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## Looking and Looking Away

### Stephen Mitchelmore on the writing of WG Sebald

Why are WG Sebald's novels so flat? Why - when the books refer to events of utmost horror and disaster, sometimes dwelling on pain and death with a fascination and regularity verging on Schadenfreude - are the events themselves always placed at a distance, always prior to the narrator's present, as if only ever to be experienced second-hand, as stories?

The first part of *The Emigrants*, the first of Sebald's novels to be published in English, is exemplary.

It begins with a photograph of a graveyard. Below it is a date and, below that, a description of a journey to a large house situated in a village in East Anglia. The narrator and his partner are to view accommodation there. There is little or no tension. It could be mistaken for a straight memoir, particularly as there are so many photographs accompanying the words. Without pleasure or discomfort, the reader can follow the litany of precise natural details provided by the narrator - oak trees, Scots pines, a grassy graveyard, a thick shrubbery of hollies, Portuguese laurels, dry, rustling leaves. One expects it to lead somewhere, and a story of sorts does get told eventually. However, once it is, these details seem excessive. In the end all we are told is of the narrator's brief acquaintance with the melancholy Lithuanian emigrant Dr Henry Selwyn, and the curious coincidence that emerged later. In summary (though this is barely any shorter than the original) Selwyn lost his Swiss mountain guide in the early years of the century; he went missing on the Aare glacier. Selwyn, we're told, remarked on how deeply this loss affected him, even more than separation from his wife. The fact doesn't take up much space in the book. But seventy years after the loss, when visiting Switzerland, the narrator sees a news report of a body being given up by a glacier. It turns out to be the same mountain guide. Selwyn could not be told of the discovery because, by then, he had killed himself with a hunting rifle. In fact, his suicide is a footnote. It is not presented as a great tragedy. There is no speculation on what he was thinking as he prepared to pull the trigger, or even why he chose to end his life. The narrator's journey to Switzerland isn't detailed either. It's tacked on the end without the precise details provided at the beginning, while the chapter itself ends with these lines:

"And so they are ever returning to us, the dead. 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 hobnailed boots."

It's an oddly glib reflection; a flat reiteration of a Proustian epiphany that doesn't, in fact, happen. There is no richness, no sense of revelation. The presence of the past is down to its bare bones. Another writer, perhaps with an eye for the main chance, might have expanded this into an ambitious tale across the dark decades of the Twentieth Century, involving mountaineering, forbidden love, religious persecution, exile and war, all framed by the giant sky of the East Anglian countryside.

But not Sebald. One might say that in this story not only is there no violence, there is nothing much at all. The presence of the dead is always at one step remove, never quite a full presence in the narration, and though his later work does go into more detail, giving a chance for that lost time to re-emerge, the flatness continues. Jacques Austerlitz, for example, is said to have grown up in Wales, but there is no rising inflection in his words, no lilt; just Sebald's familiar, formal prose. At best this can be described as uncanny. Otherwise, there isn't much for reader to indulge in. The fiction vacates rather than fills the space of literature.

So why has Sebald been hailed - by Susan Sontag among others - as a literary great? Well, Sontag points to the "passionate bleakness" of "a restless, chronically dissatisfied mind" that offers us "moral fervency and gifts of compassion". But this doesn't tell us much really. She also says that the accompanying photographs provide "an exquisite index of the pastness of the past." Again, so how does that make Sebald great? Pastness is a great attraction to a culture that fetishises old objects. Indeed, Sebald's style is called "Antiquarianism" by Daniel Johnson in the TLS: deriving from, he says, "a peculiar synthesis of English eclecticism and German perfectionism" where "the past has a more powerful presence than the present". That presence is precisely its pastness, which is present only as an index of what's not actually there. A curious paradox - one that would probably leave the experts of Antiques Roadshow nonplussed. Like their punters, they would probably prefer just to accumulate more and more of it. Hence perhaps why much is made of the variety of subject matter in Sebald's novels, like a lumber room in a rundown mansion ready for an enthusiast's rummage.

It is also likely that the popularity of Sebald's fiction is due to a nostalgia for works that deal seriously with the most serious of subjects - all four Sebald novels might be misconstrued as Holocaust Literature. Certainly, Sontag desires something to counter "the ascendancy of the tepid, the glib and the senselessly cruel as normative fictional subjects". A nostalgia, too, perhaps, for black and white distinctions: Nazis evil, victims good. When we listen to the story of a Jewish refugee, such as Max Ferber in *The Emigrants*, who lost his parents in the camps, the obscure hurt has to be acknowledged even if it remains beyond us. In comparison to the moral confusion of the present, it is much easier for the reader to feel something. However, Sontag herself doesn't see things as so clear cut. She ends her review of *Vertigo* with Sebald's own curiosity with "the mysterious survival of the written word"; the dead, as it were, returning to us here too, again and again.

The question of whether this is a good thing is left, as it is in Sebald's novels, unanswered. Yet could the flatness be a means of trying to mitigate that survival?

2.

Sebald himself is survived by four novels for which we can be thankful. The Rings of Saturn followed The Emigrants, then came Vertigo, written before the other two, and finally, Austerlitz. The first and last in this sequence can crudely be called a pair: both contain stories framed by the narrator's relation to individuals exiled from their origins. The middle two novels are framed by the narrator's own wanderings, although they too involve telling others' stories, usually an historical figure like Stendhal or Casanova. The trajectory is unsatisfactory. As I suggested in a review of Austerlitz, the author seemed to be painting himself into a corner. A new path is required.

We can only imagine what that path might have been. Yet that sense of loss and lack of development is oddly in keeping with the fiction. It's as if the novels exist to deal with the inadequacy of resolutions. What I mean is described at the end of Vertigo.

The narrator returns to the German village that he left as a youth. This is his first visit for thirty years. It gives him the chance to talk about all the goings-on, all the characters and intrigues that make up childhood memories with which he seems to be preoccupied. He meets friends from that time, now suddenly aged. One takes him to an attic room packed high with antiques and curios. Amongst the junk is an old tailor's dummy dressed in a 17th Century soldier's uniform. The narrator recognises it as the origin of a terrible threat that awaited him should he enter a forbidden room of his childhood. As he used to dream of this ghostly figure, his curiosity is stirred and he reaches out to touch the cloth, as if to make some kind of contact with that nightmare. The cloth crumbles away into dust. In subsequent dreams, he also reaches out and touches the soldier: "And every time, I then see before me the fingers of my right hand, dusty and even blackened from that one touch, like the token of some great woe that nothing in the world will ever put right."

While the dream takes the place of that childhood nightmare, perhaps offering the end of years of unconscious terror of the unknown, what replaces it is itself a troublesome lack. One dark thing dissimulates into another. Knowledge is gained yet, while this is apparently a progress, it buries the expected dissolution of the child's fear in another darkness. Sebald's writing is precisely this progress; a token of some great woe that is present only in the trace of its absence. Not progress enough perhaps. The "restless, dissatisfied mind" of the writer becomes our own experience of reading. We look for some concluding knowledge to get us beyond this apparent impasse, and we continue reading as the narrators continue on their wanderings, from one place to the next, from one book to the next. They are always getting over some undescribed illness or having just gone through "a particularly difficult period" or are feeling just plain empty. It is a neurasthenic condition familiar to other distinguished quasi-autobiographical writers: Proust and Kafka. Like Sebald, they sensed a world beyond their own restless, dissatisfied minds. Kafka first:

*It is entirely conceivable that life's splendour forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off. It is there, though, not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf. If you summon it by the right word, by its right name, it will come. This is the essence of magic, which does not create but summons.* (Diaries 18 October 1921)

And Proust:

*What the intellect gives us back under the name of the past is not it. In reality, as happens with the souls of the departed in certain popular legends, each hour of our lives, as soon as it is dead, embodies and conceals itself in some material object. Unless we meet with that object it remains captive there, captive for ever. We recognise it through the object, we summon it, and it is released.* (Against Sainte-Beuve p3)

Both continued writing, as if this would bring life's splendour. But if the right words summons what was hidden, wouldn't the means of seeking it also be a means of missing the time where its advantage could be lived? Both writers' unhappy, hypochondriac real lives suggest as much. Or perhaps their manner of seeking itself was at fault; Kafka certainly felt that way. How can one tell though? When can one know if the manner is correct until life's splendour has passed and has become words only, mere history?

Perhaps, though, that is the advantage.

There's a famous scene in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* when Marcel returns to the Grand Hotel in the northern seaside resort of Balbec (locations familiar to readers of *Vertigo*). He bends down slowly to remove his boots and suddenly, he says, undergoes "a convulsion of my entire being". His chest is filled by "an unknown, divine presence" which shakes him to tears. It turns out to be the sudden return in his memory of his late, beloved grandmother; "a complete and involuntary memory". It is only as her presence fills him like this does he realise that she is really gone. Nothing in fact really happens but it is an exquisite moment for Marcel. At last, his mourning can take its course. The novel has many such incidents, spread across seven volumes as if to ensure that each appears with an appropriate intensity to the reader, and so, in the same way, to the writer. In both cases, they exist as a passionate report; moments of felt distance. It is only in this way that movement forward is possible. The same is true in Kafka's most powerful stories, where the death of the protagonist, in for example *The Judgement* or *Metamorphosis*, is the means of returning writing to life. The paradox, of course, is that this can happen only in writing - a space that is neither fully alive nor fully dead - a condition actually embodied (or disembodied) in Kafka's great story *The Hunter Gracchus*.

While Kafka's stories and Marcel's epiphany are in stark stylistic contrast to each other, and both to the Henry Selwyn chapter of *The Emigrants*, there is the same toward into life that requires a movement closer to death. How can we make sense of this?

3.

In 1874, Nietzsche published a long essay *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* in which he argued against the obsession with history. He recognised that there is something pathological in the pursuance of the past for its own sake.

Instead, Nietzsche says, forgetting is necessary, at least for a time. Otherwise we cannot let go; we cannot sleep.

He divided historical explanations into three types: monumental, antiquarian and critical. While all served life, both history and life suffer if they are abused, "Monumental history" he writes "deceives with analogies: with tempting similarities the courageous are enticed to rashness, the enthusiastic to fanaticism". It's the kind of history where the phrase "Never forget" is cried out and becomes itself a monument obscuring what needs to be remembered. Antiquarianism, on the other hand, cherishes every little detail of the past rather than the big picture. But this means it is unable to distinguish between what is and what is not important. The result is the utter veneration of the old because it is old, and the rejection of anything new. Meanwhile, critical history is used to deal with both: "to shatter and dissolve something to enable [life]". While critical history is useful to enable movement forward, it can also be a means of avoiding its lessons: but in both forms it is a means of moving on.

Applying this to Sebald, one could say he takes the monument of the disasters of civilisation and exposes them to the gaze of Antiquarianism. Yet while the latter is present in the fiction in what Sontag calls the "spaciousness and acuity of the details", they refuse the harmlessness of antiques. In fact, they have that potential to summons described by Kafka and Proust (perhaps what Sontag means by "spaciousness"). This does not seem to lend itself to moving on. Each detail in the story of Henry Selwyn begins to speak to its narrator: the grassy graveyard, the thick shrubbery of hollies, the Portuguese laurels, the dry, rustling leaves. As they build, there is a sense of some great woe that nothing in the world will ever put right. Wouldn't it be better to leave it be?

Forty years after Nietzsche, Freud offered an understanding of the process of dealing with the weight of history that might explain. In *Mourning & Melancholia* there is an uncanny outline of Sebald's apparent fictional procedure. As Tammy Clewell summarises,

*The work of mourning entails a kind of hyperremembering, a process of obsessive recollection during which the survivor resuscitates the existence of the lost other in the space of the psyche, replacing an actual absence with an imaginary presence. This magical restoration of the lost object enables the mourner to assess the value of the relationship and comprehend what he or she has lost in losing the other.*

In Sebald's case, the space is writing and not the psyche, replacing an actual presence with a fictional one. Still, Freudian psychoanalysis would accommodate this as a cathartic process, whereby the gift of writing is the freedom from loss. The melancholic energy demanded of the work itself enables the ego's release.

However, in both Nietzsche and Freud, the problem of discussing these issues is not itself an issue. Yet if one is to move on, then how much work is involved and how much is that work responsible for the need itself? To clarify, Clewell points out that Freud's original theory was in the same vein as his earlier essay *On Narcissism*, and she detects "something self-serving about [Freud's] description of mourning as a process of detachment and consoling substitution". There is a sense of that self-serving element in Sebald's relentless pursuit of stories of others' lives and suffering,

particularly the suffering. It's as if the more stories the narrator is able to tell, the freer he becomes, yet also the more he needs the stories for that freedom. The written word mysteriously survives in the lives of the writer, and reader also. Everything becomes imbued with the spaciousness that we have to escape.

The danger of such "referential mania" is embodied in a story by another great modern stylist, Vladimir Nabokov in the story *Signs & Symbols*. For the institutionalised son of the elderly parents:

"everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. [...] Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sun flecks form patterns representing in some awful way messages which he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme."

While such extremes of paranoia are not present in Sebald's novels, his work does share this story's unease with its expressive self: that is, how much is the writing implicated in creating the problems it seeks to solve or escape? *Signs & Symbols'* power comes not only in what it tells us - of mental illness and the ravage of the parents - but the way in which fear and anxiety is evoked in each step into the story; not in what is explicitly said but in what words portend. Nabokov's florid sentences evoke forces bearing on all our lives - forces that can move us to aesthetic pleasure as a reader, and that make the son go mad. It is a dangerous confrontation, one that Proust, Kafka and Sebald make in their different ways too.

Incidentally, Nabokov appears, another sign of something, as a butterfly catcher in *The Emigrants*.

4.

With the publication - now in paperback - of a collection of lectures under the title *On the Natural History of Destruction* we can now begin to appreciate even more that Sebald's project was beyond melancholy reflection. And far from being yet more Holocaust literature, work seeking to recover history for the present and future, it is fiction as a search for an end, of having done with ghosts at last.

The collection's title itself, while at first appearing to be the loose pretence of a marketing department unchecked after the death of the author, directs us to the biological sciences where natural history is the precise eyewitness description of empirical data and events (an incipient Antiquarianism). The specific destruction under examination here is, according to Sebald, under-described: the carpet bombings of 131 German cities and towns, such as on Hamburg on 27 July 1943 in which at least 50,000 civilians died.

Sebald sketches the natural history of the firestorm. What happened that night is summarised by the unnamed reviewer at the *Complete Review* as "(huge numbers of dead, enormous amounts of bombs, rubble, etc.)". The parentheses are symptomatic. Sebald does not try to wrench human detail from these, as it were, a priori

euphemisms but to analyse the response with a view to opening debate about the subject. The lectures are surprisingly provisional, and wouldn't amount more than notes if it wasn't for Sebald extraordinary ability, as seen in his fiction, to embed the deepest themes in the apparently superficial.

The title places the clarifying words *On the* in front of natural history so that the subject becomes the attempt at recording and, implicitly, the attempt at forgetting. The latter is inevitable, hence the need for history. But what kind? How can we remove others' experiences from its bracketed containment without crippling ourselves - in Nietzsche's sense - in the process? For sure, Sebald finds the attempts to approach the air war unsatisfactory, almost without exception. Not that there were many attempts in the first place. We can assume two main reasons for their rarity and unsatisfactory manner: the eyewitnesses who weren't killed had to use all their energy to survive their survival. For example (my example), Jorge Semprun's account of his own survival of the concentration camp at Buchenwald is called *Literature or Life*; he had to choose the latter in order to be able to write this very book much later.

The second comes in Sebald's reference to Lord Zuckerman's abandonment of his plan to write an article for a British journal following his visit to Köln, another firebombed city. Simply, he couldn't find the words: "All that remained in [Zuckerman's] mind" Sebald tells us "was the image of the blackened cathedral rising from the stony desert around it, and the memory of a severed finger that he had found on a heap of rubble." The experience was incomparable, and so words, the very means of communication through the tacit repetition of comparisons, fail too.

Zuckerman's remaining memory is significant for Sebald's project. One might assume that if there was a photograph of the finger, he would have placed it on the page. But not out of prurience. James Wood, in his perceptive essay on Sebald's novels, refers to the tragedy of fact evoked by the captionless images placed throughout his books. They are not supplementary to the words but confirmation of mutual inadequacy. However, it is an inadequacy that contains much referential potential. The single memory is an equivalence; it orientates us toward the traumatic impact of experience even if we can have no real appreciation of what it means. Indeed, the impact exceeds experience. Zuckerman was only passing through and what remained for him was only an image. For the survivors, the ravage seems to have gone much deeper. Accounts following the raid on Hamburg tell of the majority of the surviving population - over a million - wandering through the country, without any apparent destination. They were seen everywhere, aimless and torpid. Sebald tells the apocryphal story of a woman waiting at railway station whose suitcase fell open depositing its contents on the platform, including the charred corpse of a baby.

Many millions went through this and it is more or less absent from post-war German novels and non-fiction. It was also absent from acknowledgement in everyday life. As he grew up, Sebald felt that something was being kept from him: "at home, at school and by the German writers whose books I read hoping to glean more information". He says it hung over his life like a dark cloud. The silence had its advantages of course: "the economic miracle" of Germany after the war "has its source in the well-kept secret of the corpses built into the foundations of our state, a secret that bound all Germans together in the post-war years".

Undoubtedly, the reconstruction required a focus on the future rather than the past and, inevitably, literature would reflect this. While those in charge were removed, the mindset of nation remained: they continued to work hard without questioning, and the companies that supplied gas to the death camps continued their capitalist success stories. German industry became a byword for efficiency (precisely what prompted the invention of the death camps). However, on the cultural front, German literature faded behind the fresh new talents of North America. One must assume that forgetting is incompatible with great literature. Appropriate recognition of the genocide of the Jews was delayed. The same happened to their own experience of the air war. For this reason, Sebald accuses modern Germany of being "strikingly blind to history and lacking in tradition. We do not feel" he writes "any passionate interest in our earlier way of life and the specific features of our own civilisation, of the kind universally perceptible, for instance, in the culture of the British Isles. And when we turn to take a backward view, particularly of the years 1930 to 1950, we are always looking and looking away at the same time."

He makes this movement clear in this analysis of the few accounts of the raids themselves by listing the kind of phrases used throughout:

'On that dreadful day when our beautiful city was razed to the ground'

'a prey to the flames'

'that fateful night'

'all hell was let loose'

'we were staring into the inferno'

'the dreadful fate of the cities of Germany'

In other words, endless cliché. Sebald says they are no more than gestures "sketched to banish memory". The words slide by without gaining any purchase on the past. The truth has not been hidden, but it hasn't exactly been registered. But should this be regretted? Well, when the lecture was first delivered, in 1997, Sebald felt it was appropriate to remind Germans that this forgetting remained part of:

"the project of creating a greater Europe, a project that has already failed twice [and] is entering a new phase, and the sphere of the Deutschmark - history has a way of repeating itself - seems to extend almost precisely to the confines of the area occupied by the Wehrmacht in the year 1941".

He claims that the "psychic energy" of this project remains in the nation. If it is not brought into the open, it will carry on into the future. And that is certainly something to be regretted.



This is not to say there was complete silence about the air war. In the post-war years, fiction did try to approach what had happened. Sebald refers us to three writers who wrote about the destruction and were published. While he finds the novels superficially admirable for at least broaching the subject, he is disturbed by their form and content. For example, Hermann Kasack's novel *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom* ("The City Beyond the River") envelops the bombing raids and death camps into part of one big expressionist allegory. Sebald's literary analysis is objective but his appalled disdain is also clear, particularly as, at the time of the novel's publication, it was considered of "epoch-making significance". Sebald suspects it was judged so because it appealed to the pre-war obsession with grand, utopian visions. In this way, they look away just like the clichéd reportage. But worse than that, in repeating pre-war fantasies of mysterious metaphysical worlds possessing transcendent truth, all these novels display "a profound ideological inflexibility". Sebald says that the culture was still "in the midst of that pedagogic province which, in the German tradition, extends from Goethe ... through Stefan George ... and on to Stauffenberg and Himmler".

So of what, one wonders, does he approve? Well, he welcomes Hubert Fichte's novel *Detlev's Imitations*, set in 1968, because it is "not too abstract in character" and includes "concrete and documentary" investigations into the raid on Hamburg. Specifically, the novel has genuine medical reports by a pathologist into the victims of the raids. They are straightforward autopsies of mummified corpses. All fiction pales before such documents. The gruesome facts make any imaginative effort seem evasive and pretentious. Stories become only a means of sustaining value where there is only flesh and bone. As it is, only clinical objectivity has the words for the calamity. Sebald, of course, doesn't accept this. While he concedes that the reports were written in the interests of science, he does say that, within the narrow focus of its specialist language, the report "opens up a view into the abyss of a mind armed against all contingencies". In the end, it is only another example of avoidance masquerading as proximity. He sets scientific analysis alongside the journalistic clichés and novelists' fantasies. The pathologist's rationality clings to a tradition in order to pass through the catastrophe untouched.

In order to bring out how the catastrophe made its mark on his own work, Sebald quotes extensively from his own. But that was in the German edition. It is excised from the English. This is a perverse decision. Sebald's excuse is that the original subject of the lectures was poetics and it would be inappropriate to repeat them now that the subject is the air war. I don't see why these lectures don't count as poetics still. Each of Sebald's stories continues that sense of being kept from something, of the observer's isolation, which is precisely the relation to the air war. The reticence of the narratives is really a patience. There is no aggressive push to imagine beyond what the narrator can see and what he hears at second-hand. Words and pictures remain orientated toward. It continues in us too, his readers. Perhaps, though, this isn't enough. When we bandy around phrases like "literary greatness", we contain past greatness, everything we understand to be great: the expansiveness of epic, the microcosm of theatre, the language-making power of poetry, the encyclopaedia of narrative fiction. Sebald cannot be included here. At least, not on those terms. If Sebald is great, it is in his refusal of such supremacy. The word greatness is changed if he is indeed great.

Sebald's success, however, beyond such chatter, is in finding a form appropriate that investigates his deepest concerns in the most appropriate way. This is perhaps a mark of greatness.

5.

It is curious then that not one of Sebald's fictional works approaches the air war. Not one character is a survivor of those events. As I noted, the fiction is generally misconstrued as Holocaust Literature, perhaps gaining more attention as a result. Austerlitz, for example, features a visit to the remains of Theresienstadt concentration camp in the Czech Republic. The tragedy is once again illuminated. This has a fine and necessary tradition. Aharon Appelfeld - himself a survivor - approves of fictional representation of the Holocaust because "the numbers and the facts were the murderers' own well-proven means. Man as a number is one of the horrors of dehumanisation."

One wonders what the response would have been if a novel had focussed entirely on individual survivors of Hamburg or Dresden? We might wonder again because as Sebald's book appeared in paperback, so did Frederick Taylor's study of the most infamous raid: Dresden: Tuesday, 13 February. It has been received with acclaim in the British press. In the Daily Telegraph, James Holland writes "with this fine, highly readable and scholarly work, we can finally view the terrible destruction of Dresden with renewed objectivity", while David Cesarani in The Independent, after highlighting Sebald's implicit comparison of the bombings to Nazi mass murder, calls Taylor's an "authoritative and moving account" that "provides a truer, more fitting memorial" to those who died. Authority, objectivity and memorials is perhaps most welcome to those who were not on the receiving end. But how would it appear fictionally?

It wasn't until twenty or more years after the war that Germany began to acknowledge the effect of its "psychic energy". Certainly, one cannot claim that national awareness of the Holocaust is repressed. Indeed it has become commonplace in our idea of modern Germany: think of Daniel Liebeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, or Harry Enfield's contrite yet overbearing comic stereotype Jürgen the German, apologising for the war at every opportunity. The latter is not a figure that would have been possible when Primo Levi or Jean Améry began writing. Améry is the subject of one of three essays appended to the main lecture. He was a resistance fighter tortured by the Nazis. After the war, he concentrated on his paid work without attempting to write (for the same reason as Semprun). It was only in the 1960s that he published autobiographical essays reflecting on his terrible experience. What interests Sebald particularly is that he found a form to orientate the reader toward, to look but not look away at the same time. Where Sebald used a restrained style, Améry is more personal and polemical; he writes with "an implacable resentment". Sebald is impressed that his work manages to "dispense with any kind of literary stylisation which might encourage a sense of complicity between writer and his readers." Cliché and ingratiation are not present. Sebald compares Améry to the great Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard who, as a teenager, witnessed the bombing of Salzburg and later wrote with ferocious contempt for the institutionalised forgetfulness in his country.

(NB: it is a shame Sebald's essays on Bernhard are not already translated – and edition is required).

Such a comparison indicates that Sebald is not, as The Complete Review accuse him, contemptuous of the imagination; entirely the opposite. He is keen only to find a form that conveys the process by which the imagination dispenses with contact with its environment, as in Kasack's highly imaginative novel. The task is more complex than the crude opposition between imagination and reality. Améry's description of his shoulders being dislocated under torture is written without ornament. He does not try to convey the pain with the force of adjectives. Above all, his aim is to show that, as Sebald writes:

"the practice of persecuting, torturing and exterminating an arbitrarily chosen adversary [is] not as a lamentable but incidental feature of totalitarian rule but, unreservedly, [...] its essential expression."

One cannot read Améry's essays without confronting the possibility of wider implication of the events of his life. They cannot be read for the find out what happened only. In this way, autobiography becomes a means for furthering life.

For Sebald, Améry remains "the only one who denounced the obscenity of a psychologically and socially deformed society, and the outrage of supposing that history could proceed on its way afterwards almost undisturbed." Indeed, he was so angry that he criticised Primo Levi for being too forgiving. It is Sebald's thesis that the air war is as much part of that deformation as anything. It too has to be worked through: repression is not a healthy option. Sebald's fiction demonstrates the need for patience required for Germany's "coming to terms" with the Nazi era; how it had to empathise with the victims of its crimes from a distance. The same can be said for victims of the air war. Imagination is required rather than objectivity.

6.

After delivering the lectures Sebald and receiving press attention, he received many letters from distressed Germans, children at the time of the raids, whose traumatic memories have had no place to go. One can only imagine the scale of the trauma. However, seven years on from the lectures, there has been a more sustained attempt to bring this into public discourse. It reached a peak with the publication in 2002 of Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*, a book of several hundred pages describing the raids in relentless detail. It prompted an outpouring of blocked memories across Germany, becoming part of a nation debate about the subject. There was also a lot of anger, resentment and claims that the raids were war crimes. Sebald received letters from a middle-class neo-Nazis proclaiming Germany as the self-defensive victim, not the aggressor. Sebald is contemptuous. The process, he accepts, has to confront such danger. In this way, the responses to Sebald's book become part of the literature.

It is a terribly instructive coincidence that many reviewers were writing in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. In the *Boston Review*, Susie Linfield tells of demonstrators equating the bombing of Dresden with the forthcoming Shock & Awe campaign on Baghdad. "I can think of few worse analogies" she writes.

"The propagators of such analogies would say they are using historic knowledge to heighten moral awareness and thus prevent the commission of present and future horrors. But I fear that the opposite is true: The reliance on historic analogies is an evasion of the particular, indeed novel, political complexities that face us now, complexities that have emerged since (but are not solely the result of) September 11th. Like photographs of starving children or grieving mothers or blasted buildings, such analogies create instant, Pavlovian moral equivalencies. They shut down critical thought and ultimately, therefore, stifle moral acuity."

This is certainly true. It is why Sebald's complained about the clichés of the accounts of the raids. They were a careless means of expression and abuse history. However, Linfield doesn't offer an alternative, except by telling us to use "critical thought" and "moral acuity". Maybe these elegant phrases tell us more than the protestors' banners, though I'm not sure what. They too seem like gestures to banish unpleasant thoughts. With what Susie Linfield would compare the imminent bombing, I wonder? How would she demonstrate her feelings about it?

Meanwhile, Daniel Johnson, reviewing Friedrich's *Der Brand* alongside Sebald, expresses his opinions about the demonstrators' comparisons more forcefully. He calls it "moral cowardice" and blames Friedrich for aiming "his bombshell of a book at the ageing edifice of the Atlantic Alliance". He says the book it enabled the German government to exploit "anti-Americanism". While he accepts that the comparison of the Nazi Holocaust to the air war is "never spelt out" by Friedrich and Sebald - he does say that the "impassive accumulation of gruesome detail serves a rhetorical purpose: to demonstrate the utter inhumanity of the air war." (If there was a humanity in the air war, Johnson doesn't spell it out.) It all means that the Germans "might still be capable of repeating the mistakes of the past", and he explicitly means the opposition to the invasion.

Christopher Hitchens also uses his review to support the invasion. He is suspicious of the language used by those recovering the air war, such as Sebald's "weak qualifier" in the reference to the German population's "vague feelings of shared guilt" about the Holocaust. "Vague?" he says "Remember what we are talking about". Indeed. But perhaps "vague" means unspoken and unformed - which is certainly plausible. In conclusion, Hitchens himself refers to Iraqi exiles' "infinite pain" in supporting the invasion when it is obvious they would not be running the gauntlet of US cluster bombs, or their children to endure the legacy of depleted uranium. So much for remembering what is being talked about.

While the majority of the reviewers referred to here use the air war to support or to excuse the Shock & Awe blitzkrieg, and all remain suspicious of Sebald's project of imaginative empathy, they have nothing but admiration for his fiction. Hitchens says Sebald's early death is "mourned by all who love writing for its own sake" (whatever that means) and Daniel Johnson says that had Sebald lived, he would "hardly have been able to avoid the attentions of the Swedish academicians", though exactly why isn't explained. In fact, they write next to nothing about the fiction. It's as if they do not know what it is so prefer to keep it in the safe enclave of entertainment or salutary

token of “some great woe that nothing in the world will ever put right” (so long as it’s the right kind of wrong). Remember it is Johnson who used the convenient half-truth of describing Sebald's work as "a highly literary form of antiquarianism". Perhaps it is fairly explained by the fact that they are reviewing a work of non-fiction. But, as I hope to have made clear here, *On the Natural History of Destruction* is a coda to Sebald’s extraordinary fiction, and for such prominent and serious critics to overlook this is curious indeed. But I would go further. These reviewers, mere literary critics, have used book reviews to become accessories to the crime of killing innocent people, and their fingers are stained not black, but red.