W. G. SEBALD

Image, Archive, Modernity

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A NOTE ON REFERENCES AND TRANSLATIONS

Wherever possible in this study, I have quoted from the published English translations of Sebald's work, but page references to the German editions have been provided for those wishing to consult the original texts. The table below lists the abbreviations used. Full publication details are given in the bibliography at the end of the volume.

Abbreviation	English Title	German Title
A	*Austerlitz*	*Austerlitz*
BU		*Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*
CS	*Campo Santo*	*Campo Santo*
E	*The Emigrants*	*Die Ausgewanderten*
LL		*Logis in einem Landhaus*
NHD	*On the Natural History of Destruction*	*Luftkrieg und Literatur*
AN	*After Nature*	*Nach der Natur*
RS	*The Rings of Saturn*	*Die Ringe des Saturn*
U	*Unrecounted*	*Unerzählt*
UH		*Unheimliche Heimat*
V	*Vertigo*	*Schwindel.Gefühle*

All page references to the English translation will be given first, then those to the German edition. So, for example, the reference 'E 15/24' means that the

quotation can be found on page 15 of *The Emigrants* and page 24 of *Die Ausgewanderten*.

For other works, published translations have been used wherever possible. All other translations are my own.

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I

INTRODUCTION

FRAGMENTS OF MODERNITY: ON THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF SEBALD

Since his death in a road accident in December 2001, W. G. Sebald has become one of the most written-about contemporary German authors. Conferences devoted to his work have been held in Davidson (North Carolina), Munich, Paris, Sydney, Marbach am Neckar and elsewhere, and the secondary literature devoted to his work is now extensive – to say nothing of interviews, reviews, obituaries and further publications in press. While these scholarly writings discuss a wide range of thematic and formal aspects of Sebald's work, it is possible to identify a limited number of topoi that recur in almost all the criticism so far published: the Holocaust, trauma and memory, melancholy, photography, travel and flânerie, intertextuality and *Heimat*.[1] It is my contention that these individual topoi can in fact be seen as epiphenomena of a much wider 'meta-problem' in Sebald's work, one to which only a small number of critics have drawn explicit attention, but which dominates his work from start to finish. That is the problem of modernity.

By modernity, I understand the seismic social, economic, political and cultural transformations that took place in European societies from the eighteenth century onwards.[2] These changes have their roots in a longer history that goes back to developments that occurred in the decades around 1500 (the 'discovery' of the New World, the Renaissance, the Reformation and the emergence of mercantilism). These moments conventionally represent the threshold between the medieval and early modern periods. But the eighteenth century witnesses

accelerated change in economic, political and social organisation as a result of three related factors: Enlightenment thought, the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. The changes that characterise modernity are both numerous and varied, but one might single out the following as especially salient features: the industrialisation of production and the transformation of knowledge into technology on which industry depended; the unprecedented exploitation of natural resources; increasing standardisation and rationalisation in both the production and consumption of serially produced goods; rapid urban growth and concomitant demographic shifts as societies moved from being largely rural and agrarian to being predominantly industrial and urban; a series of developments in communications technology, including the telegraph, telephone and steam press, that facilitated the binding together of diverse and geographically dispersed audiences; the spread of new transport networks through railways, motorised road travel and aviation; and an increasingly rapid circulation of goods within an ever-expanding world market. Within the context of this study, of particular significance is the expansion of the nation state sustained by a proliferation of bureaucratic apparatuses and a range of civic institutions whose intended function was the regulation, discipline and control of populations.

The ways in which modernity is thematised in Sebald's writings can best be illustrated by surveying the various topics that have come to dominate Sebald research. One of the most widespread but also most problematic readings of Sebald is as a writer of 'Holocaust literature'. Journalistic reception of his work in Britain and the United States frequently portrayed Sebald in this light, and referred to his living 'in exile' in such a way as to imply expulsion or inner compulsion rather than economic migration, thereby implicitly establishing parallels between Sebald and the protagonists of *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*.[3] The emphasis on the Holocaust as the central concern of Sebald's work has been particularly prominent among anglophone critics. This is not to say that German critics have ignored the Holocaust, but in quantitative terms it remains the province of anglophone criticism.[4] It is effectively impossible to discuss the Holocaust without touching on the question of modernity. The 'Final Solution' has been conceived of as a pathological reaction to the experience of modernity, or as a kind of negation of modernity, a regression from the rational processes of civilisation to an archaic state of barbarism. Other scholars, such as Zygmunt Bauman (2000) and Tzvetan Todorov (1999), have countered this view, arguing that the Holocaust was an event whose very conditions of possibility lay in the technological rationality and bureaucracy characteristic of modernity itself. A third way is suggested by Dominick LaCapra, who advocates elucidation of:

> the intricate conjunction of [the Holocaust's] distinctively modern features (such as the seemingly dominant role of instrumental rationality,

> bureaucratization, and massive technical resources) with the recurrence of often repressed forces, such as scapegoating with 'sacrificial' dimensions. (1994: 94)

However one seeks to understand the Holocaust, though, an examination of its relationship to modernity is inescapable.

Sebald scholars have in recent years – notably since the publication of *Austerlitz* in 2001 – begun to notice that the thematisation of the Holocaust in his work goes hand in hand with a profound concern with the longer history of modernity. In an article by Arthur Williams, for example, the 'metanarrative' of the Holocaust slips over into another metanarrative according to which the beginnings of the catastrophes of twentieth-century history are located firstly (and somewhat arbitrarily) 'around 1905' (2001: 80), and then in the seventeenth century (83). Thus even within the work of a critic who insists more than most on the centrality of the Holocaust, there is an acknowledgment, however fleeting, that Sebald is actually concerned with what Mark Anderson calls the *longue durée* of European modernity (2003: 104). To quote Anderson once more, '[T]he roads in Sebald's work do not all lead to Theresienstadt. The view of human devastation and darkness is much larger, at once geophysical and metaphysical, though their roots lie in a profound meditation on the violence of European modernity' (120).[5] This 'profound meditation' has yet to be explored in detail, even though it haunts other areas of Sebald research.

The question of memory, for example, is generally addressed with reference to the remembrance of the victims of Nazism in Sebald's work.[6] The so-called 'memory boom' has been identified as a feature of the past quarter-century of Western cultural life, and is seen by Andreas Huyssen as a response to specific late-twentieth-century technical processes – such as fast-speed information networks, Baudrillardian simulacra, and a threatening sense of non-synchronicity and heterogeneity – that are transforming our *Lebenswelt* (1995: 7). Yet memory has long formed an integral part of the way in which European societies sought to come to terms with the nature of modernity. In his book *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History*, Peter Fritzsche locates the beginnings of this trend in the French Revolution and the European wars that followed it, which, he argues, produced major shifts in historical consciousness and a heightened awareness of the need to preserve the past. The experience of exile, for example, led to French aristocrats' conserving the artifacts of both exile and the *Ancien Régime*, thereby establishing loss and remembrance as fundamental components of identity (2004: 79). One might, with Richard Terdiman, locate the origins of the memory crisis at an even earlier point, in the changes wrought by shifts in production brought about by machines and the capitalisation of European economies (1993: 29). The continual production of the new in capitalism has as its concomitant the

continual destruction of the old, and the acceleration of obsolescence itself. In this light, modernity was, from quite an early stage, understood as something that perpetually generated loss. Two effects can be seen to emerge from this. The first was to establish remembrance of loss as an imperative and thereby to link European identities to the recollected past. The second was to induce a crisis of memory at both individual and collective levels, engendered by a profound sense of historical rupture, a sense that the world had decisively changed, and consequently also a 'massive disruption of traditional forms of memory' (Terdiman 1993: 5). The expanding institutions of preservation and collection detailed by Fritzsche (2004), Susan Crane (2000) and Wolfgang Ernst (2003), the emergence of history as a distinct academic discipline, and ultimately also the hypertrophied historical consciousness lambasted by Nietzsche in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (1988) [*On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*] can all be seen as symptoms of the memory crisis at a collective level. In the sphere of individual life, it was primarily psychoanalysis, for which memory is both the source of the problem and the resource of the cure, that established the determining role of the past for a subject's present life.

One characteristic of the memory crisis is that memory ceases to be a pure matter of consciousness, and comes to reside instead in the very material of our social or psychic life. This is clear in the role that the institutions of memory – museums, archives, historiography, newspapers, photography – came to play in the course of the nineteenth century. Even in psychoanalysis, though, the unconscious exists within us but functions without our participation or our explicit allegiance (Terdiman 1993: 34). Furthermore, Freud's attempts to find suitable metaphors for the functioning of the unconscious led him repeatedly to material metaphors: archaeology, the 'mystic writing pad', and, most tellingly photography, which was a metaphor that Freud repeatedly invoked, rejected and reinstated, from 'A Note on the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis' (Freud 1958a) to *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud 1964). These metaphors imply that consciousness is always already infected by external mnemotechnical supplements; the artifacts of modernity are permanently lodged in the psyche as a kind of internal prosthesis. Memory and modernity are indissolubly linked.

Of the various media of memory, photography is the one most obviously present in Sebald's work.[7] Photography is in many ways the emblematic medium of modernity. Roland Barthes implied that the history of the world can be divided up into 'before' and 'after' photography (1977: 44), and Vilém Flusser sees the development of photography as a revolutionary moment on a par with the invention of linear writing in the second millennium BC (2000: 10). Jonathan Crary, on the other hand, sees photography as one part of a reorganisation of the 'ways in which vision was discussed, controlled, and incarnated in cultural and scientific practices' (1990: 7). For Crary, then, the visual regime of

modernity begins not with photography, but with a 'radical abstraction and reconstruction of optical experience' (9) whose origins lay in the emergence of physiological optics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Furthermore, as a technical mode of representation that allows for potentially infinite mechanical reproduction, photography embodies the principles of technological rationality and seriality that govern capitalist production. Beyond that, however, photography also participates in numerous institutions, practices and discourses that lie at the heart of the modern European nation state: the discourses of criminology, anthropology, ethnography and race; the politics of colonialism; the implementation of 'scientific management'; the institutions of discipline and surveillance, and of the nuclear and extended family, to name just a few. In the context of Sebald's work, photography is most often discussed in relation to the crisis of memory, with particular focus on Sebald's questioning of photography's referentiality and mnemonic capacity. As we will see, however, the function of photography in Sebald's work exceeds by far the question of memory and touches on many of the discourses and practices of modernity that I have briefly outlined above.

Writings on photography frequently dwell on the inherent melancholy of the medium,[8] and melancholy is also one of the more obvious features of Sebald's prose.[9] Mary Cosgrove argues that Sebald's texts are dominated by an understanding of history as melancholy, which maroons the subject in the ruins of the immediate post-war years (Cosgrove 2006a: 218–20). In this light, the title of Peter Fritzsche's book *Stranded in the Present* aptly conveys the state of Sebald and his narrators. Fritzsche argues, furthermore, that this sense of history is a specifically modern phenomenon: 'Part of modern experience was a deepening sense of loss, a feeling of disconnection with the past, and a growing dread of the future' (2004: 49).[10]

But this is not the only link between melancholy and modernity. Wolf Lepenies' seminal work *Melancholie und Gesellschaft* (1998) [*Melancholy and Society*] offers an historical sociology of melancholy. In the foreword to the 1998 edition, Lepenies argues that the melancholy of the intellectual becomes a topos in Europe at the point when capitalism and the protestant work ethic instal the *vita activa* as the behavioural norm within bourgeois society, and marginalise the *vita contemplativa* (XXI). Whereas melancholy in the seventeenth century was worldly and internal to the social system that it served to stabilise (74), the melancholic of the eighteenth century – particularly but not solely in Germany – was excluded from political power (83). Though his melancholy was a reaction to this political disenfranchisement, it strove to conceal its own origins by positing the individual psyche as the cause of the melancholy (84–5). Lepenies points to the recurrence of a melancholy response to political setbacks in German history. He draws explicit parallels between the melancholy of the eighteenth-century German bourgeoisie, for whom political power failed

to keep pace with economic emancipation, and the post-war Federal Republic's reaction to the moral and political catastrophe of Nazism (83–4). This tradition has been extended by Peter Morgan to encompass the left's response to the failures of 1968, and he sees Sebald as a belated and extreme example of this defining *linke Melancholie* or leftist melancholy (2005: 89). There are numerous other correspondences between Lepenies' bourgeois melancholic and the Sebaldian narrator, foremost among them being the tendency to flânerie as a way of protesting (albeit vainly) against commodification, and the elevation of nature to the status not only of a refuge (1998: 135), but of a mute recipient of the melancholic's emotional investments and projections (108). Like memory, then, melancholy is an aspect of Sebald's texts that might appear to be irreducibly individual or psychological, but once historicised emerges as one more element in a wider exploration of modernity.

   Intimately related to the question of nature is that of *Heimat*, that untranslatable German word that basically means home, the place in which one is born and grows up and to which one feels a particular affinity. As most commentators note, the discourse of *Heimat* as it developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was structured around a series of binary oppositions that:

> set country against city, province against metropolis, tradition against modernity, nature against artificiality, organic culture against civilization, fixed, familiar, rooted identity against cosmopolitanism, hybridity, alien otherness, or the faceless mass. (Boa and Palfreyman 2000: 2)

Indeed, the tradition-modernity binary actually subsumes the other pairings; *Heimat*-discourse is a product of modernity.[11] The notion of *Heimat* is, of course, dependant on its opposite and other, namely 'die Fremde' – the strange, foreign, geographically removed.[12] Sebald's peripatetic narrators repeatedly encounter new places, people and things. Their penchant for walking links them with the flâneur, that emblematic figure of urban modernity who, in his Benjaminian incarnation, responds to the rise of early commodity culture exemplified by the Parisian arcades, and to other features of urban life: the mass, alienation, the need to develop a shorthand form of making sense of fleeting urban encounters.[13] But Sebald's walkers are not tied exclusively to the urban environment. Eluned Summers-Bremner (2004), for example, suggests that Sebald's narrators' rural wanderings are an attempt to re-appropriate the legacy of the *Wandervogel* movement from its ideological debasement in Nazism. This movement originated in 1896, and its celebration of nature and of the human body's own locomotion, together with its revival of folk-song, can, like *Heimat*-discourse, be seen as a response to the forces of industrialisation, urbanisation and mechanisation. As such, the *Wandervögel* were a late manifestation of a longer history of walking as leisure pursuit that had begun

with the Romantics in the late eighteenth century and stemmed from precisely the same motives (Solnit 2000: 83–4 and 104–17). Thus the modes of walking thematised in Sebald's works – urban flânerie and Romantic rural wandering – are products of modernity. Sebald's travelogues can be linked to modernity in other ways as well. Bianca Theisen, for example, sees Sebald's work as following a distinctively modern tradition of travel writing. She argues that the travel genre shifts in the eighteenth century from being an object-orientated account providing information about foreign countries and journeys to being a more clearly 'fictional', subject-orientated genre. This was facilitated by improved transport infrastructure, improved safety, and the greater accessibility of travel. Travel literature no longer needed to communicate information; rather, it couched travel experiences in personal reflections and awareness of a world that was already mediated by literature (2004: 166).

This implies, of course, that eighteenth-century travel writing was deeply intertextual, and intertextuality is the final major field of Sebald research.[14] If, as Gabriella Rovagnati (2005b: 146) claims, the practice of intertextuality is as old as literature itself and only the term is of recent provenance, intertextuality is clearly one area of investigation that ostensibly eludes the modernity problematic. And yet it is possible to historicise intertextuality. One of the problems addressed by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in their famous article 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1970) was the high degree of allusiveness demonstrated by modernist poetry. This points to the emergence of a form of intertextuality in the work of Eliot and Pound – but also Joyce, Roussel, Kafka, Borges and numerous others – that was perceived as something new. Writing of painting, Foucault remarks that modernism was the first form of 'museum art' because it entertained a self-reflexive relationship to the tradition of painting and the institutions of art. Indeed, paintings such as Manet's *Olympia* acknowledge 'the new and substantial relationship of painting to itself, as a manifestation of the existence of museums and the particular reality and interdependence that paintings acquire in museums' (1977: 92). By thus thematising tradition in their paintings, the impressionists demonstrated their profound allegiance to one of modernity's central institutions. The same may be said of modernist writing: 'Flaubert produced the first literary work whose exclusive domain is that of books' (92). The institutions of literature are, of course, different, but in an age that saw the widespread opening of public libraries, the professionalisation of criticism, and the emergence of vernacular literatures as university disciplines that were deeply bound up with the constitution of national identity,[15] allusion in literature was a way of building into the text one's own relationship to the canon in a way that could be appreciated only by those professionals in possession of sufficient knowledge to notice the allusions and of the power to grant access to the canon. Such, I would argue, is the intertextuality of Sebald. It is an allusiveness aimed at academics and designed to ensure the works' canonicity.

There is more to the question of intertextuality than this. A further development characteristic of modernity is the realisation that the self is constituted of discourses that lie beyond the confines of consciousness. This is articulated by the German Romantics and finds its programmatic expression in Novalis' laconic dictum 'Das Ich ist eine Kunst, ein Kunstwerck' ['The self is an art, a work of art']. This is tantamount to the insight that literary subjectivity is a construct, a notion that is foregrounded time and time again in the literature of the nineteenth and, more conspicuously, the twentieth century. The deployment of intertextuality in Sebald's works is clearly indebted to this Romantic tradition, beginning with *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, whose narrators and protagonists 'must continuously confront the "truth" that [their] consciousness is inseparable from the endlessly reiterated narrative patterns of Western literature' (Kilbourn 2006: 63), and reaching an apotheosis in the figure of Jacques Austerlitz, the fabric of whose entire existence consists of references and allusions to other writers, philosophers and historians. In its use as both a guarantee of canonicity and a mode of subject-formation, intertextuality can be seen as a further continuation of the engagement with modernity that exists elsewhere in Sebald's work.

Wherever one looks in the literature on Sebald, then, one is confronted with topoi that are ineluctably and inextricably connected to the problems of modernity. In saying this, I do not wish to suggest that existing criticism on Sebald is misguided or irrelevant. My point is rather that modernity is a concern that permeates Sebald's writings, and the various themes that dominate Sebald scholarship testify, in symptomatic fashion, to this wider problematic.

This book offers an account of Sebald's relationship to modernity. My central focus is the (photographic) image and the archive. As I argue in more detail below, these are so central both to modernity and to Sebald's narrative project that they facilitate a wide-ranging exploration of modernity in Sebald's work and allow me to touch – sometimes directly, sometimes tangentially – on all the critical concerns mentioned above. Furthermore, it will emerge that the very structural and formal properties of Sebald's writing are themselves governed by an archival logic that can be understood only in relation to the problem of modernity.

MODERNITY AND THE ARCHIVE

One of the most striking and memorable moments in W. G. Sebald's oeuvre occurs towards the end of *Austerlitz*, when the protagonist launches an attack, simultaneously vituperative and comic, on the new Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. He comes to the conclusion that the more perfect a system of information storage and retrieval is designed to be, the more likely this perfection is to flip over into chronic dysfunction and constitutional susceptibility to collapse (A 392–3/395). And yet the new Bibliothèque Nationale is built on the site of

a Nazi facility for the cataloguing and 'redistribution' of goods confiscated from Parisian Jews. This was itself a vast archival enterprise, and foregrounds the close connection between archives and power.

For Sebald, who spent much of his professional life reading and writing about Austrian literature, the theme of the archive as a site of both power and malfunction will have been intimately familiar. The supreme example comes from an episode in Kafka's *The Castle*, in which the protagonist K. visits an official of the castle bureaucracy in order to find out more about his duties as a land surveyor.[16] The gouty and bed-ridden official orders his wife Mizzi to help:

> The woman opened the cabinet at once. K and the Superintendent looked on. The cabinet was crammed full of papers. When it was opened two large packages of papers rolled out, tied round in bundles, as one usually binds firewood; the woman sprang back in alarm. 'It must be down below, at the bottom', said the Superintendent, directing operations from the bed. Gathering the papers in both arms the woman obediently threw them all out of the cabinet so as to read those at the bottom. The papers now covered half the floor. 'A great deal of work is got through here,' said the Superintendent nodding his head, 'and that's only a small fraction of it. I've put away the most important pile in the shed, but the great mass of it has simply gone astray'. (1992: 62)

Sylvio Vietta, who begins his book on modern German literature by quoting this passage, sees the image of administrative and epistemological chaos as an image of the modern, *ein Bild der Moderne*. Vietta notes that in Kafka, all attempts at transmitting information and attaining knowledge tend to degenerate into the chaotic and labyrinthine. The representation of cognitive situations that become increasingly confused is, he argues, typical of the literature of the modern age, from the late eighteenth century to the present. It is a literature dominated by a profound sense of epistemological and linguistic crisis, in which the apprehension of any kind of totality is impossible, and the fragment or detail all that remains (1992: 7–8).

Yet in its concentration on collapse and confusion, Vietta's reading of Kafka remains one-dimensional, for the episode he analyses attests, too, to another aspect of modernity, namely the assumption that contingency and uncertainty can be managed through the error-free functioning of the administrative apparatus. The Superintendent tells K. the 'unpleasant truth' that the community has no need of a land surveyor, but denies that his being summoned was in any way down to bureaucratic malfunction. The files themselves provide proof: ' "[I]t was only certain auxiliary circumstances that entered and confused the matter, I'll prove it to you from the official papers," ' states the Superintendent (64). ' "It is a working principle of the Head Bureau that the very possibility of error must be ruled out of account. This ground principle is justified by the