

Die Ausgewanderten

Vier lange Erzählungen

W.G. Sebald

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What makes a story interesting? If it is true? What makes a picture interesting? If it shows verisimilitude to something? Thus criteria are neither sufficient, nor are they necessary, still believing that something you are told is being true and not just 'made up' adds greatly to its significance and its potential interest. Is Sebald telling you true stories? They certainly have the feel of true stories, in fact they are the literary equivalent of 'collages' in which pieces of reality are cut out and pasted onto a board. Most readers of Sebald have a fair conception of his biography. He was born in the mid forties (May 18, 1944 to be exact) and grew up in a small sub-alpine village in southern Germany. As a young man he emigrated to England, where he worked as an obscure professor of literature in an Anglian university. He appeared, so to speak from nowhere, late in life as a writer in the early 1990's and became renowned during the ensuing decade for his output. His life and career was cut short by a pointless auto-accident at the end of 2001. Thus reading his work with their frequent references to his situation, pieces of reality are thrown in as reassuring witnesses to the veracity of his stories. But are they true stories? What is the difference between fact and fiction? Sebald claimed that one merged into the other, just as our dreams merge with our real lives, using pieces thereof, if in new and exciting constellations. Surely a reader is naive if he takes what Sebald writes for real, on the other hand, during the reading the acceptance of everything for its face value is the game in which the reader is invited, nay say expected to join. But that is the game that is played in all reading of fiction, the difference being that with Sebald this is carried to a meta-level, it may be fiction, but the reading of it is not.

Fiction or not, what matters factual details? The realistic details are necessary in order to manifest something else, and while the facts may be made up, that something else, whatever it is, is of course as real as anything else, even more so if you think of it, reminiscent as it is of the forms of Plato, which needs concrete manifestations in order to be susceptible to the human intelligence, but which are independent of those very manifestations.

Sebald is an emigrant. And as every emigrant an involuntary such, even if the decision to emigrate may have been taken fully voluntarily. As every emigrant he is made to feel like an exile. An exile is a being who is cut off from its roots, and by so doing achieves a sense of freedom at the price of living a life which is not quite real. A life which is to a large extent made-up turned into a fairy-tale. I know. I was an emigrant for eight years, in which I consciously reworked myself, acquired a new language, a new identity, all of my own making. It felt like a fairy-tale, not quite real. Exhilarating in many ways, yet ultimately I thought pointless. I returned to reconnect, in so doing losing the sense of freedom without necessarily regaining the sense of reality. Reality once lost touch of, does

not easily let itself be regained. In fact once lost, it can never be fully retrieved, because the essence of reality is connectedness, and once something is cut off in time, it does not reconnect.

Sebald presents the story of four people, four emigrants, just like himself. All of them originally German speaking emigrating in three of the cases to an English reality, abandoning their native tongue adopting the foreign with equal abandon and resignation. In the remaining story, the situation is slightly different and I will return to it at the end.

In the first rather short story (despite the subtitle, not all of those stories are long) we meet Dr. Henry Selwyn. A former surgeon marooned in an old estate near Norwich where the narrator and his companion find temporary quarters. He is a superfluous man, even superfluous to his active wife who seems almost always away. He spends his time counting leaves of grass or engaging in similar pointless activities, and as always his story is given the narrator in bits and pieces. He ends my blowing himself away by an old rifle he acquired when he once went to India in his youth. It is a short story but typical, and it ends with a twist. Selwyn during one of his rambling monologues mentioned a man who made a deep impression on him when he was young, and whose disappearance on a glacier devastated him. Many years later the narrator comes across a note in a daily paper about a corpse being delivered seventy odd years after its initial claim by a glacier. This clearly is the man to whom Selwyn referred. That newspaper clipping might be real, so the friend of Selwyn was real after all, but does that prove that Selwyn was real as well? Once again the phenomenon of the collage. A piece of reality cut off and then replanted in another context, just as an emigrant, giving credence to a story. Incidentally stories about bodies being redelivered by glaciers after an extended storage were rather legion in the eighties as I recall. Ultimately being capped by the 'Ice Man' found on the Austrian-Tyrol border in September 1991.

The third story introduces the emigrant relatives of the author. Close relatives who emigrated to 'Amerika'. Those are almost archetypical beings in many European families. Are they made up? Who cares? The story of one of those, the great-uncle Ambros Adelwarth, whom the narrator only glimpsed once in his life during a family reunion in the early 50's, turns out to be fascinating. That story is told not by Ambros himself, whom the narrator never meets again, but indirectly through the reminiscences of a New Jersey Aunt. Adelwart spent his life as a paid companion and steward to a young, headless young man and future heir to a rich successful Jewish businessman and father. It is a pointless if charmed life spent at the upper echelons of society, without being part of it. Another instance of the curse of exile. At the end of his life, when discarded, the man not surprisingly falls into the torpor of a deep depression. He is removed to an institution outside Ithaca where he willingly subjects himself to repeated el-shock treatment which wears him out and eventually kills him. The narrator travels to Ithaca in the 80's, makes inquiries, meets the successor of the institute which has long since fallen in disuse and disrepair, gets the last stories of the man, and also the diary he kept during his travels to the Middle-East just before the First World War. Is it all true? Of course not, but the 'collage' method intrudes, a picture of an old notebook is exhibited, as well as the closely annotated pages inside. Is that also made up or real? In the latter case a piece of reality given a new interpretation?

Finally the fourth story is about the artist Max Aurach who has ensconced himself fittingly in the decaying Manchester working in a dusty studio with almost no light attacking his impenetrable canvases. Sebald spent a few years in Manchester, so once again the setting is utterly believable, and thus one starts to reading it with rapt attention, because few things are as fascinating as the first few days of exile, those momentous days when an irreversible transition is being made, a border crossed, one identity to be shed and another incipient. But of course it is but a ruse to anchor the story. Aurach is a Jewish refugee, sent away by his parents from Munich to his uncle in London, when he was just a teenager. He was never to see his parents again who predictably perished. Later the narrator gets his hands on the diary Aurach's mother kept during her last year. A diary that has miraculously survived, but the convenient ubiquity of miracle is the point of fiction, but which mostly concerns not the drab humiliations of everyday life, but the sad recollections of the past, the idyllic life before the First World War. In a sense we are all exiles from our childhood and youth, and as such we find our present condition somewhat unreal. The Jewish theme is also present in the second story, that of the model pedagogue that was Sebald's teacher as a young boy. Or are we once again confusing Sebald with the narrator? Of course we are making that cardinal sin, forgetting that they have little in common except the voice and certain superficial biographical details. (The comparison is of course deeply asymmetrical, a narrator possesses not much more than a voice, on the other hand the pure distillation of a writer is nothing but a voice either, and on that level the two can be seen as coincide.) The idyllic school-life in a village of the early fifties is caringly depicted, that was a time when highly intelligent and eccentric personalities still could be found teaching the young. That teacher exiled himself in the 30's, yet returned to Germany during the war, being after all only quarter Jewish. In his last decades though he roamed mostly in France embracing the French tongue, making himself as a late exile. Consequently the latter part of his story is told by an elderly French woman, whom the narrator contacts. (She is instrumental in arranging the funeral after the school-teachers suicide committed through lying himself on a train-track, the symbolism of which should not be lost.)

Four stories told as if they were true (and maybe they ultimately were?). Is the reader cheated? To some extent if he is engaged in simply reading, but of course if he is engaged in meta-reading, the cheating is part of the game and hence of the fun, and the careful reader can enjoy intermittent hints dropped mischievously by the writer (as opposed to the narrator). One such is the appearance of the butterfly man in various incarnations. He appears in the Adalwarth story close to Ithaca, in the Aurach story close to Geneva telling Aurach that he should return from the mountain, and as a young vacationing boy close to the Riviera in the recollection of Aurach's mother. The knowledgeable reader identifies him immediately as Nabokov. This works like irony in say the writings of a Plato, a secret understanding between the author and the one intelligent reader to the effect that what is written and said is just for the masses, it is all an illusion.

Sebald shares, as noted above, the voice with his narrator. A voice is an expression of a temperament, and that of Sebald, befitting an exile, is one of quiet melancholy. His depiction of places is fascinating, and one which I can deeply identify with. As an exile and as a writer he travels through but is not part. The world than takes on a strange aspect, just

like ordinary things do if you stare at them long enough in order to separate their existence from their uses and purposes. The same with geographical location, once seen for what it 'really' is, a kind of facade, it becomes sort of empty and unreal. It works particularly well with locations, such as that of Manchester, which have survived themselves, and now present mere modern ruins of a reality once vibrant but now hopelessly of the past.

Why did Sebald voluntarily leave Germany? What forced him to take that step? One reason often proposed is that of guilt. The guilt of the Holocaust. Both the perpetration itself and the amnesia of which followed. The slaughter of the Jews were not committed with passion, at least not that of hate or enjoyment¹, because after all virulent anti-semitism was hardly the hallmark of traditional Germany (as opposed to other countries such as France and Russia), although denial of the phenomenon of anti-semitism as such in Germany would of course be absurd. Had it been so, it would at least have been more understandable. On the contrary, it seems to have been performed out of a sense of duty and carried through with a perverse kind of self-pity. Bad as it was for the victims, did not those who had to do it suffer even more? To paraphrase Himmler². This created in the post-war Germans a divided mind about the Holocaust. On one hand they were of course innocent and puzzled. They had felt no hatred, even less any enjoyment. Thus they were unable to take any emotional responsibility, although of course on the other hand as to a formal and official one, no country has ever owned up more unconditionally to the horrors and atrocities it had committed than post-war Germany. A laudable response free of hypocrisy. Yet the War left a big void of denial, be it both as to the extermination as well as to the own extermination in the hands of allied bombing squads they suffered themselves. Sebald has addressed both issues, the former is of course utterly uncontroversial, the second much less so. When it comes to the Holocaust, most thoroughly dealt with in 'Austerlitz' it is never done head-on, that would be impossible. It is done obliquely, tracing the boundary of the void, rather than staring into it. Some of the most effective descriptions are indeed just evocations. The head-on treatment of the Holocaust does not belong to literature, as Sebald is quite aware of, it belongs to sensationalism and concomitant vulgarization, ultimately trivializing. The role of literature is ultimately just to evoke and suggest, not by replacing imagination, but by stimulating it.

June 18, 2009 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*

¹ As that of the slaughter of Indians by the British during the so called Sepoy Mutiny, according to Jan Myrdal.

² This brings to mind the eloquent rhetoric of Golda Meir, who told her Arab counterparts, that we can forgive that you kill our sons, but we can never forgive you that you force us to kill yours.