

## Schwindel.Gefühle.

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April 2-9, 2006

The book consists of four independent chapters. The first is a brief recapitulation of Henri Beyle as a young man, participating in the campaigns of Napoleon, as well as launching his own campaigns in the field of love, capped off by his end at the age of fifty-nine by stroke. The third is a recapitulation of a Dr.K. visiting a Sanatorium in Riva, Italy back in 1913. One suspects that Dr.K. stands for Kafka, especially in view of a certain photograph as well as by explicit references to Felice. The remaining interleaving chapters are autobiographical, or at least written in that spirit, including two visits of the author to Northern Italy back in 1980 and 1987. The final chapter, possibly the most interesting, is an account of his return to the village of his childhood referred to as W.<sup>1</sup>. The account of his northward busride from Innsbruck and through a cold and misty landscape is very nicely done, reminding me of the power of geographical evocation displayed by a Max Frisch<sup>2</sup>. The charm of such an account are the poetic asides. Sebald recalls from his childhood being exposed to pictures of the ruined cityscapes of Berlin and Hamburg stemming, scenes whose exceptional quality he at the time had no inkling, but simply saw as natural manifestations of large cities. The trouble of personal reminiscences is of course that they are invariably much more interesting to the narrator than to the reader. So either those memories must be endowed with special dramatic qualities appealing to the culture in each reader; or be of such a universal nature, that they can provide a natural matrix for those of the reader as well. And indeed when Sebald is most successful is in the evocation of experiences, like the mundane aspects of travel, with which most readers are familiar. The literary quality of this book supposedly rest with implicit references between the seemingly independent chapters. Such references may take some time and trouble to locate, and thus I will be content with pointing out one single explicit one. Sebald is led up the attic of an old neighbour. The attic has never been sorted out and is hence the depository of all kinds of debris people collect during their life-times and are too sentimental to rid themselves of. Inside the author spots the figure of a man. It turns out to be a mannikin replete with an old military uniform. As Sebald touches the fabric it turns immediately into dust. He withdraws, but subsequent research reveals that the uniform is in all likelihood a local military uniform used at the beginning of the 19th century, possibly by corps fighting Napoleon during the campaign which begins the book.

There are two other instances in the text appearing in the second chapter, I would like to point out. The author visits Venice and upon awakening remarks that awakening

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<sup>1</sup> The careful reader localizes it to being within walking distance from the bordercrossing north of Innsbruck, and an even more careful reader spots the name - Werlach, in the small print of an illustration appearing on page 233

<sup>2</sup> Or could it be that my relative unfamiliarity with German endows the language with a poetic quality which would fade by the light of repeated usage?

in Venice is a strange experience as there is none of that subdued sound of traffic which modern cities never are entirely free of. During a visit to Verona the hpotel misplaces his passport. He needs another one. The proprietess takes him to the police, in which a paper is issued ceremoniously. As he returns to the car with his landlady, he feels that the issuing of the paper is tantamount to the two of them just having been married and now they are being free to go wherever they want.

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