

THE PERIPATETIC PARAGRAPH: WALKING (AND WALKING) WITH W.G. SEBALD

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Abstract: What is perhaps hardest to grasp and explain about the writings of W. G. Sebald is what it feels like to read him. It is unlike reading almost anyone else. Many comparisons have been made, for example to Thomas Bernhard, to Kafka, to Nabokov, to Proust, to Andre Breton, to Walter Benjamin, and many other writers; the range of comparisons is suggestive of a futile urge to categorize his writing. This essay focuses on Sebald's style, making observations about paragraphs, metaphor, the digressive quality of his prose, and also his subject matter. Through an extensive consideration of Sebald's writing, and also what others have written about it, this essay attempts to capture what it feels like to read Sebald.

What is perhaps hardest to grasp and explain about the writings of W. G. Sebald is what it feels like to read him. It is unlike reading almost anyone else, although I am aware of the many comparisons that have been made, for example to Thomas Bernhard, to Kafka, to Nabokov, to Proust, to Andre Breton, to Walter Benjamin, and many other writers, some of which I don't even know and can't even read. Sebald, the expatriate German writer who died in 2001 at the age of 57 – though he had already written several exceptionally highly lauded books – was, it was widely agreed, probably only just hitting his stride. I imagine these myriad and indeed disparate comparisons are made out of a common feeling of futility – that the multitude of comparisons is an index of how little he really is like anyone else, so critics and commentators must grasp for likenesses, as though reaching for ballast on a new vertiginous journey – or an old journey, traversing familiar landscape, but with entirely new conveyances.

Although I am a scholar of literature, I do not read German, and I am aware that when I am reading Sebald, always I am reading, interrogating, and interpreting a text in translation. So even my observations about paragraphs – which is one of the main features of his writing that I wish to explore here – might look, actually look, different in the original text. The other key feature that I wish to dwell on is Sebald's thorough lack of metaphor. His prose digresses – constantly (in fact it is pretty much almost all digression: one critic felicitously employs the phrase “poetics of digression” to describe Sebald's writing)² – but it is not metaphorical. He nearly never uses metaphor, and simile rarely. This is extraordinary, and unusual, and once one notices it, it strikes one as being nearly like an exercise, like that whole novel by Georges Perec that avoids, in the entire text, using the letter E.³ In Sebald's world, one is led to understand, by this rhetorical absence, nothing is like anything else. Everything

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² J.J. Long, *W.G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 137.

³ G. Perec, *La Disparition* (1969), translated as *A Void* (1994).

is: is, or was – in great detail – and even then, even without the perfidious poetics of comparison, still potentially specious, enigmatic, and ephemeral. It is as though to compare something to something else is already to be seduced into the counterfeit maze of meaning without even first confronting or pondering the thing in itself and its already mendacious mantle of a word or words that attach to it and signify it: that perhaps already just the material fact of language abrades meaning, even while it is the very stuff necessary to confer meaning upon it or convey it. One critic describes it this way:

the narrative exudes a kind of encyclopaedic constation of places, of cities, buildings, houses, of landscapes; there is, in the Sebald text, a delight in circumstantial specificity, in naming things and objects, thereby acknowledging their testable thereness.⁴

Susan Sontag similarly needs clumsily to coin a word to suggest the stripped-down quality of Sebald's textual expression: she says Sebald's language is "delicate, dense, [and] steeped in thinghood."⁵

And even while he does not dwell on any word or words or phrases and their possible meanings for very long, one begins to feel that he is circling something, particularly things that he wants to bring you to but slowly and nonchalantly though deliberately. It is why, I imagine, he is thought of as a post-Holocaust writer – that the atrocities he glancingly includes in his prose are so embedded in the minutiae of his narrators' thoughts, memories, and their peregrinations that they seem both unimportant and crucially illuminated. This approach suggests not so much the banality of evil but the banality of everything. And if nothing matters – well, how can you live with that...? The word most often used to describe Sebald's prose is "melancholic" (as I shall return to shortly).

Though if nothing matters, then everything does. So even when Sebald's narrator is seemingly extemporizing on the condition of the house he stays in (the "floorboards were covered with a velvety layer of dust. The curtains had gone and the paper had been stripped off the walls, which had traces of whitewash with bluish streaks like the skin of a dying body"),⁶ and on the vicissitudes of the fortunes of the Ashbury family, he is obliquely – though perhaps very pointedly – suggesting the vestiges of the Troubles in Ireland that created such exigencies and circumstances. After much more extensive description of the house and the grounds and the family circumstances, he quotes (though as usual there are no quotation marks) Mrs Ashbury as describing her reticulated understanding of how, perhaps, their living situation – that of herself and her two daughters – came to be what it was:

Apart from my extremely reticent husband, said Mrs Ashbury, my only other source of information was the legends about the Troubles, part tragic and part ludicrous, that had formed during the long years of decline in the heads of our servants, whom we had inherited together with the rest of the inventory and who were themselves already part of history, as it were (*Rings of Saturn*, 214–215).

It is possible, in other words, to read Sebald as a post-Holocaust writer in this tortuous way: he writes obliquely about the calamities of history, and primarily of those of the

⁴ M. Swales, "Intertextuality, Authenticity, Metonymy? On Reading W.G. Sebald" in R. Görner, ed., *The Anatomist of Melancholy: Essays in Memory of W.G. Sebald* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2003), 81.

⁵ S. Sontag, "A Mind in Mourning" *Where the Stress Falls* (London: Vintage, 2003), 41.

⁶ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002 [1998]; published in German 1995), 210. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

twentieth century; and the calamity that has taken on the commonly held notion of the most important and most serious calamity of the twentieth century and the one, incidentally, that Sebald as a German would be the most expected to want to expatiate on (or be expiated for) is the Holocaust. It is a stretch, but given Sebald's labyrinthine writing and his oblique descriptions and references, it is not impossible – or far-fetched. But one wonders: is it necessary to narrow it down, to know that he is writing really always only about one thing, one event, as awful and in need of endless (paradoxically) amplifying and extirpating narrative exercises as it does?

Susan Sontag suggests that his status as a post-Holocaust writer is due to the reputation established for readers of his work in English by his first book published in English (though not his first book, which was *Vertigo*):

Because it was *The Emigrants* that launched Sebald in English, and because the subject of the last narrative, a famous painter given the name Max Ferber, is a German Jew sent out of Nazi Germany as a child to safety in England – his mother, who perished in the camps with his father, being the author of the memoir – the book was routinely labeled by most reviewers (especially, but not only, in America) as an example of Holocaust literature.⁷

There is more to understanding Sebald as a post-Holocaust writer than just his actual references to the Holocaust (which occur again even less obliquely in the last work published in his lifetime, *Austerlitz*, a narrative told entirely from the point of view of a survivor of the Kindertransport); he writes it himself on the penultimate page of *The Rings of Saturn*: “Now, as I write, I think once more of our history, which is but a long account of calamities.”⁸

Martin Swales suggests Sebald's writings constitute “the sayable things that are at the circumference of the suffering centre.”⁹ Richard Eder suggests that *The Emigrants* “presents a Holocaust-in-absence.”¹⁰ And André Aciman gets it exactly right when he observes (in 1998, before the publication of *Austerlitz*) that “Sebald never brings up the Holocaust. The reader, meanwhile, thinks of nothing else.”¹¹

One feels overwhelmingly like a precocious child (though inevitably not precocious enough) being led by the hand, slowly and patiently, by a very wise elder through the landscape of history, with the harboured hope on the part of the elder that he will have to say only very little for one to grasp the enormity of what he is really conveying. One knows there is a secret, can see and feel the fabric of it, but, feeling both singled out and foolish, can't understand the extent of what one is being shown and told. The book is even *illustrated*. How can one be so dense as not to see what one is being shown...? This is Sebald's technique: circling, circling – circumnavigating – in order to bring one to the brink of seeing something, knowing something, in the way that sometimes only a sidelong glance will allow one to see some very terrible things.

It is, of course, what being an inquisitive adult feels like perpetually – if one is lucky. That is perhaps the fissured, yet gratifying, lesson one comes away with. There are things perpetually within one's purview that simply do not become visible until one's eyes are clear

⁷ Sontag, “A Mind in Mourning”, 44.

⁸ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 295.

⁹ Swales, “Intertextuality, Authenticity, Metonymy?”, 87.

¹⁰ R. Eder, “Excavating a Life”, *The New York Times Book Review* (October 28, 2001), 10.

¹¹ A. Aciman, quoted in L. S. Schwartz, Introduction, in Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (London: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 12.

enough to see them – and by clear eyes, I mean maturity. Sebald is making the landscape of history available to us, pointing to all the crucial landmarks and facts, until we are ready to see it. He is urgent but patient. All-knowing and generous, but laconic and slow. An ideal, though mystifying, parent.

The conviction I am conjuring of a senescent sage, Sontag calls “the preternatural authority of Sebald’s voice: its gravity, its sinuosity, its precision, its freedom from all undermining or undignified self-consciousness or irony.”¹² Some, like Peter Schjeldahl, art critic for *The New Yorker*, no less alert to the influential effects of Sebald’s writings, likens them however to an affliction: “His conjurings of historical and personal loss, which in his novels and memoirs are usually keyed to the calamities of the Second World War, happen to you slowly, as you read, like the onset of a cold.”¹³ But when Schjeldahl comments that “Sebald’s signature tone is dead calm,”¹⁴ he is indicating the very same tone of authority that I want to call paternal.

One example of Sebald’s manner of wafting over a statement of some import and doing so only briefly, only once, in a kind of meiosis – that is, a kind of rhetorical understatement – comes in the concluding chapter of *Vertigo*. In the chapter “Il ritorno in patria,” the narrator makes this passing, nearly easy-to-overlook but potentially profound reference to his father’s engagement as an officer in the post-Weimar-era Third Reich amidst a very detailed description of the furnishings of his Bavarian childhood home which he is revisiting after “a good thirty years had gone by.”¹⁵ (I shall quote at length, mainly to show how incidental this mention seems among the extensive details):

the room which was furnished with all the pieces my parents had bought in 1936 when, after two or three years of continuous upturn in the country’s fortunes, it seemed assured that my father, who at the calamitous close of the Weimar era had enlisted in the so-called army of the One Hundred Thousand and was now about to be promoted to quartermaster, could not only look forward to a secure future in the new Reich but could even be said to have attained a certain social position. For my parents, both of whom came from provincial backwaters, my mother from W. and my father from the Bavarian Forest, the acquisition of living room furniture befitting their station, which, as the unwritten rule required, had to conform in every detail with the tastes of the average couple representative of the emerging classless society, probably marked the moment when, in the wake of their in some respects rather difficult early lives, it must have seemed to them as if there were, after all, something of a higher justice. This living room, then, boasted a ponderously ornate armoire, in which were kept the tablecloths, napkins, silver cutlery, Christmas decorations and, behind the glass doors of the upper half, the bone china tea service which, as far as I can remember, was never brought out on a single occasion; a sideboard on which an earthenware punchbowl glazed in peculiar hues and two so-called lead crystal flower vases were placed symmetrically on crocheted doilies; the draw-leaf dining table with a set of six chairs; a sofa with an assortment of embroidered cushions; on the wall behind it two small Alpine landscapes in black varnished frames, the one hung a little higher than the other; a smokers’ table with gaudily coloured ceramic cigar and cigarette containers and matching candlestick, an ashtray made of horn and brass, and an electric smoke absorber in the shape of an owl. In addition, apart from the drapes and net curtains, ceiling lights and standard lamp, there was a

¹² Sontag, “A Mind in Mourning”, 41.

¹³ Schjeldahl, “Feeling Blue: Artists Get Serious” in *The New Yorker* (August 4, 2008), 74

¹⁴ Schjeldahl, “Feeling Blue”, 74.

¹⁵ W.G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002 [1999]; published in German 1990), 186. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

flower *étagère* made of bamboo cane, on the various levels of which an Arcauria, an asparagus fern, a Christmas cactus and a passion flower led their strictly regulated plant lives. It should also be mentioned that on the top of the armoire stood the living room clock which counted out the hours with its cold and loveless chimes, and that in the upper half of the armoire, next to the bone china tea service, was a row of clothbound dramatic works by Shakespeare, Schiller, Hebbel and Sudermann" (V 192–194).

The narrator does not return to this mention of his family's perhaps coerced engagement in the development of Hitler's Third Reich, but only catalogues the perhaps equally compelled acquisitions and ornaments of their home. Conceivably we are meant to understand that the accoutrements the social and political decorum of the time insisted upon and allowed were the proper objects of a home befitting a family even timorously obedient to the dictates of the reigning regime, and that there was little thought or choice in the matter of allegiance, large or small.

It is possible that when I say that Sebald resists metaphor, I might be completely wrong; that is, that conceivably Sebald is always setting out elaborate analogies, harder to detect for being so thorough and elaborate and long, that his digressive threnodies of degeneration and the mutability and misery of memory are meant always to be understood as long parables for the more concrete and graphic calamities of history – that although I have suggested that he is not writing metaphorically, and only occasionally through simile, that he might be writing entirely as apologue.

For example, in *The Emigrants*, perhaps the delicacy with which Sebald circles around the story of his narrator's Uncle Adelwarth and his very special close relationship with Cosmo, the man to whom he serves as valet, travelling companion, and all around factotum – and probably his lover – functions to point to more generic kinds of knowing within suppressed understanding. It is almost as though the narrator himself does not detect the nature of their relationship, but the reader can. And when Ambros deteriorates and then dies from morbid depression, one cannot help but wonder if the love whose name not even Sebald's narrator dares speak – the very silence of it, I mean – killed him.

And so one also wonders if perhaps that delicacy or silence stands in for other kinds of silence: the social opprobrium against which outcasts must nevertheless keep up appearances, sustain a "shell of decorum."¹⁶ Sebald writes that his Aunt Fini suggests that after Cosmo's death "Ambros Adelwarth the private man had ceased to exist, that nothing was left of him but his shell of decorum." When Sebald's narrator goes to retrace their steps in Deauville he exhaustedly hallucinates seeing them, first in Deauville – Cosmo's "right arm, resting on the back of Ambros's seat," surrounded by "constant whisperings of the rumours that were in circulation concerning Cosmo and Ambros...variously described as master and man, two friends, relatives, or even brothers." The "curiosity of the Deauville summer guests... naturally grew, and the suspicions that were voiced waxed more audacious" (E 124–125). The narrator conveys his comprehension, against the narrative's own not seeming to know, through dreamed up romantic scenarios of his uncle and his possible paramour.

Or in another example, in the last section of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald's narrator chronicles at great length the adoption in Europe of silk production in the late eighteenth century, first in France, and then in Germany: the "greatest efforts were made to promote

¹⁶ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002 [1996]; published in German 1993), 99. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

the cultivation of silk, even in the rather backward Germany of the time, where pigs were still being driven across the Schlossplatz in many a principal town.” But we learn that what began as an economic opportunity ended as dictatorial control:

In Prussia, Frederick the Great with the help of French immigrants had attempted to bring a state silk industry into being, by ordering mulberry plantations to be established, by distributing silkworms free of charge, and by offering considerable rewards to anyone who would take up silk cultivation (*RS* 286).

The narrative brings us to understand that the “main reason why silk husbandry failed so soon after it had been introduced was not so much that the mercantile calculations were adrift, but rather the despotic manner in which German rulers attempted to force it along, whatever the cost” (*RS* 287). In the years leading up to the collapse of the silk industry in Germany in the first part of the nineteenth century, the enforcement of sericulture was tyrannical:

in the Rhineland-Palatinate, where silk farming had been conducted on the largest scale, every subject, official, citizen and householder who owned more than an acre of land was obliged within a given period to be growing six [mulberry] trees per acre, regardless of his circumstances or the use to which he had hitherto devoted his fields. Whomsoever had been granted arms-bearing, brewing or baking rights had to plant one tree, every newly accredited citizen had to plant two, all village greens, town squares, streets, embankments, boundary ditches, even churchyards had to be planted, so that subjects were compelled to buy a hundred thousand trees from the principality’s tree nurseries every year (*RS* 288).

When perhaps we are beginning to detect the parallels and presages of a time shortly forthcoming in Germany of a tyranny not only of the forced cultivation and breeding of silkworms, Sebald nevertheless makes it plain: “the Reich ministers of food and agriculture, of labour, of forestry and of aviation had launched a sericulture programme, inaugurating a new era of silk cultivation in Germany” (*RS* 293), which included specific instructions on “extermination to preempt racial degeneration,” namely by “suspending [the silkworms] over a boiling cauldron”:

The cocoons, spread out on shallow baskets, have to be kept in the rising steam for upwards of three hours, and when a batch is done, it is the next one’s turn, and so on until the entire killing business is completed (*RS* 294).

Thus that paragraph (covering five pages) ends, with no further word on silk or silkworms or sericulture, until this phrase I already quoted: “Now, as I write, I think once more of our history, which is but a long account of calamities”; but what follows is this: “it occurs to me that at one time the only acceptable expression of profound grief, for ladies of the upper classes, was to wear heavy robes of black silk taffeta or black *crêpe de chine*” (*RS* 295–296). And thus we have what seems like the resolution of the silk story – not the segue from silkworm genocide to Nazi pogroms, but the vestments of mourning to which this whole story (as nearly all his stories) must be making its headlong way (Sontag writes, “Sebald was not just an elegist; he was a militant elegist.”)¹⁷

This concluding commentary on silk takes us back to Norwich, for the sentiment finishes

¹⁷ S. Sontag, “Looking at War: Photography’s View of Devastation and Death” in *The New Yorker* (December 9, 2002), 94.

as follows:

Thus at Queen Victoria's funeral, for example, the Duchess of Teck allegedly made her appearance in what contemporary fashion magazines described as a breathtaking gown with billowing veils, all of black Mantua silk of which the Norwich weavers Willett & Nephew, just before the firm closed down for good, had created uniquely for this occasion, and in order to demonstrate their unsurpassed skills in the manufacture of mourning silks, a length of some sixty paces (*RS* 296).

And consequently we return to the launching pad for this book's narrative, which begins with his narrator "set[ting] off to walk the county of Suffolk" and leads him, still on the very first page, "into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility" (*RS* 3).

To begin one of his ambulant books with immobility is a nice rhetorical gesture, and suggests perhaps the ways that his mobility is really yet again a metaphor for his mental digressions, that, as Sontag points out, "travel is the generative principle of mental activity in Sebald's books."¹⁸

When I refer to the peripatetic nature of Sebald's writing, I am referring to an impression. I am referring to how it feels to read Sebald; how it has always felt to me reading Sebald is that one is taking a very long walk with him – very like the actual perambulations he (or his narrator) takes alone and also occasionally with his interlocutors in the books (in *Vertigo* the narrator walks so far his shoes fall apart [*V* 37]) – and that one is so absorbed in what he is narrating, that suddenly after a long while one looks up and has no idea how one got to this place from where one started, and has no sense of how long one has been traversing this terrain with him, and also has no urgent sense of a need to get back to where one started. This can happen within a page. And also at length throughout a chapter.

The light has changed, your body aches, you have been walking and walking along all this time.

One of the reasons for this impression is that there are no breaks.

When I say peripatetic paragraphs, I mean that there are no paragraphs – or, at least very few paragraph breaks in his writing. Certainly, there are fewer and fewer as his publications progress. One finds more in *Vertigo*, his first book, though still there are pages on end without any. In *Austerlitz*, as far as I can find, there are no paragraph breaks at all – in the whole book. It is interrupted (if you can even call it that) only by photographic images and some quotations, each illustrations of the prose in progress. On occasion (I found four), asterisks break a section to signify a breath, a turn, a pause.¹⁹

Therefore, practically, the only manner in which to cease reading Sebald is to do so arbitrarily – there is no: "I will read to the end of this section and stop." You must stop in the middle of a thought or a disquisition. You must interrupt him. It feels rude.

Now this is not to say that Sebald's writing is persistently stimulating. On the contrary, its rhythm is soporific. Its monotony of tone, its simultaneous (paradoxical) fullness of detail and its restraint, makes it hard to stop reading but also hard to keep reading. Another way to stop reading Sebald, in other words, besides reaching the end of a chapter or stopping arbitrarily, is to fall asleep.

¹⁸ Sontag, "A Mind in Mourning", 46.

¹⁹ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2001; published in German 2001), 42, 165, 354, 403.

This is one of the many paradoxes of Sebald's writing. (And I am not the only one to think so). Sebald's prose is both soporific and suspenseful. Geoff Dyer, for example, concurs when he comments that it is this "trembl[ing] constantly on the brink of being boring...that makes Sebald's writing so compelling."²⁰ He continues in this paradoxical vein by commenting that "Sebald's hypnotic prose lulls you into tranced submission, a kind of stupor that is also a state of heightened attention." It reminds one of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, because of that sense of movement created through the tidal style of the prose, that feeling of stimulation and sedation.

Sebald's writing is both depressing and uplifting. There are few critics who do not characterize Sebald's writing in some paradoxical way (though without pointing to it – and so seemingly not to recognize it – as paradox), and even fewer who can resist deploying the word "melancholic" to describe it, as I have suggested, but nevertheless exclaim the thrill and compulsion of reading it.

Elinor Shaffer refers to the "melancholy pleasure" of approaching his writings.²¹ Lynne Sharon Schwartz refers to his "tangled restlessness and torpor."²² Elsewhere Schwartz refers to his writing as "[m]agnetic" and "evanescent."²³ Richard Eder refers to his diction as "darkly incandescent."²⁴ Susan Sontag to "his commanding exquisite prose arias."²⁵ Michael Silverblatt refers to the writings' "gravity" and "playfulness."²⁶ Ruth Franklin calls it "bizarre" and "mundane."²⁷ Peter Schjeldahl refers to him as the "rapturously depressive German writer."²⁸

In a very insightful and humorous piece (this already is paradoxical – to write humorously of a writer whose prose is said to "glor[y] in bottomless malaise")²⁹ in *The New Yorker* in 2002, Anthony Lane writes that he is "torn between demanding that W.G. Sebald be given a Nobel Prize and suggesting as politely as possible that he be locked up."³⁰ And in a description that is not quite paradoxical but still invokes a discordant collocation of words, Michael Hoffman refers to the "chilly extravagance" and "numbed obsessiveness" of Sebald's prose.³¹

The nearly ubiquitous proffering of paradox in the descriptions of his writing is paralleled by the similarly vacillant efforts to classify the genre of his prose. I began this disquisition on Sebald proposing that the myriad efforts to find literary precedent or comparison for his prose suggested precisely the futility of the efforts, that it suggested instead precisely the ways that Sebald's prose was really like no other. Similarly, the yearning to describe his prose (as I have also done extensively here) but also almost always to have to describe it paradoxically,

²⁰ G. Dyer, "A Symposium on W. G. Sebald" in *Threepenny Review*, No. 89 (Spring 2002), 18.

²¹ E. Shaffer, "W.G. Sebald's Photographic Narrative" in R. Görner, (ed.), *The Anatomist of Melancholy: Essays in Memory of W.G. Sebald* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2003), 51.

²² L. S. Schwartz, "A Symposium on W. G. Sebald", 19.

²³ L. S. Schwartz, Introduction, in Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*, 16.

²⁴ Eder, "Excavating a Life", 10.

²⁵ Sontag, "A Symposium on W. G. Sebald" in *Threepenny Review*, No. 89 (Spring 2002), 18

²⁶ M. Silverblatt, "A Poem of an Invisible Subject" in L. S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*, 78.

²⁷ Ruth Franklin, "Rings of Smoke" in Lynne Sharon Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (London: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 121.

²⁸ Schjeldahl, "Feeling Blue", 74.

²⁹ Schjeldahl, "Feeling Blue", 74.

³⁰ A. Lane, "W.G. Sebald" in *Nobody's Perfect: Writings from The New Yorker* (London: Knopf, 2002), 497.

³¹ M. Hoffman, "A Chilly Extravagance" in L. S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*, 90.

with antithetical terms, or dreamily – by the very similes and metaphors that he uses so sparingly – suggests the genuine elusiveness of his style.

Critics unfailingly comment on the impossibility of classifying the genre of Sebald's writing. "The porousness of generic borders," Jim Shepard writes, "isn't exactly news, and anyone who's read W.G. Sebald has a vivid sense of just how much can be accomplished in that hazy ground between memoir, history and speculation."³² "[G]enre-defying," describes Eva Hoffman; Sebald is a "writer of almost unclassifiable originality."³³ Another critic describes *The Emigrants* as a "mesmerizing but hard-to-classify combination of biography, fiction, memoir, travel sketch and antiquarian essay."³⁴ This literature – simple, evocative, even easy to read ("quicksilver reading," comments Michiko Kakutani³⁵) – like its narrators and protagonists, has no home: no generic home.

Exile is the keynote of Sebald's texts; his tomes are populated with the displaced: the four "emigrants" of *The Emigrants*: Henry Selwyn, Paul Bereyter, Ambros Adelwarth, and Max Ferber; Jacques Austerlitz of *Austerlitz*; the narrator who at the end of *Vertigo* returns to his childhood hometown of W.; and Sebald himself, German by birth and upbringing, who resided in Britain for over thirty years. Even the characters and historical figures who are not in exile are still all nearly universally portrayed as away or adrift from wherever they call home: Henri Beyle, Dr. K., Dante, Thomas Browne, Roger Casement, Joseph Conrad, Swinburne, Michael Hamburger, etc. etc., and of course the narrators themselves, whose divagations are both corporeal and expository.

The untethered existence of Sebald's characters is analogized in the style, the genre (-lessness) of his prose. The constructed figures and the writing that constructs them are equally not at home in the world. And thus it renders us so. The various descriptions referring to Sebald's "restive mental travellings"³⁶ might put one in mind of Elizabeth Bishop's poem of ambivalent voyaging, "Questions of Travel." While the poem exhorts us wearily to "Think of the long trip home," which for the deracinated of Sebald's books is impossible – no sooner is a figure torn from the land by his roots (whether he recalls the renting or not), there is no way back: the country has disappeared, or the émigré has nothing to go back to; the tether has snapped – but then also to wonder: "Should we have stayed home and thought of here?" Anyone reading Sebald is, at least for the moments of immersion in his prose, made an anxious armchair itinerant. Stationary yet perambulating, agitatedly navigating landscapes of history, memory, tragedy, longing, loss, and dispossession, and then stopping, resting, pausing momentarily, at the absurdity and uncanniness, yet, though unexpected, the inevitability, of connection: not union, but relatedness; we can detach ourselves from the details of history only willfully, and ignorantly. "Is it right to be watching strangers in a play in this strangest of theatres?" Bishop's poem asks. It is not right but inescapable, Sebald's books might answer, when we comprehend that we ourselves are strangers and wanderers, also.

³² J. Shepard, *The New York Times Book Review* (May 17, 2009), 9.

³³ E. Hoffman, "Curiosity and Catastrophe", review of *After Nature*, *The New York Times Book Review* (September 22, 2002). (http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/22/books/curiosity-and-catastrophe.html?ref=w_g_sebald; visited 7 August 2010).

³⁴ J. Schuessler, "Campo Santo: Hanging out with Kafka" in *The New York Times Book Review* (April 23, 2005).

³⁵ M. Kakutani, "In a No Man's Land of Memory and Loss", review of *Austerlitz* in *The New York Times* (October 26, 2001) (http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/26/books/books-of-the-times-in-a-no-man-s-land-of-memories-and-loss.html?ref=w_g_sebald; visited 7 August 2010).

³⁶ A. Lane, "Postscript: W.G. Sebald" in *The New Yorker* (January 7, 2002), 22.