Millions of women are still being bullied to get in touch with their inner housewife. What is different about the current puritanical hygiene movement is its highly individualistic and resolutely apolitical focus. Detoxification is popular in health spas throughout the United States and Europe. Toxins have to be "flushed" from the "system." The term "B.O." was promoted in the 1950s during the huge advertising campaign for underarm deodorants, and it has become an obsession for many. The daily shower is practically a religious ritual. Unlike the fears held by nineteenth-century reformers, male and female, who strove to impose new hygienic regimes on entire classes and nations, today's fear of the polluting aspects of modern society has led to a retreat back to the individual. With only a few exceptions (the environmental movement being the most prominent), people focus on trying to "clean up" the body corporeal rather than the body politic. Cleanliness now entails a systematic education and control of the body: detailed and disciplined care for the "clean self." Its meaning has changed so much over time that I am left only with the certitude that cleaning is a never-ending project with ever-shifting goals, which will always get women's hands dirty. ■

THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

W. G. Sebald's melancholy art

By Evelyn Toynton

Discussed in this essay:

The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald, edited by Lynne Sharon Schwartz. Seven Stories Press. 173 pages. $23.95.

In the five years between the first appearance of W. G. Sebald's books in English and the car crash that killed him at the age of fifty-seven, his work was often described in terms we might have thought had vanished from the critical lexicon altogether. The word "sublime" kept recurring—"mysteriously sublime," in James Wood's formulation—not as a mere adjective of extravagant praise but in precise reference to the tenor of his writing. The deployment of "genius" was perhaps less anachronistic: "a . . . masterwork of singular genius," "a work of obvious genius." But when we read of Sebald's "high seriousness," of his "utmost moral seriousness," when we find Susan Sontag referring to his "noble literary enterprise"—phrases plucked, seemingly, from nineteenth-century discourse—it is difficult to imagine any of his contemporaries being praised in those terms. Nor can one think of many other writers whose death would have been so intensely mourned. "The loss feels unbearable," wrote Sontag, a sentiment expressed over and over in eulogies registering an extraordinary degree of grief. It was as though Sebald had become a repository of people's hopes for writing itself, resurrecting the belief, in John Banville's words, that "greatness in literature is still possible."

Evelyn Toynton's last review for Harper's Magazine, *"Waugh vs. Waugh," appeared in the August 2007 issue.*

Yet no one would claim that Sebald's work is in and of itself consoling. A pervasive melancholy, alleviated only by moments of acute sorrow on the one hand and slightly macabre humor on the other, a sense of moving through a death-in-life accompanied by specters from the past, emanates from the pages of each of the four works of fiction—or fiction/memoir/travelogue, or fiction/travel/history, for so the first two were called—that he published, initially in German and later in English, in the eleven years before his death.

Thus, in *The Emigrants*, the narrator—all Sebald's narrators being, like Sebald himself, a German-born academic living in England—describes the work processes of a painter who was sent to England from Germany as a young boy, before World War II broke out, and whose Jewish parents never managed to join him:

> He felt closer to dust, he said, than to light, air, and water. . . . He never felt more at home than in places where things remained . . . muted under the gray, velvety sinter left when matter dissolved, little by little, into nothingness . . . that process of drawing and shading on the thick, leathery paper, as well as the concomitant business of constantly erasing what he had drawn with a woolen rag already heavy with charcoal, really amounted to nothing but a steady production of dust, which never ceased except at night. . . . If he then decided that the portrait was done, not so much because he was convinced that it was finished as through sheer exhaustion, an onlooker might well feel that it had evolved from a long lineage of gray, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper.

But if this mournful invocation of the dead is quintessential Sebald, no less typical is a description, in the same section of *The Emigrants*, of a faintly ridiculous gadget, very common in the England of the '60s, with which the narrator's Manchester landlady (Manchester being the city where Sebald himself lived on first coming to England) supplies him on his arrival:

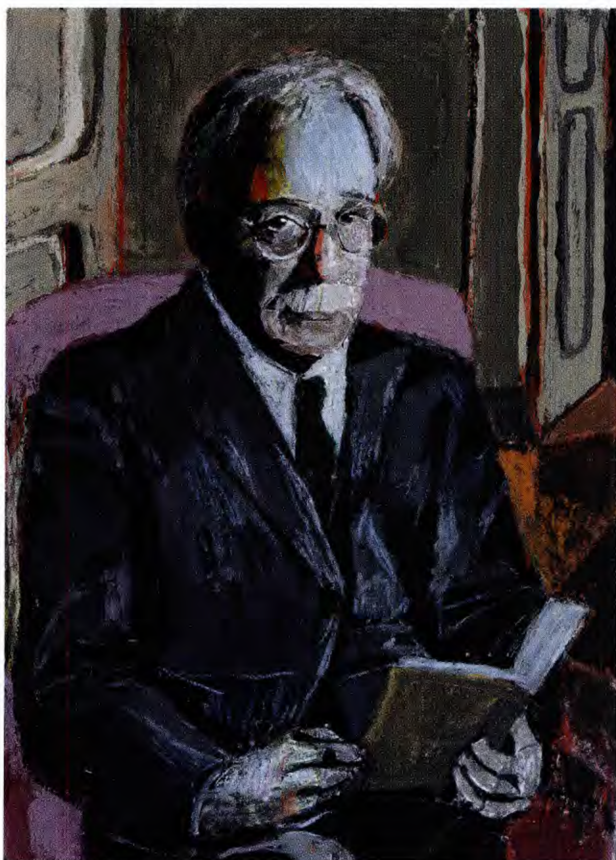
> She explained that it was called a *teasmaid*, and was both an alarm clock and a tea-making machine. When I made tea and the steam rose from it, the shiny stainless steel contraption on its ivory-colored metal base looked like a miniature power plant, and the dial of the clock, as I soon found as dusk fell, glowed a phosphorescent lime green that I was familiar with from childhood and which I had always felt afforded me an unaccountable protection at night. That may be why it has often seemed, when I have thought back to those early days in Manchester, as if the tea maker brought to my

> room by Mrs Irlam, by Gracie—you must call me Gracie, she said—as if it was that weird and serviceable gadget, with its nocturnal glow, its muted morning bubbling, and its mere presence by day, that kept me holding on to life at a time when I felt a deep sense of isolation in which I might well have become completely submerged. Very useful, these are, said Gracie as she showed me how to operate the teas-maid that November afternoon, and she was right.

There is wry comedy not only in the elaborate gravity of this description but in the way the last line resonates: "Very useful, these are, said Gracie" (a classic lower-middle-class English locution), meaning it will wake him up, it will make him tea in the mornings; "and she was right" refers to the fact that it holds her new lodger to life, a use she could never have foreseen or imagined. The lugubriousness that some people complain of in Sebald is constantly leavened by this kind of deadpan self-mockery—except when his subject matter rules it out.

And then there it is, the teas-maid itself, squatting on the page in a black-and-white photograph. All Sebald's books are full of such illustrations, many of them dark and smudged and blurry (though, as it happens, the photo of the teas-maid is not one of these). We get snapshots of ticket stubs from the narrator's journeys, of paintings and trees and moldering stately homes described in the text; there are images of birds and dingy streets and crumbling towers and also photographs depicting—or ostensibly depicting—the people he is writing about.

In the commentary on Sebald's work that began appearing almost as soon as the work itself did, these photographs have been called "emblematic of the return of traumatic memory in the form of fragmentary visions" and "part of his aesthetic strategy to 'redeem' history." Sebald himself, however, once gave a much simpler explanation of why they are there:



> . . . the photographs allow the narrator, as it were, to legitimize the story that he tells. I think this has always been a concern in realist fiction, and this is a form of realist fiction. . . . In the nineteenth century, certainly in the German tradition, the author is always at pains to say, well, this is where I got it from, I found this manuscript on top of a cupboard in this or that town in such and such a house . . . to give his whole approach an air of legitimacy.

Sebald is talking to Eleanor Wachtel, a Canadian writer and broadcaster, whose interview with him has now been published in a collection entitled *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald.* Edited by Lynne Sharon Schwartz, who also provides an introduction, the book contains a number of such interviews, as well as essays about Sebald's work by Charles Simic, Tim Parks, and others. Sebald's remark to Wachtel is perhaps less enlightening about his use of photographs—it's almost as though, with the artist's instinctive cunning, he is disavowing responsibility for the complex emotions they arouse—than about his relationship to nineteenth-century German fiction, a topic he reverts to repeatedly in these interviews.

When *Bookworm* host Michael Silverblatt questions him about his literary antecedents, for example, Sebald talks about the influence of Adalbert Stifter and Gottfried Keller, writers of artfully simple, disquieting tales of rural tragedies in their homelands of Austria and Switzerland: what Sebald, who grew up in a small village in Bavaria, calls "the periphery of the German speaking lands, where I also come from." Critics have more often compared Sebald to Proust or Kafka; Sebald himself acknowledges his "great debt of gratitude" to the Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard, whose reliance on obsessive first-person monologues obviously served as an inspiration (although the mocking, furiously scornful tone of Bernhard's rants seems very far from Sebald's elegiac tenderness). But it's the "very, very high intensity" of Stifter's and Keller's writing, the precedence in their work "of the carefully composed page of prose over the mechanisms of the novel such as dominated fiction writing elsewhere, in France and in England, notably, at that time," that, he tells Silverblatt, has "always been very close" to him.

As with the writers he cites, the "very, very high intensity" of Sebald's prose is not a matter of decorative elaboration, art-for-art's-sake purple passages; rather, it is grounded in a type of metaphysical brooding that seems distinctively German in character. (If Keller's and Stifter's mix of unease and yearning can transmogrify, in Sebald, into horror, that is where the twentieth century enters in.) In the nineteenth century, the period when Romantic and idealist philosophy had its great flowering in Germany, the novel, too, became a vehicle for philosophical speculation, taking on a uniquely "reflective, spiritually questing, poetic register," as one scholar has put it. Despite his meticulous observations of physical

Illustration by Andrea Ventura

scenes and objects, we always get a sense, with Sebald, of the immanence of some other, only dimly perceived world beyond this one: "intuitively we know that we shall never be able to fathom the imponderables that govern our course through life." It is this, as much as his old-fashioned diction and his long, somberly beautiful sentences, that connects Sebald to the nineteenth-century German tradition.

Still, in *The Emergence of Memory*, as in most considerations of his work, it is Sebald's relationship to a later period of German history that is most frequently alluded to. Questioned by his interviewers about the Nazi era, he describes the "conspiracy of silence" that prevailed while he was growing up after the war; he is convinced that his parents, who had been supporters of Hitler, never spoke about what had happened even when they were alone. "But then pressure eventually saw to it that in schools the subject would be raised," he tells the writer Joseph Cuomo. "It was usually done in the form of documentary films which were shown to us without comment. So, you know, it was a sunny June afternoon, and you would see one of those liberation of Dachau or Belsen films, and then you would go and play football." He talks, too, about his discomfort, later on, as a student at Freiburg University—a sense of some falseness he could not exactly pin down. Eventually, he realized that all his professors had received their doctorates in the 1930s and early '40s; he even hunted up their dissertations: "If you . . . looked at what their Ph.D.'s were about, your hair stood on end." When Wachtel asks him about his feelings for Germany, Sebald begins, "Well, I know it's my country," and winds up by saying, "in a sense it's not my country. But because of its peculiar history and the bad dive that history took in this century . . . because of that I feel you can't simply abdicate and say, well, it's nothing to do with me. I have inherited that backpack and I have to carry it whether I like it or not."

Three of the four stories that make up *The Emigrants* are about Jews or half-Jews, the other being about a German gentile who goes to America and works for a wealthy Jewish family there. But the Holocaust is present only as a shadow that darkens all their lives. (As André Aciman has said, "Supremely tactful, Sebald never brings up the Holocaust. The reader, meanwhile, thinks of nothing else.") *Austerlitz*, the last of Sebald's books to appear before his death, and the only one to take the form of a conventional novel—with many Sebaldian digressions—deals with it more directly. The title character was sent to England on the Kindertransports from Prague at such an early age that, unlike the painter in *The Emigrants*, he remembered nothing about his past. Adopted by a dour Welsh pastor and his wife who renamed him Dafydd Elias and never spoke about his antecedents, he went to Oxford and became an architectural historian. The narrator meets him first in the late 1960s, in a railway station in Antwerp (the Sebaldian narrator is always wandering somewhere or other in the hopes of shaking off some vague melancholy that afflicts him). Austerlitz talks learnedly, discursively, like Sebald himself, about the madness and dark history of the grandiose fortifications around them, and of many similar monuments to power. "Outsize buildings," he says, "cast the shadow of their own destruction before them." Following a series of accidental encounters over a period of thirty years, Austerlitz and the narrator meet once again, in Liverpool Street Station this time, where Austerlitz tells his story: After a breakdown that wore away his resistance to "the emergence of memory," after the failure of his one real hope for love, after realizing that he has never really inhabited his life, he set out to learn his history. He has been to Prague, where he met his old nurse, and learned the fate of his parents insofar as she knew it; he has been to Theresienstadt, where his mother died. In some sense, then, he has reclaimed his own identity. But this is not a book about a healing journey into the past, a therapeutic process; it is an elegy for broken lives. Austerlitz, like the dispossessed figures in *The Emigrants*, remains an almost spectral being, haunting his solitary life like a ghost.

Other German writers have written about the Holocaust, Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass chief among them (though *The Tin Drum*, the World War II novel for which Grass remains best known, hardly refers to the Jews at all). Yet there always seems to be something coy and evasive in their fictions. In Böll's sentimentalized *Group Portrait with Lady* and Grass's *From the Diary of a Snail*, the focus is on innocent souls who looked on helplessly, or heroic figures who tried in vain to help. (Sebald once wrote a scathing essay about Alfred Andersch, a now almost forgotten novelist, once highly acclaimed in Germany, whose fictional alter ego nobly protects his Jewish beloved, though Andersch had actually divorced his Jewish wife to protect himself.) In Bernard Schlink's *The Reader*, one of the few German novels to feature a "perpetrator"—a concentration-camp guard—an equally coy strategy is employed: She took on the job, we learn, because she could not read and was too ashamed to acknowledge the fact. Almost always the focus is on the Germans themselves; the victims are largely an abstraction.

It is of course a delicate matter, the whole vexed question of how a German gentile should write about such things. Sebald talks about it in several interviews in *The Emergence of Memory*: "I've always felt it was necessary above all to write about the history of persecution . . . the attempt, well nigh achieved, to eradicate a whole people. And I was . . . at the same time conscious that it's practically impossible. . . . This is why the main scenes of horror are never directly addressed. . . . The only way in which one can approach these things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially." Even in *Austerlitz*, he does not take us right into the nightmare of the camps; instead he evokes the doomed inmates' suffering by cataloguing the grotesque trades they were forced to learn, by describing a propaganda film they were made to take part in, by enumerating the pitiful relics left behind in a junk shop in the town. And when the narrator visits Breendonk, a fort used by the Germans as a prison and labor camp, he tells us, "I could not imagine how the prisoners . . . could have pushed those barrows full of heavy detritus over the sun-baked clay of the ground, furrowed by ruts as hard as stone . . . it was impossible to picture them bracing themselves against the weight until their hearts nearly burst, or think of the over-

seer beating them about the head with the handle of a shovel when they could not move forward." Supremely tactful, as Aciman says, Sebald acknowledges his inability fully to imagine such suffering and at the same time makes it harrowingly vivid. He goes on to say,

> . . . when I finally entered the fort itself and glanced . . . into the so-called mess of the SS guards with its scrubbed tables and benches, its bulging stove and the various adages neatly painted on its walls in Gothic lettering, I could well imagine the sight of the good fathers and dutiful sons from Vilsbiburg and Fuhlsbüttel, from the Black Forest and the Bavarian Alps, sitting here when they came off duty to play cards or write letters to their loved ones at home. After all, I had lived among them until my twentieth year.

In contrast to the abstract rhetoric Grass used to castigate his fellow Germans for their Nazi past (before it turned out he had a bit of a past, too)—"For the first time in the history of mankind the systematic destruction of whole sections of the population was planned, organized and carried out. Since then our courts have convicted only the executants of criminal acts"—Sebald implicates himself in the catastrophe, taking on the emotional burden of his country's history.

Winfried Georg Maximilian Sebald was born in 1944—in "the same month when Kafka's sister was deported to Auschwitz," as he once told an interviewer from the *Guardian*. Many members of his generation would deny that the Third Reich's crimes have anything to do with them: a recent poll showed that 62 percent of Germans are "sick of being reminded about the Holocaust." Nor would they be likely to refer, as he does, to "the concentration camps erected by my compatriots" or a woman "murdered by my compatriots in Auschwitz"; we would expect to hear them say "by the Nazis." The fact that Sebald took on that burden seems like a moral choice. The fact that he writes about twentieth-century German crimes in the grave, stately cadences and "spiritually questing . . . register" of a nineteenth-century German seems both to heighten the horror of what he is invoking and to reclaim a tradition that has been buried by that horror. (One might say

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NOTES FOR "SCORE SHEET"

*Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov. Note: * indicates an anagram.*

The unclued words are the characters in *Peter and the Wolf* and (Down) the instruments representing them. The circled letters, rearranged, spell PROKOFIEV.

ACROSS: 1. thro(b)-at; 7. *; 14. pun; 18. Ga's-h(ead); 19. *; 21. i(Lear)s-1(rev.); 24. a(thletics)-choo(choo); 27. hidden; 29. two mngs; 31. Flo-U-NYC*; 32. ge(r)m; 33. hidden; 35. rev.; 39. sh(R.)ub; 41. art-[h](c)ritic; 44. rot(rev.)-ii; 46. *; 47. *; 48. *; 50. *; 51. s(we)den*.

DOWN: 2. h-Ave.; 4. hidden; 5. tra, pun; 8. and-E(rev.); 9. rev.; 11. checker-board; 12. het*-aria(rev.); 13. era-to; 15. pun; 22. *; 25. cur(t); 26. *; 28. homophone; 30. tan-tric(k); 36. *; 37. *; 38. *; 39. *; 42. s(GI)r, (rev.); 43. homophone.

CORRECTION: *In the solution diagram to the February 2008 puzzle, 38A should have read* "TORN," *not* "TORY." *We regret the error.*

that he is doing this for the Germans themselves, restoring to them a strain of German Romanticism that was perverted and corrupted by the Nazis.) And finally, the fact that he so profoundly mourns for what happened, mourns both the absent dead and the scarred survivors as individual presences rather than an abstract lesson about man's inhumanity to man, may be the fullest "attempt at restitution"—a phrase from one of his lectures—any German has yet made.

It would be reductive, however, to see him as a "Holocaust writer," or to suggest that his horror and pity are reserved for the fascists and their victims alone. In *The Rings of Saturn*, a literally rambling account of a walking tour in East Anglia that Lynne Sharon Schwartz, among others, considers Sebald's greatest book, his subject, again, is cruelty and annihilation (or, in his words, "scenes of destruction, mutilation, desecration, starvation, conflagration, and freezing cold"). But here it is the natural and animal world that is being destroyed; here it is not the Jews but millions of black slaves being starved and beaten and worked to death in the Belgian Congo. The Nazis appear again, helping the Croatian fascists carry out a particularly brutal massacre of 700,000 Serbs, Jews, and Bosnians; the camps are invoked in a brief account of an aristocratic British soldier who, after participating in the liberation of Belsen, retreats into solitude and silence. But then there are the other British soldiers, of the nineteenth century, who with their French counterparts engage in the ferocious and senseless destruction of the "magic garden of Yuan Ming Yuan near Peking, with its countless palaces, pavilions, covered walks, fantastic arbours, temples and towers." Everyone, it seems, is participating in the savagery, inflicting those "marks of pain which... trace countless fine lines through history." We are even asked to consider the suffering of herrings: "the natural historians sought consolation in the idea that . . . the peculiar physiology of the fish left them free of the fear and pains that rack the bodies and souls of higher animals in their death throes. But the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels."

In some ways his most diffuse, abstract book—though he humanizes it with accounts of Conrad's tragic childhood, of Edward FitzGerald's piteous decline, of Chateaubriand's star-crossed romance with an English vicar's daughter during his exile in Norfolk—*The Rings of Saturn* is also the purest expression of Sebald's theme: the pervasiveness of sorrow and failure, mankind's legacy of devastated places and devastated lives. Yet even here his sense of the ridiculous is constantly in play, and we get many passages of sly humor, as well as many glimpses of marvels and mysteries that serve as a counterpoint to the prevailing melancholy.

To provide what she calls "a skeptical correlative to what might otherwise be a gush of nearly unqualified enthusiasm," Schwartz has included a piece by the British poet and translator Michael Hofmann, who accuses Sebald of a lack of "humor, charm, grace, touch," of a "chilly extravagance, a numbed obsessiveness." He also waxes scornful about Sebald's "steals" from Kafka—a description of blank-faced messengers in elaborate jackets and an image of dark, over-furnished culs-de-sac in the Brussels Palace of Justice. Yet one could argue that the passages are a deliberate homage to Kafka rather than a form of plagiarism, just as the "numbed obsessiveness" Hofmann cites has been characterized by the English poet Rod Mengham as "an imaginative meticulousness otherwise known as love." Although it would be possible to refute the idea of Sebald's greatness—it must be admitted that at times his connections are strained; his constant avowals of disbelief and incomprehension and amazement begin to sound like a stylistic tic; his prose can become mannered, repetitive, even boring (though I believe this is sometimes now accounted a virtue)—Hofmann fails to construct a persuasive case, relying as he does on disdainful assertions rather than rigorous arguments. Schwartz might have done better to include Ferdinand Mount's *Spectator* review of one of Sebald's posthumously published essay collections, in which Mount points out that Sebald's poetically expressed thoughts are sometimes pretty banal. Or she could have reprinted André Aciman's damning review of *The Rings of Saturn* from *The New York Review of Books*, which even revokes much of Aciman's earlier praise for *The Emigrants* in *Commentary*. "Sebald's view of recursion is interesting as an idea only," Aciman writes. "It is conveyed intellectually, not aesthetically; it is not experienced... not worked into the form of the book."

Besides, it seems odd that Schwartz calls Hofmann's "the one dissenting voice" in the collection when there is in fact a much more eloquent dissent here. In her piece on another posthumous collection of Sebald's essays, Ruth Franklin, while calling him "unique among German writers in his understanding of the catastrophe that befell the European Jews," argues that "Sebald's work has always presented suffering without its cause, as merely a part of the great pattern of pain that defines the human condition.... Sebald's patterning amounts to an aestheticizing of catastrophe." (James Wood, on the other hand, cites Sebald's "patterning" approvingly—which isn't to say that either he or Franklin is wrong.)

Franklin makes this claim in the course of berating Sebald for a "grandiose" statement from his essay on the Allied bombing of German cities, about the Germans listening to music after the war: "And the question must also be permitted as to whether their breasts did not swell with the perverse pride that no one in the history of mankind on earth had been so played on and had withstood so much as the Germans." But the passage is surely sarcastic: those swelling breasts, that pompous phrase "the history of mankind on earth," come across as a bitter parody of Germanic bombast. Sebald's sense of the Germans' moral culpability is so consistently present in his work, both in his narrator's voice ("how I wished... that I belonged to a different nation") and in the voices of certain characters whose authority the reader is not encouraged to doubt (as when we are told that Austerlitz's father "did not in any way believe that the German people had been driven into their misfortune; rather, in his view, they had entirely re-created themselves in this perverse form, engendered by every individual's wishful thinking"), that it would seem almost impossible to regard him as a moral relativist.

Continued on page 102

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REVIEWS

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So the issue is really whether Sebald was just an enchanter, whether the beauty of his prose (though Hofmann denies that such beauty exists) serves to shroud the unspeakable reality in a sort of misty haze—an "evanescence," as Franklin calls it—that "merely substitutes an artistic image for a blank space," thereby denying the harsh truth of oblivion. "The blankness," Franklin says, "is closer to the truth. When it seeks to do the work of memory, art may be a source of illusion." No one, I think, would disagree with that statement. But at this distance in time, illusion may be the one substitute for memory that is left to us—the only way, however shadowy and imperfect, that the dead can be rescued from total oblivion. Would Franklin really insist, as Wittgenstein might say, that Sebald should have remained silent? He cannot, as he himself acknowledges, capture the hell in and of itself, or make its victims fully present to us; yet "we also have appointments to keep in the past . . . and must go there in search of people and places who have some connection with us on the far side of time." And so, because to forget would be even worse, he conjures up ghosts, absences; he pieces together fragments of a lost world. Above all, he brings before us the desolation of the so-called survivors: their tragedy, being known to him as that of the murdered can never really be, is his true subject. He does not, as another writer might, attempt to present it from the inside. But this, too, seems like a mark of respect—a refusal to colonize or cannibalize their suffering—rather than a failure of compassion.

At one point Sebald says to Eleanor Wachtel:

> There is a great deal of mental anguish in the world, and some of it we see and some of it we try to deal with. . . . But people usually suffer in silence or in privacy. And certainly when it's a question of mental anguish, not all of it, only very little of it is ever revealed. We live, as it were, unaware; those of us who are spared this live unaware of the fact that there are these huge mental asylums everywhere and that there is a fluctuating part of the population which is forever wandering through them.

This reminds me of another nineteenth-century novelist, an English one this time. In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot writes: "That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence." It might be said of Sebald that he listened, as closely as anyone could, to that roar. The great achievement of his work is that he makes it audible to his readers while still honoring the silence. ■

April Index Sources

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