G. Sebald wrote.

Altogether, for me, ‘Dr Henry Selwyn’ is perhaps the most beautiful thing Sebald ever wrote, and contains in microcosm and in mysterious hints all the rest of his work. It is like one of his great images of art, the swift, watery sketches of Turner and of Great-Uncle Alphonso in *Austerlitz*, which render one of his dominating ideas about truth: that it can only be approached glancingly, fleetingly, without trying to pin it down and make it definite and clear. Typically, however, he also has an opposite idea of both art and truth, which is summed up in the lovely image of the model of the Temple of Solomon, in ‘Max Ferber’ in *The Emigrants*, and again in André Hilary’s history lesson in *Austerlitz*: that it takes ‘an endless length of time’ (A 100) and records every detail in miniature. (I am very glad that he also has this definition of art, as you will understand if you see the size of my own books.) He himself does both kinds, the long and detailed kind in *Austerlitz*, the glancing sketch kind in ‘Dr Henry Selwyn’. I’m going to start with ‘Dr Henry Selwyn’, and then move through ‘Max Ferber’ to *Austerlitz*. That way I hope to move from glancing mystery to detail, if not clarity, on our subject, which is traces of the Holocaust in Sebald.

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‘Dr Henry Selwyn’ starts with the narrator, and at first sounds completely solid and normal: ‘At the end of September 1970, ... I drove out to Hingham with Clara in search of somewhere to live.’ (E 3).² But it soon becomes very unsolid and strange, i.e. very Sebald. I won’t go into all the strangenesses – Dr Selwyn the hermit living in his own garden, Elaine the whinnying cook who never cooks, the dreamlike structure of the empty house. I want to note just two especially strange – and wonderful – things.

¹ Associate Lecturer, Creative Writing MA, Oxford Brookes University. Email: carole@cangier.co.uk

² W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* (London: The Harvill Press, 1996).

First of all, the servants' staircase, which opens off the wide corridor leading to the narrator and Clara's flat. Across this corridor is a door to 'a dark stairwell', which leads to 'hidden passageways' on every floor,

running behind walls in such a way that the servants, ceaselessly hurrying to and fro laden with coal scuttles, baskets of firewood, cleaning materials, bed linen and tea trays, never had to cross the paths of their betters. (E 9).

You may remember this. It is hard to forget.

'Often I tried to imagine,' Sebald continues, 'what went on inside the heads of people who led their lives knowing that, behind the walls of the rooms they were in, the shadows of the servants were perpetually flitting past' (E 9). This image is like the actual images, the photographs, in *The Emigrants* – detailed and convincing, yet uncanny and often improbable, so that we wonder if they are, as they seem, real, and if not, what they mean. Perhaps this image is about the oppression of servants, as it seems to be. But Sebald is not political. He is always on the side of the weak, and he is deeply disturbed by the alienating effects of capitalism and industrialisation; but he doesn't write about 'the workers'. So what else, or what also, might the extraordinary servants' staircase mean?

The second mystery is about the dead man who returns in 'Dr Henry Selwyn': Johannes Naegeli, the Alpine guide with whom Dr Selwyn spent the summer of 1913 climbing in the Bernese Oberland. We never hear any more of Dr Selwyn's parents, sister or uncle, with whom he came to England in 1899, nor of his favourite teacher, the beautiful Lisa Owen, although the older generation – perhaps including Lisa – must be dead by now. Nor do we hear of any of the family whom they left behind in Lithuania, who must eventually have been swallowed up in the Holocaust. We learn of only two attachments of Dr Selwyn's: to Elli, his wife, from whom he has drifted apart; and to Johannes Naegeli. To this man he has, by contrast, felt closer and closer over the years; and Naegeli's death in 1914, a year after their friendship, had plunged him into a deep depression, though he had known him for only a few weeks, and was by then in a completely new life, thousands of miles away.

Again history may enter: 1913 was the last year of peace before the first of two terrible European wars, and the last year of happiness for both Amos Adelwarth, in the chapter bearing his name, and Luisa Lanzberg, in 'Max Ferber'. Perhaps that is what Naegeli represents, and why Dr Selwyn mourns him. But again this political explanation, like the one of the servants' staircase, doesn't seem enough to account for the emotional weight of Naegeli's death and return – not only for Dr Selwyn, but for us, through the power of Sebald's writing. Once again, some extra mysterious meaning seems to lie in those lines: '*At times they come back from the ice more than seven decades later, and are found at the edge of the moraine, a few polished bones and a pair of hobnailed boots*' (E 23, my italics).

Let us move, then, from the mysterious watercolour sketch of the first chapter of *The Emigrants* to the fuller oil painting of the last one, 'Max Ferber' (with a glance or two at the chapters between). Now several details begin to emerge. First of all, Ferber says something strange and interesting about time, when the narrator has been away from Germany as long as he himself had been when they first met. Time, he says,

is an unreliable way of gauging these things, indeed it is nothing but a disquiet of the soul. There is neither a past nor a future. At least, not for me. (E 181).

Time has stopped for Ferber since the separation from his parents in 1939, which he feels he ought not to have survived; as time had stopped for his mother Luisa when her fiancé Fritz died in 1914, and again when her second love, Friedrich, also died a few years later. She does not know how she got over these losses, or, as she says in her journal, whether she ever did. Nor does Ferber know if he has ever grasped the fact of his parents' deportation and death, two years after they put him on an aeroplane to England. For twenty-five years – that is, up to two years before he and the narrator first meet – Ferber managed not to think about or remember his loss, and sometimes he succeeded 'in maintaining a certain equability' (*E* 191). But really, as he tells the narrator, the tragedy of his youth was too deeply rooted in him, and it has spread a 'poisonous canopy' over him in recent years (*E* 191).

This is, of course, very like what has happened to all three of the other emigrants as well. We do not know how long Dr Selwyn kept his origins secret from his wife, or whether he ever managed to forget them; but he withdraws further and further from life, until he shoots himself with a hunting rifle. Paul Bereyter too manages not to think about or remember the loss of his home in the 1930s until the last ten years of his life; when he finally recognizes that he belongs 'to the exiles, and not to the people of S' (*E* 59), he kills himself. Ambrose Adelwarth does not lose Germany, but seems unambiguously glad to escape it; what he unbearably loses is his Johannes Naegeli – his friend and probable lover Cosmo Solomon. Like (we must imagine) Paul Bereyter and Dr Selwyn, he longs for 'an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember' (*E* 124); and he achieves it, by submitting himself to electric shock treatment – German electric shock treatment, in fact – until he is destroyed.

Of the four emigrants, Ferber – though he suffers quite as much as the rest – is the only one who does not kill himself. The only difference between them is that he alone of the four turns his suffering into art. It is an extraordinary art, extraordinarily described by Sebald: an 'art of destruction' (*E* 180) as much as creation, in which he scrapes away as much paint as he puts on, and creates his portraits out of the ghosts of all the previous ones he has scraped off and destroyed. This is the last idea of art in *The Emigrants*: an art of constant self-doubt and self-laceration, constant scratchings out and revisions; which is exactly the art of the narrator in writing this portrait of Ferber; as he himself describes it: 'By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions' (*E* 230).

The narrator shares something else with Ferber, and with his mother Luisa: the sense that ordinary time does not exist; or an ability to move between times, and to see, in certain states, the past and the dead. So Luisa sees her two dead loves, Fritz and Friedrich, in a delirium, while Ferber sees his parents' drawing room in a dream, 'though he cannot say whether by day or by night' (*E* 175). And the narrator sees Ambrose and Cosmo in a dream in 'Ambrose Adelwarth'; and in the last pages of 'Max Ferber', even though he is awake he slips between the present (1991), the past (1966), and photographs from an exhibition he had seen a year before, of the Polish ghetto of Łódź in the 1940s, in which he sees three women, one of them called – possibly – Luisa.

Like the writer Friederike Halbleib, whose grave he sees in the same cemetery as the Ferber family, and whom he feels he himself has lost, even though she was a stranger, and died thirty years before he was born (*E* 224) – like Friederike Halbleib, this Luisa, even if she is or represents Ferber's mother, is not in reality his own personal loss. And yet the last lines of 'Max Ferber', in which she appears, are as grief-stricken and moving as the last lines of 'Dr Henry Selwyn'.

This strange sense of connection to an unknown dead person is shared with Ferber, who feels ‘a sense of brotherhood’ (*E* 167) with the desperate and brilliant philosopher Wittgenstein, with whom he has no link apart from the coincidence of having lived in the same lodgings in Manchester, thirty-six years later. ‘Doubtless,’ Ferber says, ‘any retrospective connection with Wittgenstein was purely illusory, but it meant no less to him on that account’ (*E* 166). The narrator’s connection with the Luisa in the picture, and Dr Selwyn’s connection with Johannes Naegeli, are similarly illusory; but they mean no less to them on that account.

By the end of ‘Max Ferber’ we know that the narrator is just as much an exile from Germany as Ferber; that as a young man at least he felt equally isolated (*E* 153–4); and that as an artist he is equally tormented – and equally brilliant. What he says of the painter also applies to the work we are now reading: ‘Time and again... I marveled to see that Ferber, with the few lines and shadows that had escaped annihilation, had created a portrait of great vividness’ (*E* 162).

There are two more links between the narrator and Ferber’s story. The first is a pair of coincidences to do with the narrator’s birthday, the 18th of May (*E* 224) – Sebald’s own birthday. First, Ferber’s parents put him on the plane on the 17th of May; which means that the first day of Ferber’s exile falls on the same date as the first day of the narrator’s life (and Sebald’s). And second, in the same Jewish cemetery in which the narrator finds the graves of the Lanzbergs and of Friederike Halbleib, he also sees, ‘with a shock of recognition’, the grave of Maier Stern, ‘who died on the 18th of May, my own birthday’ (*E* 224). Both of these are, as I have said, mere coincidences. But we know from the coincidence of Ferber’s living in the same lodging house as Wittgenstein that coincidences carry a mysterious significance in *The Emigrants*. And not only in *The Emigrants*, as we shall see.

The last link comes right at the end of ‘Max Ferber’, in the desolate and lovely last lines about the three young women in the Łódź ghetto. They are working at a loom, because, as the narrator seems to hear them say, ‘Work is our only course’, if they want to survive. And, he writes, ‘the irregular geometric patterns of the carpet they are knotting, and even its colours, remind me of the settee at home’ (*E* 237). All the goods produced in the Jewish ghettos, like all the goods the Jews once owned, did in fact end up in German homes like the narrator’s: and though the carpet the young women are weaving did not end up in his home, this similarity carries the same ‘shock of recognition’ as the coincidence of Meier Stern’s death date with his own birthday, and Sebald’s.

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We come, finally, to *Austerlitz* – literally finally, since it was the last of his books published in Sebald’s lifetime. It was also the culmination of the central themes we are exploring, and the culmination altogether, I think, of Sebald’s art. It is his Temple of Solomon (*E* 176), his André Hilary history lesson, recording ‘in some inconceivably complex form...who had perished, who survived, and exactly where and how’ (4100–1).³

Austerlitz explores in detail the theme of the unreality of time. We know from the study of history that the layers of time co-exist in fact: that under Liverpool Street Station the original meadows still lie, and the priory of St Mary of Bethlehem, including its infamous hospital

³ *Austerlitz* (London, New York: Penguin, 2002).

called Bedlam (*A* 183); that under the vast soulless new Bibliothèque Nationale⁴ still lies the Austerlitz-Tolbiac depot, in which the impounded possessions of the Jews of Paris were stored and pillaged (*A* 401–3).

We know this rationally, but Austerlitz longs to experience it, as Luisa Lanzberg often experienced it, describing her childhood in her journal in the dark days of 1940, and feeling ‘as if it were still going on, right into these lines I am now writing’ (*E* 207). Austerlitz does sometimes feel it, ‘in quiet places where nothing has changed for decades’. ‘It seems to me then’, he says,

as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last, just as when we have accepted an invitation we duly arrive in a certain house at a given time. And might it not be... that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak? (*A* 359–60)

That is, of course, what he does in the course of this book, and what the narrator does in the course of all Sebald’s books. But the actual experience of the simultaneity of times is rare, and not only desirable. When it happens to James Mallord Ashman in *Austerlitz*, for example, the owner of Iver Grove – one of those quiet places where nothing has changed for decades – ‘it wouldn’t have taken much... to upset his reason’ (*A* 153); and when Cosmo Solomon experiences the co-existence of events in space in ‘Amos Adelwarth’ – ‘[seeing] clearly, in his own head’ the Great War in Europe, even though he is thousands of miles away in America – it does upset his reason, and brings on his first breakdown, from which he only temporarily recovers when the war ends (*E* 95–7).

This is not surprising, since it is clear that this way of thinking, or being – experiencing distant times and spaces as though they were one’s own – is closely allied with two things: with art, but also with madness. And Austerlitz himself is clear that this vision – ‘that time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously’ (*A* 144) – is not only his most fervent hope, but also ‘opens up the bleak prospect of ever-lasting misery and never-ending anguish’ (*A* 144). For if all moments are equally present, then we can eternally re-experience the moment of loss, of ‘rejection and annihilation’ (*A* 322), as well as the moment before, when ‘everything [is still] as it once was’.⁵ The deep ambivalence of Austerlitz’s desire is summarized in the two images of art which bracket the book: the painting of a skating scene at the start, in which a lady has fallen, and shall always have fallen, ‘and nothing and no one [can] ever remedy it’ (*A* 16); and the ‘moment of rescue’ perpetuated forever in the sculpture of a hero on horseback scooping up a girl ‘already bereft of her last hope’, which Austerlitz sees towards the end, in the Antikos Bazar in Terezín (*A* 276–7).

Of course the reason why Austerlitz longs to ‘turn back and go behind’ time – and why Dr Selwyn and Max Ferber may also long for this, and why Luisa Lanzberg does – is to

⁴ Or not quite under it, as Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Sarah Gensburger have established, but near it. See Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Sarah Gensburger, *Des Camps dans Paris* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 290.

⁵ This is close to Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal recurrence, which is surely at least part of what lies behind Austerlitz’s (and Sebald’s) vision: the idea that we should live in such a way that we could face the prospect of every moment in our lives eternally recurring.

re-find the people in it, the lost and the dead. And in *Austerlitz* we learn that the desire is mutual: the dead want to return, and do return, especially those who have died violently, or before their time. Austerlitz learns this from Evan the cobbler, with whom he spends every free moment of his childhood, though he doesn't realise why at the time. 'Evan told tales of the dead who had been struck down by fate untimely,' Austerlitz tells the narrator, 'who knew they had been cheated of what was due to them and tried to return to life' (*A* 74–5). And they do return, in small groups 'of beings of dwarfish stature' (because, Evan explains, 'the experience of death diminishes us, just as a piece of linen shrinks when you first wash it' {*A* 75}).

Later Austerlitz sees them himself – especially in times of great stress, or as we may say, of madness. So, for example, he sees a small group of dwarfish figures, just like the ones Evan described, in Marienbad, when he has been unable to break out of his isolation with Marie de Verneuil, whom he loves and who loves him; and where, as he learns only later, he, his parents and his nanny Vera had spent their last happy summer together. He sees the past and the dead in the Salpêtrière, during his first breakdown, and on his night walks in London, when the final one is approaching; in the Prague archive, in Terezín, and in Paris.

He has always suspected, Austerlitz says, 'that the border between life and death is less impermeable than we commonly think' (*A* 395). Evan the cobbler – i.e. Sebald – puts this metaphor into an image:

Hanging from a hook on the wall above Evan's low work-bench, said Austerlitz, was the black veil that his grandfather had taken from the bier when the small figures muffled in their cloaks carried it past him, and it was certainly Evan, said Austerlitz, who once told me that nothing but a piece of silk like that separates us from the next world. (*A* 75–6)

It is always through this veil, faded from black to grey – of smoke or dust or light, but also of silk, or some other thin and delicate fabric – that Austerlitz glimpses the past, or that the dead return (for example, *A* 193). When, one day, he 'sees' his mother, she is in a grey silk bodice, with her face behind an iridescent, cloudy veil (*A* 229). Then we may remember, with our own 'shock of recognition', Ferber telling the narrator that he is visited every day by a beautiful woman wearing a ball gown made of grey silk (*E* 181–2). Is she Ferber's mother? Is she every lost mother – because we all lose our mothers, no matter what time and place we live in? Is she, perhaps, a memory of Sebald's own mother?

Because – and this is my last point, the point to which I have been secretly heading – all the retrieval of time and mourning of the dead links us not just to the narrator, but to the author himself. For it is not only the narrator but Sebald himself who has been doing the heart-breaking work of 'remembering, writing and reading' (*E* 193) of *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, and of all the other books as well. And we know that Sebald himself was often melancholy, and went through 'bad times',⁶ to which he often alluded in his writing (for

⁶ Especially during his early Manchester time, during which he spoke of feeling close to madness, just as the narrator of 'Ferber' does. See R. Sheppard, 'The Sternheim Years' in J. Catling, R. Hibbit, eds., *Saturn's Moons: W.G. Sebald – A Handbook* (Leeds, London: Legenda Main Series, Maney Publishing, 2011), 68. Also in the period described in Part II of *Vertigo* (see J. Cuomo, 'A Conversation with W.G. Sebald' in L. S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory* (London: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 103. I take the expression 'bad time' from Ferber (*E* 167).

instance, in *E* 154–6, *A* 46, *V* 33.) It is impossible not to imagine that, like Ferber in his painting, and like Ambrose Adelwarth telling his stories to Aunt Fini, in his writing Sebald was ‘at once saving himself, in some way, and mercilessly destroying himself’ (*E* 100). I even imagine that we can apply to him the ironic image of the photographer’s assistant in ‘Max Ferber’. The assistant’s body, he wrote,

had absorbed so much silver in the course of a lengthy professional life that he had become a kind of photographic plate, which was apparent in the fact (as Ferber solemnly informed me) that the man’s face and hands turned blue in strong light, or, as one might say, developed. (*E* 165).

In just this way, I think, Sebald became the grief he was writing.

In *Austerlitz*, as in ‘Max Ferber’, he glancingly suggests the connection of his story with himself. When the narrator first visits the fortress of Breendonk in 1967, he already knows that it was a German penal camp up to 1944; and he imagines the sufferings of the prisoners, and at the same time the ordinary life of their SS guards, playing cards or writing letters home. ‘I could well imagine the sight of the good fathers and dutiful sons from Vilsbiburg and Fuhlsbüttel, from the Black Forest and the Bavarian Alps,’ he says. ‘After all, I had lived among them to my twentieth year’ (*A* 28–9). He does not yet know that the pit in which he finds himself was a torture chamber; nonetheless he is overcome by nausea, and scenes from home arise in his mind (*A* 32–3). A few years later he reads Jean Améry, and learns the details of the tortures (he quotes Améry’s description at some length) which ‘were being conducted here around the time I was born’ (*A* 33–4).

We are back to the connection with the narrator’s home and birthday, which are also Sebald’s. And that – the coincidence of Jewish deaths with his birth – appears again, brought to its logical, or illogical, conclusion, in the last lines of *Austerlitz*. Here he quotes the messages scratched into the walls of another fortress that became a German prison during the war: the notorious Fort IX in Kaunas in Lithuania, where more than 30,000 people were killed. One message reads ‘*Nous sommes neuf cent Français*’, and under it three French names are scratched (the first, incidentally, that of Marcel Lob, from the camp of Austerlitz in Paris.) The last one is strangely familiar: ‘Max Stern, Paris, 18.5.44’. Meier Stern has become Max, Sebald’s own name; and 18 May 1944 was Sebald’s full birthday.

Let me, finally, quote an extract from an interview with Sebald by Marco Poltronieri, published in 1997. Poltronieri asks him about his return visit to his home village, Wertach im Allgäu. Sebald replies that it was ‘complicated’, because the idyll of his childhood was only apparent. ‘I look at a family album of the time,’ he says, ‘where I’m lying in my pram, and my mother is pushing me through the flowery alpine meadows, and underneath they’ve written May 1945... Since then I’ve learned what was happening elsewhere. So there’s a contrast between my privileged-baby position in this south German village, where no trace of the war ever reached, and the destruction of this country and all other countries that was happening at the same time, and all the horrors of the last years of the war.’⁷

The link is in ‘Max Ferber’ too – and not only in that first name. After the Great War Luisa Lanzberg consents to marry Fritz Ferber, who will become Ferber’s father. In 1921 they go on honeymoon to the Allgäu – Sebald’s home region. And Luisa writes: ‘*[T]he scattered villages were so peaceful it was as if nothing evil had ever happened anywhere on earth*’ (*E* 217, my

⁷ M. Poltronieri, “Wie kriegen die Deutschen das auf die Reihe? Ein Gespräch mit W.G.Sebald” in F. Loquai, ed., *W.G.Sebald, Porträt 7* (Eggingen: Isele, 1997), 138.

italics). Then, twenty years later, the villages still looked the same – but everything evil happened, and it came from there.

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So what is this winding path we have followed, like the paths in Sebald's great walking book, *The Rings of Saturn*? It began in the mysterious images of 'Dr Henry Selwyn': in the narrator struggling to imagine how people can have oppressed others, barely hidden behind thin walls; in the image of the dead returning, having been intensely mourned by someone who hardly knew them. It became clearer in 'Max Ferber', in which Ferber and his mother see their dead, and in which the narrator himself mourns someone he hardly knew; in which, too, he explicitly links the dead of the Holocaust to himself through his birthday, and through the pattern woven by the doomed Jewish girls, like the one in his home. And it ends in *Austerlitz*, which is one long search for the dead, who want to return; and in which once again the dead of the Holocaust are linked to the narrator, through his visions of home in the fortress of Breendonck, and through his birthday again, and his name.

The path, in other words, leads from the Holocaust to Sebald himself, who was born at the same time, in Germany. That was the original contradiction that fractured his world. It is why all his books, but especially the two I have I have looked at, both wish and fear that 'time did not exist at all, only various spaces..., between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like' (A 261). It is why we see the exploited slaves just behind the thin walls; and why all Sebald's books, but especially these two, mourn others' losses as though they were his own.