

Logis in einem Landhaus

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This is a collection of essays on various German writers, to which has been added a hyper-realist painter - Jan Peter Tripp. As the latter somehow stands apart from the rest, both because of his occupation and because of his location in the recent past, I will begin by discussing the essay on him.

Hyper-realism is a strange contemporary phenomenon. It highlights the fact that even rather mediocre artists can attain a technical mastery that rivals, and even surpasses those of the old masters. Verisimilitude is an obvious goal for painting, and the ability to paint *trompe l'oeil* has always been seen as a remarkable technical achievement. With the invention of photography the possibility of automatizing this process into a purely mechanical one made us rethink the role of faithful reproduction in painting. Delacroix proclaimed, supposedly tongue in cheek, that art was dead. That the role of faithful reproduction has always been questioned and ignored in the history of art, should not blind us to the obvious fact, that photography released visual arts, and that henceforth in due time painting become less and less devoted to what photography could do better and more relaxed as to its representational assignment to the point of rejecting that altogether and becoming non-figurative. This development was not uncontroversial. The artist had until recently been seen as a master craftsman, the education of whom was a long and arduous process, in many ways similar to what apprentices in science now undergo. The representational skill of an artist was also something even the untutored could judge, and thus it became in a manner something objectively assessable, and thus institutionalized in various academies. When the artist flaunted this basic ability, one started to wonder whether not anyone could be an artist, it if was just a matter of self-expression and daubing paint on a canvas, and that the quality of art no longer was something that could be universally shared but defined by purely subjective criteria. To some extent those worries have been confirmed. There is no doubt that many modern painters owe their success to promotion, their own or others. Promotion is of course always a factor in everything that seeks fame and even specialized recognition, but in recent times one may wonder whether not promotion itself can supplement intrinsic qualities and become an integral part of the total work of art. Art is anything you can get away with, in the words of Andy Warhol, who more than anyone else may epitomize the cynical approach to art, as being purely a social convention. Of this Sebald has little to say, his point is on the contrary that hyper-realism, i.e. the faithful representation of reality, involves far more than meets the eye. To take the example of van Eyck. His classical picture of the bridal couple may be seen as an early example of hyper-realism. As a viewer you may at least first be fascinated to be the point of being overwhelmed by all the details, which seem to exist on all levels, down to the microscopic. This is of course a physical impossibility, a brush can only be so fine. Thus the great achievement of van Eyck is not so much his representational ability, but that he is able to fool our eyes to the effect of suggesting that this faithful representation

has no limit, and would we be able to use a microscope we would find even more details. How is this effected? Clearly one of the secrets of the artist, and which shows that even the representational ability of an artist surpasses that of the camera. The same way with hyper-realism. It is not just a matter of systematically recording pixel by pixel, but to create a crispness of image that evades the capability of the camera (which is constrained by a limited depth of focus for one thing). The result is a 'Verfremdung' of the image, making the overly familiar strange.

Writing can never achieve the same kind of representational faithfulness as can the visual arts. There really is no direct analogue of the *tromp l'oeil* phenomenon in writing. Thus writing becomes a more abstract medium than the visual. Thus the tricks, if you so want, to create an illusion of reality, are so more obvious and necessary in the art of writing than in drawing and painting. A rather mediocre artist can convey at least some visual vividness, harder it is to achieve this in writing¹. In a visual picture, all the details have somehow to be there, while in writing this is impossible² and the selection of the significant is needed suggesting all the supporting one. Of course this is not significantly different from the way we 'remember' a picture. Once again, this is not the subject of Sebalds ruminations, he has a certain propensity to seek out the marginal author, be it one who was always obscure, waiting in the wings to be resurrected by a sympathetic reader, or one who may have enjoyed fame but fallen into oblivion. Many writes may in fact be wedded to their times, so much that when those change, they become irrelevant. On the other hand by being so wedded to their times they perhaps more than supposedly greater ones are able to evoke those times. Thus they become objects of nostalgia. It is hard not to see them as anything other in the writings of Sebald. It is as if they serve the same purpose as old scraps of papers, and other artifacts, to bring forward lives once lived. Maybe the most effective setting for such indulgence is the early 19th century during the post-Napoleonic era, from which many of his subjects are drawn. It is a time to which we in many ways can relate more intimately than to more distant ages. We may even have collective memories of those times perpetrated within our own families, as those were the temporal location of the grandparents of our own grandparents. Nostalgia is a kind of necrophilia imbued as it is with the same kind of lingering sweetness. Photography, Sebald reminds us in his last essay, is death. And it is exactly the faithful representation that is the most powerful in creating the nostalgic mood. The work of such authors as Hebel and Keller is indeed nostalgic in itself. They long back to a pre-Capitalistic society in which money did not rule. One may at times see Marxism itself as a kind of conservative reaction to the modern mobility of capital and the ways it influences and ultimately impoverishes our lives. This as an ironic comment on its being in the early 20th century billed as political

¹ Visual representation may have come late in the development of modern humans, although from a pre-historical perspective, cave-paintings display an impressive antiquity. Speaking, unlike drawing, is a biological feature, and all sound individuals acquire competence in it. Narrating may of course be seen as an artful elaboration on the basis of speech, and writing that rather recent encoding of ordinary speech, has as every invention developed its own peculiar features, not originally intended. So writing becomes in a sense just as much of a cultural embellishment as drawing.

² Although literary attempts of so doing have been made, but none in my view particularly successful except as curiosities

modernism itself, ostensibly concerned with the eradication of ancient traditions, but in so doing actually longing back to a pre-civilizational stage. There is admittedly great charm in such fantasies, and they are eloquently expressed in the Republic by Plato³.

Walser is a more contemporary author. A very obscure one living in Switzerland. He never was famous, and most likely he will never be so posthumously either (otherwise a convenient ambition for most of us, as we can never be disappointed). Thus he makes an ideal study for a temperament such as that of Sebald. Success may enhance a work of art, but also to some extent pollute it. Failure on the other hand, can do nothing but purify it.

Sebald is foremost concerned with moods, and hence it is not always easy to remember, at least not in detail, what he writes. What stays with you is the slow and elaborate flow of his prose, whose content is more poetic than factual. Of course essays like in this collection are factual, even if he at times happens to get them wrong⁴, but just as in a hyper-realist painting, the sticking to facts make them sound fictional rather than factual. Sebald writes as if he makes it all up. A double-layered irony that no doubt brings delight to close reading.

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³ No wonder Popper makes a connection, beyond the obvious ones, between Plato and Marx.

⁴ It is true that Rousseau died at the age of 66, but that happened in 1778 not in 1780. It is hard not to interpret that as a slip rather than an intentional design.