

*The Good German as Narrator:
On W. G. Sebald and the Risks of
Holocaust Writing*

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Without question W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* places itself within the expanding category of "German Holocaust literature." Although it centers neither on the miseries of life in the Nazi ghettos nor on the horrors of the death camps, *The Emigrants* explores the lingering after-effects of the attempted genocide against the Jews. However, in spite of his best intentions, and amid the many accolades he received before and after his death for being a German who wrote and spoke effectively on a difficult subject, Sebald's work raises numerous questions regarding how non-Jewish German authors can adequately represent the Holocaust and its consequences.

Some of these questions have been newly focalized by attention given to the saturation bombing of Germany by the Allies. In writing about the traumas associated with World War II, novelists and historians had been more likely to be referring to the attempted elimination of European Jewry than to the destruction of Germany, yet that is no longer taken for granted: the latter has recently been revisited by a number of historians, and the horror of mass bombings is moving more and more into the light.¹ Such discussions have inspired new inquiries into the

1. Notably in studies by Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg, 1940-1945* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2002), and Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin, 1945* (New York: Viking, 2002), as well as in the collection *Als Feuer vom Himmel fiel: Der Bombenkrieg in Deutschland*, ed. Stephan Burgdorff and Christian Habbe (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2003).

posttraumatic stress those bombings induced. To judge from Sebald's oeuvre, he was intrigued by both the Holocaust and the bombings. He investigated the consequences of the Judeocide in his partly fictional narratives, *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, as well as in his numerous literary essays on Jean Améry, Primo Levi, Paul Celan, and others, and he dealt with the destruction of Germany in "Air War and Literature" [Luftkrieg und Literatur], a lecture turned monograph about the devastation following the massive assault on German cities. Taken together, these writings demonstrate that Sebald undertook two distinct approaches to narrating these different events. These approaches in turn foreground questions concerning the epistemological status of these events and the limits of their representations.

Using Sebald's writing on the air war as a point of contrast, in the following argument I attempt to account for the specific moral and epistemological consequences of narrating the Holocaust from a German position. When it came to illuminating the saddest spaces of the human spirit, Sebald was an empathetic and articulate scribe, yet just as there are limits imposed on the sensible depiction of the Holocaust, one should consider whether there are boundaries around the empathy that an author can sensibly display. Empathy may run the risk of undermining the possibility of exchange, potentially implicating an empathetic listener in their subject's past. While often productive, emulating another's trauma can undercut the laudable goals of critical analysis.² Sebald's works are certainly more than only Holocaust narratives; they are multidimensional, complex, and gracefully written. Moreover, as Mark Anderson has pointed out, "the roads in Sebald's work do not all lead to Theresienstadt," and assessing it only in this light would be unfortunate.³ At the same time, however, his writing undeniably calls attention to the considerable limitations on empathy in relation to key issues surrounding writing and the Holocaust.

Taking a predominantly literary focus, Sebald's essay on the air war, "Air War and Literature," undertakes to examine the position of post-war German writers in a society that was, in Sebald's words, "morally

2. See Dominick LaCapra's "Holocaust Testimonies: Attending to the Victim's Voice," *Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century*, ed. Moishe Postone and Eric Santner (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003) 223.

3. Mark M. Anderson, "The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald," *October* 106 (2003): 120.

almost entirely discredited.”⁴ In this work, which was originally a series of talks delivered in Zürich, Sebald examines literary writings about the air war by Heinrich Böll, Hans Erich Nossack, Hubert Fichte, and others. His lecture is meant not to uncover a secret history of the bombings but, rather, to address a lacuna in German letters, one that he suggests came about because of a great collective repression conditioned by either conscious agreement or unconscious need on the part of Germans after the war. As Andreas Huyssen notes, “[Sebald] accuses German writers of repression for failing to represent the destruction of German cities, just as Germans in general have been said to repress the Holocaust.”⁵

Sebald’s writings on the bombings describe the textual silence that followed them as a psychological problem; a consequence of quieting the memory of that horror as an impulse of Germans who by and large felt culpability and shame for having brought about their own destruction.⁶ Sebald is disinclined to treat this repression in political terms or to point an accusatory finger at the Allies. Furthermore, in considering why the bombings were not chief among topics of public discourse, he ultimately avoids consideration of Allied censorship and postwar control of the German media as among the plausible reasons. In this way, the author creates a distance between his position and any possible revisionist German historiography. Sebald was so concerned about the appearance of speaking out in a neo-nationalist way that he even included in the body of his text correspondence from an anti-Semite who misappropriates the essay as ammunition for arguments against a world

4. W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003) ix. This book is a translation of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, published by Hanser Verlag in 1999, accompanied by three additional literary essays. For a perspective on the literary context upon which Sebald was commenting, see Volker Hage’s response to Sebald’s lectures: “Feuer vom Himmel,” *Der Spiegel* 3 (12 Jan. 1998): 138–41. For a critical response to the merits of Sebald’s claims, see Andreas Huyssen’s “On Rewritings and New Beginnings: W. G. Sebald and the Literature about the *Luftkrieg*,” *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 31.124 (2001): 72–90. The latter essay also appears in a modified form in Huyssen’s *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003) 138–57.

5. See Huyssen, “On Rewritings and New Beginnings” 81.

6. Huyssen refutes the claim that the bombings were not talked about, making the point that they were in fact a topic of widespread discussion. He writes: “[T]here always was a lot of talk about the bombings in post-war Germany. After all, it was that kind of talk that produced the *Luftkrieg* taboo among liberals and leftists in the first place. This discourse was perhaps more prevalent in the private than in the public sphere, but it functioned powerfully in bolstering the war generation’s claims to victimization and the attempt to minimize responsibility” (81).

Zionist conspiracy. By way of this negative example, Sebald makes clear precisely how he does not wish for his work to be interpreted.⁷

Attempting to render his own moral position unambiguous with respect to German nationalism, Sebald guards against conflation of the air war and the Holocaust. Yet, looking over "Air War and Literature" in relation to his longer works, one must consider the provocative juxtaposition of the two. Considerations along such lines have been noted before with respect to historians who have examined the Holocaust and the fall of the Reich at one and the same time. In both the United States and Germany, eyebrows were raised over Andreas Hillgruber's 1986 book with the inflammatory title *Two Kinds of Ruin: The Shattering of the German Reich and the End of European Jewry*.⁸ In his work, Hillgruber problematically speaks of the Holocaust in a detached, statistical manner, while trying to build empathy for the German soldiers, who struggled through the last stages of the war.⁹ In taking on all at once the fate of the German Wehrmacht in the East and the fate of the Jews, Hillgruber ignited a scandal. Critics claimed that in bringing together these two forms of destruction he risked diminishing the enormity of the Judeocide. In an essay on the topic, Perry Anderson examines Hillgruber's possible rationale for setting the two events in parallel, and he judges the German historian in moral terms, arguing that "any juxtaposition of Jewish and German fates demands an exceptional — moral and empirical — delicacy," one that Anderson finds to be beyond Hillgruber's compass.¹⁰ One should note that the phrase "the end of European Jewry" itself, which is employed in Hillgruber's title, bespeaks the problem. Omer Bartov points out that the fact that the Jews are seen as absent from postwar European culture is symptomatic of Hillgruber's failure to view them

7. See the remarks on "Dr. H" in *On the Natural History of Destruction* 98–104.

8. Andreas Hillgruber, *Zweierlei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums* (Berlin: W. J. Siedler, 1986). The book is discussed in numerous essays in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Surrounding the Singularity of the Holocaust* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities P, 1993). For criticism of Hillgruber, see in particular the essay by Jürgen Habermas.

9. Bartov provides a close reading of Hillgruber's work along these lines in *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 71–88.

10. See Perry Anderson, "On Emplotment: Two Kinds of Ruin," *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 64.

as historical protagonists with whom he could empathize.¹¹

The debate around Hillgruber underscores the need for an analysis of narrative structure when dealing with these delicate topics and their continued legacies. Writing about Hillgruber's book, Hayden White draws the conclusion that two kinds of "plot types" are called for when narrating the decimation of Germany and the horror of the Holocaust. White writes: "Hillgruber's manifest purpose was to salvage the moral dignity of a part of the Nazi epoch in German history by splitting the whole of it into two discrete stories and emplotting them differently — the one as a tragedy, the other as an incomprehensible enigma."¹² White offers a narrative reading, concluding, "Hillgruber does not name the plot type which might provide the meaning of the story of 'the end of European Jewry.' But if the plot type of the tragedy is reserved for the telling of the story of the Wehrmacht on the eastern front in 1944–45, it follows that some other plot type must be used for the end of European Jewry."¹³ Here and throughout his essay, White tries to be sensitive to the many contradictions and possible transgressions that arise when one turns the Holocaust into an aesthetic object, or approaches it by constructing a narrative around it. His leading comment that "some other" plot type is necessary to narrate "the end of European Jewry" is meant as more than a question of narrative form. It engages with the epistemological question of whether and in what way the event can be responsibly communicated.

From a stylistic perspective it is immediately clear that two different narrative approaches find their voice in Sebald's writings; each approach correlates to the specific topic he addresses, the Holocaust or the bombing. His works on the subject of the Holocaust and the persecution of the Jews treat explicit depictions of the tragedy as taboo. Sebald is arguably acting in sympathy with the "ban on representation" [*Bilderverbot*] associated with the Holocaust, and he can be said to have adopted in part (though by no means wholesale) conventions associated with the film *Shoah*, which dictate that explicit representation of

11. See "Germans as Jews: Representations of Absence in Postwar Germany" in Bartov's *Germany's War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2003) 221, 234–35.

12. Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," *Probing the Limits* 37–53 (quote, 42).

13. White 43.

Holocaust horrors diminishes their atrocity.¹⁴ His work is open to the criticism that he perpetuates what Andreas Huyssen has described as an “obsessive focus on the unspeakable and the unrepresentable.”¹⁵ By contrast, and perhaps deliberately, “Air War and Literature” depicts the horrors of the bombing raids in explicit language that recalls descriptions of German death camps as the Allies came upon them. For example, his description of “Operation Gomorrah,” in which parts of Hamburg were leveled by the RAF with the support of the United States, goes as follows: “Horribly disfigured corpses lay everywhere. Bluish little phosphorous flames still flickered around many of them; others had been roasted brown or purple and reduced to a third of their normal size. They lay doubled up in pools of their own melted fat, which had sometimes already congealed.”¹⁶ The double standard applied to narrating these two atrocities — recounting the one in its most graphic detail while avoiding any description of the other, or finding the

14. An approach that Michael Rothberg calls “antirealist,” explaining that such a standpoint “forgoes any attempt to represent the Holocaust and declares attempts to understand the events ‘obscene.’” See *Traumatic Realism. The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 5. The discussion of antirealism there and elsewhere is centered on the risk of “domesticating” the horrors of the Holocaust, or of making the incomparable comparable to something, and hence not unique or absolute. As Irving Howe puts it, the Holocaust is “an event regarding which the phrase ‘such as’ cannot really be employed.” Reflecting on Adorno’s famous maxim about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz — a maxim that has been explored at length (especially by Rothberg) — Howe writes, “Adorno might have been rehearsing a traditional aesthetic idea: that the representation of a horrible event, especially if in drawing upon literary skills it achieves a certain graphic power, could serve to domesticate it, rendering it familiar and in some sense even tolerable, and thereby shearing away the horror.” See Irving Howe, “Writing and the Holocaust,” *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988) 180. Similarly, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer write about “a fear that by naming the Shoah — either as a sublime object, or as redeemable — we domesticate it and sidestep the unnameable horror that it was.” They add, “[T]he urgent question is whether, in speaking of the sublime in relation to the Shoah, we aren’t finding a way to name it, finding a way to make of the Shoah a divinity . . . in whose presence we dare not speak, as Moses dared not, whose negative presence calls forth silence, or flight, or pleasure.” See Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* (New York: SUNY P, 2001) esp. 16–17. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer are arguing that the event is “sayable” and can become the object of discourse, yet the question of how one does this properly stubbornly remains. Along similar lines, see also the essays in the collection *Kunst und Literatur nach Auschwitz*, ed. Manuel Köppen (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1993).

15. See Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 256–57.

16. See *On the Natural History of Destruction* 28. One finds similarly graphic descriptions elsewhere in the text as on 59–60, for example.

one horror to be “speakable” and the other to be “unspeakable” — is an issue for those who write about both topics. To note this is by no means to assert that Sebald cares more for German victims than for Jewish ones, only that Sebald adheres more closely to an aesthetics of unrepresentability when it comes to the Holocaust.

In the discussion about whether or not to represent Nazi atrocities graphically, the moral and epistemological issues are always linked to one another. Berel Lang asks whether “writing centered in the Nazi genocide against the Jews” is “literally and morally *possible*.”¹⁷ In speaking of the “morality” and ultimately of the “risks” of Holocaust representation, Lang adds, “the dissonance in the relation between the events of the Nazi genocide against the Jews and the writing about them is not conceptual, but moral.” The fundamental difference, he explains, “is in the phenomenon of genocide — a difference reflected in the dissonance which appears when the act of writing is judged in terms of what it does to its readers, and together with that, of what it does to its subject. . . . *The risk of failure here is constant.*”¹⁸ Despite his protestations, however, Lang’s argument is both conceptual and moral. It is predicated on a gap between the brutally real event of the Holocaust and the figurative realm. Lang writes, “The fact of the Nazi genocide is a crux that separates historical discourse from the process of imaginative representation and its figurative space, perhaps not uniquely, but as surely as any fact might be required or able to.”¹⁹ Presumably such a separation could be ascribed to the narration or figuration of other atrocities (as history provides so many), yet Lang is concerned here with the Holocaust as a limit case. His observations echo those of Primo Levi, who would warn the reader that he cannot truly say what happened in the death camps because one cannot speak “from inside of

17. Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990) 103.

18. Lang, *Act and Idea* 161 (my emphasis). The historian Raul Hilberg seconds Lang’s concerns, also speaking of such writing in terms of its “risks.” He asks: “How much more removed from the actuality of reportage are those works whose authors have introduced a theory or theme or just a visible thought to which the evidence has been subordinated? These recreators of the Holocaust, be they historians, sculptors, architects, designers, novelist, playwrights, or poets, are molding something new.” He then concludes: “They may be shrewd, insightful or masterful, *but they take a larger risk*, and all the more so, if they take poetic license to subtract something from the crude reality for the sake of a larger effect.” Raul Hilberg, “I Was Not There,” *Writing and the Holocaust* 22–23 (my emphasis).

19. Lang, *Act and Idea* 158.

death," or those of Jean Améry, who tells his readers that in order to fully explain torture to them, he would have to torture them. The chief risk implied by Lang (as well as by Raul Hilberg and others) concerns "domesticating" the horrors of the Holocaust. For this reason, authors such as Elie Wiesel have attempted to lay down the law about such writing. In a famous lecture Wiesel has argued that the phrase "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration" should be seen as a contradiction in terms.²⁰ Insofar as he argues that "Holocaust literature" is taboo, however, one must acknowledge that the taboo is unenforceable, given that writers and historians, including Wiesel, have repeatedly refigured the Holocaust in fiction (or in "semi-fiction"); such refigurations may be more common now than ever before.

Moreover, Wiesel's proclamation is problematically vague in that it steers clear of the specificities of the identity of the particular writer. From *The Seventh Cross* to *Schindler's List*, works that depict the violence of the Nazi era raise different concerns relative to the contexts out of which they emerge (for instance, East Germany immediately following the war, in the one case, and Hollywood during the Clinton administration, in the other). Holocaust filmmaking, writing, and reception take place in a variety of contexts that in turn influence how we judge them. While accounting for emphatic epistemological claims about unrepresentability, one has to assess the "risks" of Holocaust representation with respect to contexts and to the conditions of the works' intended reception. It is on those terms that I propose to analyze writings such as *The Emigrants* or *Austerlitz*, representations of the aftereffects of the Holocaust by a German writer who lived most of his adult life in England. As I will argue, while Sebald succeeds in taking account of the epistemological problem of Holocaust representation, the moral basis of his authorial position is troubled by his choice to narrate from the standpoint of an empathetic German; the overall project of dialogic analysis and critical exchange may ultimately be undermined by the close connection Sebald pursues between his works' narrators and their subjects. To raise this issue is not to suggest that Sebald's artistry is suspect but instead to inquire into whether certain modes of affective writing — especially in regard to the specific problem of Holocaust

20. See Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, ed. Elie Wiesel, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, Dorothy Rabinowicz, and Robert McAfee Brown (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1977) 7.

writing — interfere with the project of productive analysis.

Scrutiny of the identity of the author or narrator in such readings should by no means be taken as an implication that only those who survived the Holocaust can comment on its horrors. One should be pleased that non-Jewish Germans and others are moved to write on this difficult topic. This scrutiny is only meant to acknowledge that such works, although they indeed have transnational appeal and perhaps speak to the empathies of most readers, are subject to specific national and linguistic conditions of production and reception, some of which determine the “risks” associated with their choice of narrative voice. The assertion that only survivors have the right to speak would place beyond reproach authors such as the Israeli Ka-Tzetnik, who takes his pen name from the German word for the camps (*KZ-Lager*) and writes brutal narratives based on his own memories, yet it would allow for few others to write on the matter. In his eloquent philosophical memoir *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi, himself a survivor of Auschwitz, wrote of having been called upon to speak for those who died but of not being able to do justice to the true witnesses: the dead. His self-critical standards set limits on knowing and imagining horror — limits that are well worth considering. Yet if these limits are accepted, they might silence even Ka-Tzetnik’s work, because insofar as he survived, he cannot really claim to be a witness in Levi’s sense of the word. If this measure of authenticity were to serve as the standard, what would happen to works such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, of which the critical approbation is now legion?²¹

Maus has garnered huge praise but can also be seen as transgressive by survivors and others who feel that the Holocaust should never be material for a comic book. Similar questions arise concerning U.S. authors who were nowhere near the camps yet use the Holocaust as a backdrop for their stories. What of the case, for example, of *The Adventures of Kavalier and Klay*, which uses the German victimization of the Jews as a backdrop for a story about the Jewish origins of the U.S.

21. Art Spiegelman’s work won a Pulitzer Prize and is cited by Hayden White as “a masterpiece of stylization, figuration, and allegorization.” White adds: “[I]t assimilates the events of the Holocaust to the conventions of comic book representation, and in this absurd mixture of a ‘low’ genre with events of the most momentous significance, *Maus* manages to raise all of the crucial issues regarding the ‘limits of representation’ in general.” See White 42. The body of extant articles and book chapters that take up this contention are too numerous to reasonably list in a footnote.

comic book industry, or that of *The Golems of Gotham*, in which the spirits of the suicidal survivors Levi, Améry, Tadeusz Borowski, and others are summoned to help a contemporary New York writer overcome his writer's block? There are so many accounts removed from firsthand experience of the Nazi genocide — especially given the proliferation of second-generation art and literature — that authenticity is hardly a serviceable standard, and most recent literature about the Holocaust acknowledges that the character of the subject itself is culturally mediated.²² As Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, “We have become increasingly conscious of how social and collective memory is constructed through a variety of discourses and layers of representations. Holocaust historiography, archives, witness testimony, documentary footage — all have collaborated to establish a hard core of facts, and these facts need to be transmitted to the post-Holocaust generations. . . . But we are also free to recognize that the Holocaust has indeed become dispersed and fractured through the different ways of memorializing it.”²³ Once this multiplicity of memorialization and expression is recognized, however, how do we go about assessing the differences among the specific cases, especially the distinctive moral implications for such questions as German responsibility? In order to make such assessments, we have to consider the circumstances of specific texts' production, circulation, and reception. In approaching Sebald's fictional work in particular, standards that underscore important differences between perpetrators and victims, or even between witnesses and bystanders, are crucial.

For a historian such as Omer Bartov, the role that the Jews and the attempted genocide play in German depictions is more than a purely aesthetic consideration; it plays a part in critically considering the contemporary German psyche. Bartov is concerned about how German culture has undertaken to deal (or not to deal) with the question of perpetrator and victim, and he has argued that in German film and literature (to say nothing of histories such as Hillgruber's), “while not absent, the victims remain anonymous and faceless; the evil, whatever the causes attributed to it, is in the deed (and its effects on the perpetrators), not in

22. Some recent books that have dealt specifically with the second-generation problematic have included Melvin Jules Bukiet's *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors* (New York: Norton, 2002) and *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz*, ed. Efraim Sicher (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1998).

23. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories* 256.

its application to individual human beings."²⁴ The problem as he sees it is one in which Germans perceive themselves as the inheritors of victimhood and suffering, failing to empathize with their nation's own victims, often at the cost of "exclud[ing] those victims from the sphere of empathy altogether."²⁵ Presumably he is referring here to non-Jewish Germans rather than to more rare cases of German-Jewish writers such as Jurek Becker. Like Bartov, Ruth Angress, who wrote the memoir *Still Alive* under her maiden name Ruth Klüger, has argued that there was a continuing "Jewish problem" in postwar German literature. In 1985 she wrote that Jews in German fiction had long served the "function of self-gratification" for Germans in that they provided "a sense of superiority towards those who are presumed to be weak or morally deficient."²⁶

How does Sebald's fiction fit in with these context-oriented assessments? Given his own writings on the subject, it seems that he would likely have concurred with the harsh words of Bartov and Klüger: namely, that when a non-Jewish German writes about Jews, he or she has probably intentionally or unintentionally erased, distorted, or misappropriated the truth of Jewish experience. In his own essay on Jean Améry and Primo Levi, Sebald takes the position that it took almost twenty-five years for German literature and its writers to avow their

24. Omer Bartov, "'Seit die Juden weg sind . . .': Germany, History and Representations of Absence," *A User's Guide to German Cultural Studies*, ed. Scott Denham, Irene Kancandes, and Jonathan Petropoulos (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997) 211–12. A somewhat modified form of this argument forms the chapter "Germans as Jews: Representations of Absence in Postwar Germany" in Bartov's *Germany's War and the Holocaust*. In that chapter he condemns the absence of Jews in postwar German literature and history, including brief arguments about Hillgruber and Martin Broszat. At the same time, however, he commends Sebald for authoring "the most extraordinary novels on the erasure of Jewish life, identity and memory by a non-Jewish German writer" (221 n. 11).

25. Bartov, "'Seit die Juden weg sind . . .'" 218.

26. Ruth Angress, "A 'Jewish Problem' in German Postwar Fiction," *Modern Judaism* 5 (1985): 215. Her work, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2001), is the English version of *Weiter leben: Eine Jugend* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1992). By way of contrast with Klüger's 1985 essay, Ernestine Schlant argues that this sense of superiority and self-gratification is a trend in decline. She lauds Sebald's works in particular, incorporating him into a canon of German authors who attempt to deal with the past, including Heinrich Böll, Wolfgang Koeppen, Peter Schneider, and Bernhard Schlink. Sebald is described as a German post-Holocaust author who breaks the silence and "begins to mourn destruction and loss." See Ernestine Schlant, *The Language of Silence: West German Literature and the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 20. One should also mention that Klüger's recent assessment of Sebald's work is overwhelmingly positive. See Ruth Klüger, "Wanderer zwischen falschen Leben: Über W. G. Sebald," *Text + Kritik* 158 (2003): 95–102.

ignorance about the Holocaust and that literature of the postwar period — including that of Group 47 — was defined by a lack of understanding for the victims and a constitutional incapacity to deal with the truth.²⁷ Sebald was eager to distance himself from this distinctively German inheritance. For example, his judgment against the writer Alfred Andersch in his essay “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” is unforgiving. He attacks Andersch’s poor style and inflated ego, arguing that Andersch never lived up to his own idealized self-image as a great writer because he never honestly worked through his selfish reasons for staying in Germany under the Nazis. His ill-advised and opportunistic politics prevented him from confronting and coming to terms with his identification with the Reich. As a consequence, argues Sebald, he was left with “linguistic corruption and an addiction to empty spiraling pathos” as “outward symptoms of a warped state of mind.”²⁸ Sebald then analyzes Andersch’s novels, *Zanzibar* [Sansibar, oder der letzte Grund] and *The Redhead* [Die Rote], for their Jewish stereotypes, treating them as direct effects of Andersch’s lack of self-understanding. Similarly, in another article, Sebald criticizes Günter Grass’s depictions of German-Jewish relationships, scrutinizing (and satirizing) the character of Hermann Ott in Grass’s *Diary of a Snail* (1972).²⁹ Grass’s Ott is a teacher of German and biology in the 1930s who maintains friendships with Jews and even continues to buy his vegetables from Jewish merchants despite the protestations of the anti-Semitic market women. As implied by Sebald, the risk here is that such a figure would absolve a German readership from individual guilt or responsibility by providing the sense that had they been in such a situation, they too would have been kind and empathetic rather than perpetrators of atrocities. Sebald writes that Ott is meant to remind the reader that there were “good Germans” and that goodness still had a place in the face of mass

27. W. G. Sebald, “Jean Améry und Primo Levi,” *Über Jean Améry*, ed. Irene Heidelberger-Leonard (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1990) 115. For a specific exploration of this question in relation to the Group 47, see Klaus Briegleb, *Missachtung und Tabu: eine Streitschrift zur Frage: “Wie antisemitisch war die Gruppe 47?”* (Berlin: Philo, 2003).

28. Sebald, “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea,” *On the Natural History of Destruction* 125.

29. Note that Julian Preece links Sebald’s criticism of Grass to that of Angress/Klüger, putting the two on the same side of a debate about stereotypes in Grass’s work. See Julian Preece, “Günter Grass, His Jews and Their Critics: From Klüger and Gilman to Sebald and Praver,” *Jews in German Literature since 1945: German-Jewish Literature?* ed. Pól O’Dochartaigh (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 609–24.

extermination. Sebald describes this kindly figure as a “wish-figure of the author” [*Wunschfigur des Autors*], adding that characters such as these were ones “in and through whom Germany sought healing” in the postwar years.³⁰

As Sebald assesses in his reading of *Diary of a Snail*, the figure of the “good German” who would have “known better” than his evil fellow countrymen and shown proper empathy with the Jews continued well beyond the silence immediately following the war. The “good German” as a figure in literature found incarnations in the 1970s and arguably continues to do so. David Brenner points out that Bernhard Schlink’s novel *The Reader* (1995), a work that depicts a German character of the postwar generation (Michael Berg, who bears a resemblance to the work’s author) coming to an understanding of what made his former lover a perpetrator of Nazi war crimes, is still rooted in the paradigm of “the good German.” Brenner notes: “The protagonist of *The Reader* functions neither as a straw-man nor unreliable narrator. Instead, he emerges from his significant developmental struggles as a flawed, but heroic man — an instantiation of a new type of post-Shoah ‘decent German.’” He then adds: “To be sure, we have all been exposed at least since *Schindler’s List* (the 1993 film) to ‘good Germans’ of the first (i.e. the wartime) generation. But when we are asked by Schlink in *The Reader* to identify with the ‘second generation,’ is this not a plea for ‘normalization’?”³¹ The problem with *The Reader*, in other words, is that it extends the problematic tradition of the “good German,” the very figure Sebald identified and criticized in Grass’s work.

Sebald’s critique of the good German draws from an established tradition of social-psychological analysis. In the famous study *The Inability to Mourn*, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich concluded that during

30. W. G. Sebald, “Konstruktionen der Trauer: Zu Günter Grass *Tagebuch einer Schnecke* und Wolfgang Hildesheimer *Tynset*,” *Der Deutschunterricht* 35.5 (1983): 39. This same essay recently appeared in translation as “Constructs of Mourning: Günter Grass and Wolfgang Hildesheimer” in *Campo Santo*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2005) 97–124.

31. David Brenner, “Transgressing the Holocaust Taboo: ‘Working Through’ Schlink’s *Der Vorleser* as a Reading of Klüger’s *Weiter leben* (And Still Alive).” This was the text of a presentation made at the meeting of the Modern Language Association in 2002. For background on Brenner’s comment regarding *Schindler’s List* and the image of the good German, see the collection of essays and commentaries “Der gute Deutsche”: *Dokumente zur Diskussion um Steven Spielbergs “Schindlers Liste” in Deutschland*, ed. Christoph Weiß (St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 1995).

the period following the war, out of psychic necessity the Germans rewrote the past as follows: "We made many sacrifices, suffered the war, and were discriminated against for a long time afterward; yet we were innocent since everything that is now held against us we did under evil orders." The Mitscherlichs then observed: "This strengthens the feeling of being oneself the victim of evil forces; first the evil Jews, then the evil Nazis, and finally the evil Russians. In each instance the evil is externalized. It is sought for on the outside, and it strikes one from the outside."³² In a similar though less psychoanalytically inflected assessment of this phenomenon as it manifested itself in post-war literature, Ruth Klüger summarized: "The evidence would suggest that Germans don't know anymore what their victims were like and that they have the strongest blocks against imagining what they might have been like. The crudest way of dealing with the past is to present the Germans as victims."³³ This line of argument asserts that the "good Germans" are signified not through a feeling of empathy with the Jews but through laying claim to having been themselves victimized. The trauma is not confronted but emulated, which inhibits the important project of working through the past. Positions such as Klüger's bring the ideas outlined in the Mitscherlichs' argument to bear on literature, and virtually identical positions have been taken concerning Schlink's novel.

Before turning to a discussion of Sebald's *The Emigrants*, and in the interest of advancing this line of criticism, it is worth noting how at the very end of *The Reader*, the deceased Nazi perpetrator Hanna leaves behind the wish that Michael, her former lover, bring what remains of her money to the last survivor of the massacre in which she participated and for which she was much later imprisoned. The survivor rejects the gift, but Michael promises to give the money to a Jewish society that fights illiteracy. The choice is particularly meaningful insofar as Hanna herself was illiterate, a fact that mitigates her status as perpetrator. In his reading of the ending of the book, J. J. Long has argued that "by yoking together illiteracy and Jewishness, Hanna as well as her victim become the indirect recipients of the former's inheritance in a

32. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, trans. Beverley R. Placzek (New York: Grove, 1975) 46. This is a translation of *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (Munich: Piper, 1967).

33. Angress 231.

kind of belated reconciliation."³⁴ Not only is Hanna's status mitigated, but Michael also acquires the aura of the victim in that Hanna reproduced with him aspects of the relationship she had had with the Jewish prisoners who were in her care. As Bartov points out, *The Reader* is a novel in which the protagonist "becomes the Jewish victim, both by virtue of his association with Hanna as the reader, and thanks to the grace of his late birth, which prevented him from becoming a perpetrator."³⁵ Upon arguing that Michael *becomes* the Jewish victim, Bartov is not identifying the good German as such because he or she was the misunderstood German victim of German violence and oppression (as the Mitscherlichs would have asserted), but that he or she has become "good" by putting him or herself in the place of the Jews. As I will argue, Sebald's writing is dependent on a similar narrative disposition, a version of the very one that he himself critiqued. For the purpose of adding to the taxonomy of the concept of the good German, one can say that in this new instantiation, the good German atones for the lack of empathy diagnosed by Bartov and Klüger through empathizing with Jewish victims, to the point that the narrator or protagonist risks becoming one with, and even mistaking himself for, those very victims.

Sebald's *The Emigrants* shares some significant ground with Schlink's novel in that they both speak to Germans of the same generation. Sebald, on whom the figure of his narrator is clearly based, was born in 1944, the same year as Michael Berg, the protagonist of *The Reader*. Not to be unfair to Sebald, however, one should note that his work is distinguished from Schlink's by virtue of its layered and more refined narrative complexity. Michael Berg tells his own story, while Sebald's narratives continuously thematize what it means to read, hear, or bear witness to the stories of survivors. There is, to be sure, this

34. See J. J. Long, "Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* and Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Bruchstücke*: Best-Selling Responses to the Holocaust," *German Language Literature Today: International and Popular?* (Bern: Lang, 2000) 57. On the topic of forgiveness, in both literature and life, see the exchange in *PMLA* 117.2 (2002), especially Ruth Klüger's "Forgiving and Remembering" (311-13). Having written her own Holocaust memoir, Klüger says that she is often asked whether or not she can forgive Germans for what happened, but that this question simply raises a subsequent and unanswerable series of questions. See Klüger, "Forgiving" (311).

35. Omer Bartov, "Germany as Victim" *New German Critique* 80 (2000): 33-34. For a reaction from the German press to this line of criticism, see Volker Hage's commentary in which he seeks to defend recent works by Grass, Schneider, Schlink, and others from such "politically correct" attacks. See "Unter Generalverdacht," *Der Spiegel* 15 (8 Apr. 2002): 178-81.

formal distinction, although there is some similarity between the two as well. As in *The Reader*, Sebald's empathetic, second-generation German narrator experiences the plights of his story's victims so much that he takes on their grief as if it were his own. *The Emigrants* is made up of four novellas that could each stand alone, although they are linked thematically through the motifs of Judaism, the Holocaust, and emigration, as well as through the consistent presence of the narrator. The first and fourth of its figures are Jews, the second is one-quarter Jewish, and the third is likely not Jewish, but his professional life and his love life are deeply entangled with Jewish émigrés. The text is accompanied by a profusion of photographs, notes, and other "realia" that quite intentionally raise questions about the status of the narratives as fiction.³⁶ The photographs and documents appear without captions. Some of them relate directly to elements within the text, and others appear entirely unrelated to the scenes they illustrate; some are pulled unadulterated from newspapers, and others are taken from the author's personal collection. The book's employment of such documentation, coupled with the ubiquity of the self-reflective narrator, make the novel one that continually grapples with the hermeneutic issue of how a German of the postwar generation, not a survivor but an observer who appears on the scene after the fact, confronts the problematic past.

Sebald leaves open the possibility that the author and the narrator are one and the same. Although the narrator at no point says "I, Max Sebald," Sebald is for all practical purposes identical with this unnamed narrator. Like his narrative ego, Sebald is an emigrant; born in Wertach, Germany, he moved to England permanently in 1970 and took on the first name "Max" because he found that English speakers had too much difficulty with his given names, Winfried Georg. He has given extratextual confirmation that many details in *The Emigrants* come from his own experiences and those of people he has encountered. The narrator travels around "looking for somewhere to live" and feels at home

36. As to this question, when Sebald was asked, "Are these real stories?" he responded: "Essentially, yes, with some small changes." But on the other hand, when asked specifically about those changes, Sebald reveals that more than half of the details are manufactured. Much of the realia such as notes and diaries have been forged, and the characters are often syntheses of relatives, people he had known, and people he had read about. From their conversation, his interviewer concludes, as did the publisher, that *The Emigrants* is fiction, but then adds that it remains "solidly grounded in the real world." See Carole Angier, "Who Is W. G. Sebald?" *Jewish Quarterly* 164 (1996-97): 13-14.

nowhere. This para-Sebaldian figure, then, is one of his emigrants, and through him Sebald redoubles his identification with his subjects, the text's many exiles. We know that he shares the experience of homelessness with his characters and identifies with their nomadic ways. His encounters with his melancholy acquaintances are at times accidental and at other times doggedly pursued. The apparently accidental meetings may be evidence of the fact that, as the narrator says, emigrants "tend to seek out their own kind."³⁷ Because they are "of the same kind," the narrator's voice and experiences blend with those of the other characters.

Throughout *The Emigrants* the narrator is present, repeatedly voicing an awareness of his own inability to present his subjects' backgrounds and stories "as they actually were." Such authorial anxieties have become typical of Holocaust narratives insofar as they speak to the intention of the narrator to avow genuinely his or her own interpretive deformation of the facts. In order to accomplish this legitimate goal, the voice of the *scriptor* or scribe often implicitly or explicitly appears within the works (as in the cases of both Edmond Jabès's *The Book of Questions* as well as *Maus*, to name two paradigmatic examples).³⁸ The narrator indeed appears explicitly in *The Emigrants*, imposing himself between the reader and the characters through the persistent use of reported speech rather than quotation (a stylistic peculiarity that finds

37. W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1996) 67, a translation of *Die Augewanderten* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994). All subsequent references will be to the English translation and will appear parenthetically.

38. In an essay discussed at length by both White and Lang, Roland Barthes describes this modernist technique as the employment of the "middle voice." See Roland Barthes, "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989) 18–19. In this mode, subjectivity is presented as a mere effect of an event that takes place beyond the boundaries of the subject itself. Lang summarizes: "The conclusion drawn by [Barthes's] theory . . . according to which the writer does not represent or reflect on an object but 'writes-himself' — is directed specifically against the theory of writing that fosters the dilemma of the Holocaust writer." Lang objects, therefore, to the simple approbation accorded to this technique, noting that "if the reference of discourse is now internalized in the writer himself, it is reasonable to wonder what happens to the event — or subsequently, the fact — that would otherwise have existed independently as the reference of discourse. The most evident possibility here, of course, is that event and fact, together with the words of discourse, should simply be bracketed, suspended: that the facts of history should be denied their usual privilege of reference. This possibility, obviously, is more than an exercise in abstraction; it means that the items otherwise assumed to constitute history are liable to suspension — and this, by implication, means for Holocaust writing a suspension or bracketing of the events of the Nazi genocide itself." See Lang, *Act and Idea* 107.

antecedents in Thomas Bernhard's work), but Sebald minimizes his presence. Here, as in his later work, *Austerlitz*, the narrator functions almost as a psychoanalyst, volunteering little and allowing his figures to open up to him.³⁹ Were the work not ultimately a well-orchestrated work of fiction, it would appear that Sebald's intention is to make room for testimony, or to allow the victims to speak for themselves.

During the course of the work's fourth section, the narrator's voice becomes almost entirely submerged, and much of the reported speech shifts into firsthand accounts.⁴⁰ That section introduces the story of the narrator's encounters with a painter, Max Aurach, who lives in Manchester and whose family died in 1941.⁴¹ We learn that earlier, at age fifteen, Aurach had left Germany for England, and that was the last time he saw his parents, who were deported to Riga, where they were killed. At one point Max offers the memoirs of his grandmother to the curious narrator, who is so engrossed by the details of her life in Kissingen that he decides to go there himself. He visits the Jewish cemetery, where he is particularly touched by the symbol of a writer's feather quill on one gravestone, and he then experiences a strong rush of identification, as though he had been a family member of the buried Jewish author, Friederike Halbleib. He writes: "I imagined her pen in hand, all by herself, bent with bated breath over her work; and now, as I write these lines, it feels as if I had lost her, and as if I could not get over the loss despite the many years that have passed since her departure" (224, emphasis in the original). This type of de-differentiation foregrounds the loss as his own, one that is experienced by a kind and attentive second-generation German.⁴²

Sebald was not unaware of the hermeneutic problems involved in representing the stories of victims, and indeed made an effort to account

39. Discussed in J. J. Long's "History, Narrative, and Photography in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*," *Modern Language Review* (Jan. 2003). See esp. 122.

40. See esp. 188–91.

41. The key character in this section was based in part of the painter Frank Auerbach and is named Max Ferber in the English translation because Auerbach protested that the story and name were too similar to his own. Sebald explained: "I changed his name from the German version, where it was quite close to the original, to something completely different. He doesn't want any publicity whatsoever and I respect that. On the other hand he is a public figure, and I got all my information about him from published sources." Angier, "Who Is W. G. Sebald?" 14. I will here refer to the character by the name used in the German edition, Max Aurach.

42. See Stuart Taberner's observations on this in "German Nostalgia? Remembering German-Jewish Life in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*," *Germanic Review* 79.3 (2004): esp. 185–86.

for them. In his essay "Jean Améry und Primo Levi," he demonstrated his familiarity with the challenges posed by Levi's claims, writing, "The shame of survival of which Levi speaks is for him the indication that that group, the survivors, are not the true witnesses, and cannot be, even through the most expressive descent into the dark past."⁴³ To take Levi's argument seriously — as Sebald strives to do — anyone who would figure the Holocaust through literature or history has to mark the lacuna created by that initial, now absent witness; the one that cannot speak for him or herself. In other words, by carefully reporting the narratives of witnesses to the victims and their families without ever speaking of the violence that lurks in the background, Sebald in still greater measure recalls that there is an original horror about which the narrator would like to speak but cannot. By underscoring the impossibility of representing atrocity, the narrative voice calls to mind the finite nature of this regress: in the case of Holocaust writing, the act of figuration is not endlessly self-referential. To borrow a metaphor from visual studies, direct and indirect Holocaust figuration must avoid producing a "Droste Effect," a term that refers to a Dutch advertisement for Droste hot chocolate in which a nurse is seen presenting the consumer with a tray upon which a container of Droste hot chocolate sits. In this well-known advertisement, the container of hot chocolate mix bears an image of that same nurse holding a tray on which the container yet again appears. It is a *mise en abîme*, the appearance of an image contained within its image, continuing endlessly, creating the illusion that the representation repeats infinitely. If one could walk through the representations from one to the next, the image would not alter or diminish; there is no real, original image from which the viewer withdraws or toward which he moves. The advertisement was artificial in the first place; it was a simulacrum. When brought to the question of Holocaust representation, however, the logic of the simulacrum risks altering and diminishing the fact of the original violence. One cannot simply pull away from that first image and move on to the next and the next. In order for a Holocaust narrator to be circumspect, he or she has to consider the unalterably real yet unrepresentable experience at the origin of testimony. Berel Lang, in the famous sentence that gives his book its title, notes, "If there is a literal *fact* it is here, in the act and idea of the Nazi genocide."⁴⁴ According to Lang, to take the moral risks of inappropriate Holocaust figuration

43. Sebald, "Jean Améry und Primo Levi" 121.

44. Lang, *Act and Idea* 157–58.

seriously, one has to consider the genocide as a real, literal event, not as part of an endlessly repeatable simulation.

The question of witnessing raised by Levi is centered on what he saw, and Sebald follows from this by elaborating issues of witness and testimony through metaphors of vision and its loss. For Sebald, in both *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, the unspeakable point of origin for such testimony takes the form of a visual problem — a blind spot, or a horror that cannot be visualized lying beneath the narrative's tragic surface. Just as the witness cannot speak from inside of death, neither can he see from inside of it. In *The Emigrants*, the narrator's subjects are not the direct victims of Nazi violence, and they therefore speak from the position of those who intuit the existence of a horror that they cannot bring themselves to imagine. This incomprehension is experienced as a visual occlusion, one that is enacted or internalized by those whose stories Sebald recounts. They experience, in other words, a limit on visualization around these atrocities. Sebald's negotiation of this ultimate space of blindness is signaled by literal blindness at various points in his work. The character Paul Bereyter, for example, whose suicide dominates the second chapter of *The Emigrants*, develops serious cataracts decades after the war, at age seventy-two, and we learn that "all he could see were fragmented or shattered images" (59). The narrator brings the reader around to Paul's story because Paul was once his schoolteacher. Paul was, according to his friend Lucy Landau, relieved of his teaching position in 1935 because of the restrictions against Jews, and it was in this way that he learned he was one-quarter Jewish. Under the stress of anti-Semitic attacks, his father died, the family business was sold for next to nothing, and his mother died shortly thereafter. Because of the disruptions in his life, his blindness appears to be something willful. Ultimately the rage stemming from the loss of his parents and the fatherland with which he had comfortably identified is turned inward and becomes cataracts.

Marking the beginning of that chapter is the epigraph "There is mist that no eye can dispel."⁴⁵ The dominant motif of this section is occluded vision: not only Paul's blindness and eventual suicide but also the fact that there is much that the narrator himself cannot see. The narrator

45. Although not cited, the epigraph "Manche Nebelflecken löset kein Auge auf" is borrowed from Jean Paul's *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, course 3, section 14, "The Instinct or Material of Genius." I am grateful to Jan Cueppens for pointing this out to me.

remembers that Paul, a sensitive teacher, seemed to know his students well, but those students had no idea what was going on inside him. He describes attempts to visualize Paul's life, seeing him lying outdoors, skating in winter, and ultimately lying stretched out on the railroad tracks in the process of committing suicide. He writes, "Such endeavors to imagine his life and death did not, as I had to admit, bring me any closer to Paul, except at best for brief emotional moments of the kind that seemed presumptuous to me." He then adds, "It is in order to avoid this sort of wrongful trespass that I have written down what I know of Paul Bereyter" (29). In the curious contradiction that he has written down what he knows about Paul in order not to be presumptuous, he forces an inquiry into whether the outsider is ultimately prohibited from accessing the history of the victim. For this reason, perhaps, he has taken up writing about him; because visualization is itself presumptuous, he writes what he should not see. On the whole, his reflections may prompt one to wonder about the section's epigraph, the assertion that there is mist that *no* eye can dispel. If this is the case, is everyone at an equal remove from Nazi atrocities, both the German narrator and his suicidal protagonist? Does everyone suffer equally from the same blindness? In connection with the narrative, the epigraph seems to imply that the narrator's own limitations (on comprehending or visualizing the Holocaust, for example) mirror those of Paul Bereyter.

The theme of obscured sight is taken up or repeated in the fourth chapter of *The Emigrants*, a study of the painter Max Aurach. In part, he is a double of the painter Frank Auerbach, but he is also someone whose obsession with dust, debris, and cultural remains evokes the image of Walter Benjamin; even his name recalls the concept of the "aura," Benjamin's most widely known theoretical construction. This chapter begins with the narrator wandering through Manchester, giving a more poetic though no less grim account of the filthy industrial atmosphere than that in Friedrich Engels's 1844 essay, and roaming through the ruins of the Jewish quarter, where now only wind blows through the smashed windows and doors. He stumbles into an artist's studio and there begins his conversations with Aurach, who is struggling to depict his inner images on the canvas. The narrator describes him as a man who "felt closer to dust than to light, air or water" (160); Aurach's technique of "constantly erasing what he had drawn with a woolen rag already heavy with charcoal," he recounts, "really amounted to nothing

but a steady production of dust" (162). The dust not only recalls the ash production of the crematoria but also, following Benjamin, recalls the debris of industrial culture, the fragility of the social order, and its impending collapse.⁴⁶ Aurach does not stand outside of this process, as its witness, but is part of it. He tries to reproduce the inner images of his own dusty life on the canvas, but the "steady production of dust" underscores how his vision is ultimately obscured. The artist sits daily in a café named Wadi Halfa, which is Sudanese for "dusty nowhere," and is always sure to sit in front of a particular fresco that depicts a desert scene, for which, the narrator explains, the painter lacked the necessary skill. The narrator continues, "The perspective he had chosen was a difficult one, as a result of which both the human figures and the beasts of burden were horribly distorted, so that, if you half shut your eyes, the scene looked like a mirage, quivering in the heat and light" (164). He then observes, "Especially on days when Aurach had been working in charcoal, and the fine powder dust had given his skin a metallic sheen, he seemed to have just emerged from the desert scene, or to belong in it" (164). Adjacent to Aurach's reflections on Manchester, Sebald includes a picture of the city's smokestacks, which not only have come to signify metonymically the concentration camps but also produce a smog that veils the visual evidence of industrial and industrialized violence.

Aurach's perpetual struggle to see clearly parallels the text's other evocations of literal blindness. From an article about Aurach, the narrator learns about the painter's background and his parents' deportation. Accompanying the article, there is a picture of Aurach, and the narrator stared into the painter's dark eye "looking sideways out of a photograph that accompanied the text" and "tried, at least with hindsight, to understand what inhibitions or weariness there had been on his part that had kept [their] conversations away from his origins" (178). In the photograph of Aurach's eye that Sebald reproduces for the reader, there is a conspicuous white spot.⁴⁷ Though the spot is only a light reflection, and

46. Susan Buck-Morss summarizes this Benjaminian perspective, writing: "The debris of industrial culture teaches us not the necessity of submitting to historical catastrophe, but the fragility of the social order that tells us this catastrophe is necessary. The crumbling of the monuments that were built to signify the immorality of civilization becomes proof, rather, of its transiency." *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT P, 1989) 170.

47. This eye appears only in the German edition because it is a cropped photograph of Frank Auerbach's eye. It has been left out of the translation for the same reason that the name was changed from Aurach to Ferber. For the photograph, see the German edition (265). Similarly photographed eyes can be found throughout W. G. Sebald and Jan Peter Tripp's joint work "*Unerzählt*": *33 Texte und 33 Radierungen* (Munich: Hanser, 2003).

in some measure inevitable in such photographs, the presence of a disruption on the surface of the eye recalls Paul Bereyter's cataracts and, as Sebald seems to suggest, the limit the Holocaust imposes on the abyss of representation: the original point at which horrors were witnessed can be acknowledged, but not represented.

As was the case with Bereyter, the narrator again becomes temporarily afflicted with poor sight. He takes a train back to Manchester, and the photograph of the view from the train, a landscape obscured by fog, looks like a desert at night (179). On the almost empty horizon, it is difficult to separate the dark sky from the shadowed earth, and the landscape might as well be war-torn. One recalls that Aurach is a double not only of the narrator, but of the author himself. Like Sebald, Aurach was born in Germany, moved to England, and even shares Sebald's own adopted first name, Max. That Sebald's narrator sees the world, or fails to see the world, through a veil similar to that dusty one through which Aurach struggles to see reaffirms the close proximity between him and his subject.⁴⁸

A further scene with Aurach underscores the theme of limitations imposed on sight. At one point in their conversations, Aurach remembers that during a summer trip to Würzburg, he and his uncle visited the palace and stared up at Tiepolo's enormous ceiling fresco. Aurach explains that he had recalled that day a couple of months earlier, when he stumbled across a reproduction of it in a book. On that day, he found himself transfixed by the image, and "for a whole evening, [he] sat looking at those pictures with a magnifying glass, trying to see further and further into them" (185). The actual "Staircase Fresco" to which Sebald calls our attention cannot be viewed at a single glance but was instead intended for the sequential viewing of eighteenth-century visitors as they were led up the stairs. It depicts four continents: America, which comes first because it is the frontier, complete with exoticized natives astride monstrous alligators, followed by equally fantastic depictions of Africa and Asia, until the observer reaches Europe, the sovereign among continents and apparently the one to which the others pay homage. Tiepolo's world, however, is not made to be seen as a whole. It was instead one whose proportions and vanishing points align with the

48. For a studied comparison between the figures of Aurach and the Narrator, see Katja Garloff, "The Emigrant as Witness: W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*," *German Quarterly* 77.1 (2004): 80-81.

varied positions of the observer.⁴⁹ In a self-reflective gesture, one that mirrors Sebald's own self-understanding as an artist who communicates a story that exceeds his comprehension, Tiepolo painted himself into a corner of his own depiction of Europe. Upon close inspection, his eye in this self-portrait shows a tiny yet vivid white spot, similar to the one that occupies Aurach's eye.⁵⁰ At first blush, it seems that Tiepolo's work means to imply that vision is a question of perspective, but it ultimately draws attention to the boundaries on the vision of authors and artists; ones that, in Sebald's works, liken attempts at artistic expression to attempts on the part of victims to confront their traumas.

Sebald continued these reflections on the "blind spot" in his final work, *Austerlitz*, a novel about a man named Jacques Austerlitz who was placed on the *Kindertransport* in Prague by his Jewish mother, Agáta Austerlitzová, in 1939, when he was four years old, and ended up living with a Calvinist preacher in Wales under the name Dafydd Elias.⁵¹ The narrative documents how its protagonist gradually uncovers lost memories from his childhood and reports them one by one to the narrator. Austerlitz's state of mind is reported through his German narrator, who once again is unnamed, though we have enough information that his relative proximity to Sebald is not in doubt. Not only is

49. For a thorough reading of Tiepolo's painting, see Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall, *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1994). They write, "Tiepolo's ceiling can never be seen as a whole. There are photographs taken with a wide-angle lens which seem to present the ensemble. They are useful as maps of Tiepolo's world and heaven but . . . they are a view of the object no one — not even Tiepolo — ever at any moment has seen" (115).

50. The detail can be found in Alpers and Baxandall. Notably, Tiepolo comes up elsewhere in Sebald's work. In a passage that underscores Sebald's self-identification with Tiepolo, the narrator of *Vertigo* — who is once again virtually identical to Sebald himself — takes a trip home in the work's fourth, biographical section. There he visits a chapel and is reminded of Tiepolo's labors as he looks upon that chapel's pitiful pictures. He remembers Tiepolo, working to finish the Würzburger fresco despite intense physical pain. See W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1999) 180.

51. Regarding the historical basis for the character of Austerlitz, in an interview with Maya Jaggi, Sebald has explained the source of the quasi-fictional Jacques Austerlitz. He said: "Behind Austerlitz hide two or three, or perhaps three-and-a-half, real persons. One is a colleague of mine and another is a person about whom I happened to see a Channel 4 documentary by sheer chance. I was captivated by the tale of an apparently English woman [Susie Bechhofer] who, as it transpired, had come to this country with her twin sister and been brought up in a Welsh Calvinist household. One of the twins died and the surviving twin never really knew that her origins were in a Munich orphanage. The story struck home; it cast my mind back to Munich, the nearest big city to where I grew up, so I could relate to the horror and distress." See "The Last Word," *The Guardian* 21 Dec. 2001.

Sebald like the narrator, but the narrator is like Austerlitz.⁵² We are given to understand that both may be experiencing some manner of post-traumatic stress disorder. The narrator finds himself, for example, traveling to Antwerp for reasons that “were never entirely clear,” and occasionally his mind wanders back to his own unhappy childhood. As he thinks about such things, “black striations” appear before his eyes, and his thoughts suddenly turn to Jean Améry’s descriptions of the death camps and of torture under the Nazis. In this way he becomes the work’s first victim of blindness — the first to encounter blind spots. He is not a victim of the Holocaust, yet he finds himself losing his eyesight, as Bereyter did. Sebald’s narrator describes something that sounds very much like cataracts. He explains: “I noticed, looking up an address in the telephone book, that the sight in my right eye had almost entirely disappeared overnight, so to speak. Even when I glanced up from the page open in front of me and turned my gaze on the framed photographs on the wall, all my right eye could see was a row of dark shapes curiously distorted above and below. . . . At the same time I kept feeling as if I could see as clearly as ever on the edge of my field of vision, and had only to look sideways to rid myself of what I took at first for a merely hysterical weakness in my eyesight.”⁵³ A doctor ultimately diagnoses the problem: a bubble formed on the macula of the eye, “rather like a blister under wallpaper.” Once again Sebald acknowledges the presence of something that remains unvisualized, as though ordinary, day-to-day sight were itself like wallpaper repressing hidden gaps and fissures that disrupt the surface of the world in their need for recognition. The narrator’s condition is analogous to that of Austerlitz, who suffers from repeated seizures wherein he loses his sense of space and time. In their suffering, the two figures are closer to one another even than the narrator of *The Emigrants* was to his subjects; here, the narrator is not simply the empathetic listener who identifies with the victim but one that can be described as a *doppelgänger* as well.

At the novel’s end, after recovering some of his memories, Austerlitz locates a photograph of his mother, Agáta, who most likely died in Theresienstadt. In the photo she appears as a disembodied, spectral face

52. In one notable exchange, Austerlitz recalls an ivory-colored porcelain sculpture in a storefront window in Terezín. In the accompanying photograph the faint, ghostlike image reflected in the window is likely Sebald himself. Because the photo is captionless, like all the others, Sebald is not suggesting that he *is* Austerlitz, only that he is inserting himself into Austerlitz’s story. See W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001) 197.

53. W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* 34–35.

emerging from the shadows. This photograph is one of the work's most haunting ones, and in many ways it resembles the famous Holocaust photographs of the French photographer Christian Boltanski. Boltanski's well-known installation *Altar to Lycée Chases* presents the faces of a graduating class of students at that Jewish school in Vienna, many of whom died in the Holocaust. In the installation, Boltanski first isolated and rephotographed the students' faces, then enlarged these "second-generation" photographs, subjecting them to the direct and harsh light of small lamps and giving them a ghostly appearance. Andrea Liss praises the work, observing that they "taunt the viewer with uncertainties." Liss is interested in the way Boltanski's work resists empathy by presenting the dark and alienating physiognomies of the dead. She writes: "Boltanski's installations refute the strategy of facile identification between the viewer and the memory of the pictured. The artist rejects such a deception of intimacy and the assimilation of the other . . . in favor of a strategy that thwarts that closeness. . . . Through the impalpability of the face, Boltanski's photographic monuments mourn in respect for the impossibility of mourning the trauma."⁵⁴ The same could be said of the uncanny, frozen image of the mother at the end of *Austerlitz*. Like Boltanski's images, its intention is to deny viewers the pretense that they could truly comprehend what the victims have undergone.

At the same time, though, Liss is compelled to underscore that this intention is by no means absolutely fulfilled. Captionless photos such as these carry with them inevitable ambiguities and are prone to the risks referred to by Lang, Hilberg, and others.⁵⁵ Liss points out that seen in

54. Andrea Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998) 43.

55. J. J. Long discusses the lack of captions in *The Emigrants*, and points out that "the photographs in themselves contain no hint about how they are to be read. Language forms part of the textual or institutional framing of the photograph and is thus largely responsible for constructing its meaning. But the transaction between language and photography in *Die Ausgewanderten* is not merely a one-way affair, for photographs are implicated in the process of storytelling. They frequently function as traces of a past that cannot be understood without the supplement of narrative. . . . a narrative has to be read into a photograph by an individual subject within a concrete historical and ideological context." See "History, Narrative, and Photography" 120. Symptomatic of the proliferation of possible readings associated with Sebald's use of images is an observation made by Heinz Schumacher, for whom there is nothing that these ambiguous photographs do not do. Schumacher writes that the pictures included in the text "serve on the one hand to affirm the narrative, awakening the appearance of authenticity, and they also possess occasionally an ornamental function; on the other hand, they frequently take on the role of unsettling the reader, allowing him to see through the story as fiction, or they offer new chains of association, which point beyond the plot of the individual text." See Heinz Schumacher, "Aufklärung. Auschwitz. Auslöschung. Eine Annäherung an Paul Breyer," *Mitteilungen über Max: Marginalien zu W. G. Sebald*, ed. Gerhard Köpf (Oberhausen: K. M. Laufen, 1998) 61 (my translation).

relation to the “austerity and historicity” of the Tower of Faces installation at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Boltanski’s more obsessive arrangements seem almost kitsch.” Liss adds, “In fact, [Boltanski] prides himself on his manipulation of pathos. . . . [He] animates both of these *risky* realms, the sentimental and the inauthentic — precisely to implicate the ease with which the viewer gets trapped in a universalized quasi-ethereal and quasi-somber nostalgia.”⁵⁶ Boltanski’s photographs, which deliberately avoid the representation of atrocity, horror, and genocide and which work through implication, gestures, and the sense that they mildly unsettle the viewers, can potentially be misunderstood and viewed more as sentimental than provocative. There is no guarantee that such images avoid the issues that accompany the awakening of empathy in viewers or readers. Indeed, despite its productive capacity to shed light on the stories of victims, empathy can be problematic. At the end of *Austerlitz*, as one looks closer at the somber image of Agáta, who died in the camps and is therefore a true witness in the sense implied by Levi, it becomes evident that her right eye (the one on the reader’s left) has a telltale white spot. This mark may be understood to symbolize a lacuna in the eye of the true witness, the same lacuna that has appeared throughout his work. Sebald’s epigraph, “There is a mist that no eye can dispel,” runs the risk of being applied uniformly to victims, witnesses, and novelists alike.

Despite his attempts to let victims speak for themselves — to allow their voices to emerge — Sebald’s work at times blurs important differences between the speaker and the listener. In her review of Sebald’s “On the Natural History of Destruction,” Daphne Merkin remarks that in the world according to Sebald, “we are all more or less Jews bound for slaughter,” seeing Sebald as a spokesman for the universal truth of the human condition. She writes that his greatness lies in “his mining of a primal existential despair that goes beyond the merely personal to suggest something endemic about the condition of being human,” adding, “I think of him as someone who was on good terms with darkness — a solitary watchman who stayed awake while the rest of us dreamed, the better to acquaint himself with the mad dogs that bark in the night and threaten to disturb the sleep of the world.”⁵⁷ However, recognition

56. Liss 49 (my emphasis).

57. Daphne Merkin, “‘On the Natural History of Destruction’: Cordoning Off the Past,” *New York Times Book Review* 6 Apr. 2003: 14.

of the problems and the difficulties entailed in making the past present should lead critics to the conclusion that not everyone, including Jews, Germans, children of survivors, and Hollywood directors, is likely to commemorate and remember the Holocaust with one international and transhistorical voice. Rather than pretend that such differences do not exist, the standards used to evaluate the efficacy of these responses — standards that facilitate dialogue and critical analysis — benefit from attending to national and historical contexts.

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