

Mental Travel and Memory Mapping in Sebald's Work

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Jonathan White,
"Mental Travel and Memory Mapping in Sebald's Narratives"
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Abstract: In his article "Mental Travel and Memory Mapping in Sebald's Narratives" Jonathan White analyses several of the journeys — real and by means of the mind — by which W.G. Sebald follows what he once called "invisible connections that determine our lives." These connections are often although not always between the living and the dead "on the far side of time." In reaction against what Sebald interpreted as a conspiracy of silence in his youth over the destruction that Germany had caused and that which had been done in turn to it, Sebald attempted to reconstruct worlds and people destroyed or changed irremediably. Sometimes photographs are used in a form of communication akin to that which occurs between the living and the dead in Dante's *Commedia*. White suggests that Sebald's modes of real and mental travel are not only highly productive, but also capable of being followed by others in positive ways. Sebald's writing and the journeys of differing kind undertaken in it teach us negotiable routes into the uncanny.

Jonathan WHITE

Mental Travel and Memory Mapping in Sebald's Narratives

Much new writing has asked bold questions about memory, questions not even Marcel Proust, profound student of mental recollection that he was, had raised for consideration in the multiple modes of recall used in his search for time past. Memory mapping has become an important aspect of a new field of study, psychogeography. I focus in this article on a writer who, in the words of one of his alter-ego characters, has speculated that we "have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak" (*Austerlitz* 360). It is precisely his ways of traveling to keep such appointments "on the far side of time" which are of utmost importance in the work of W.G. Sebald, because they have lessons for us which are essentially new in kind. One of the claims I make is that Sebald taught us, as few other writers old or new have, why we might feel morally drawn to studying lineaments of what he termed "the nervature of past life" in his first main literary work, the poem *After Nature* (81). The real travels that Sebald undertakes cause — and are supplemented by — much mental travel to places of recent world history that haunt him. As Susan Sontag declared, "Journeys of one kind or another are at the heart of all Sebald's narratives: the narrator's own peregrinations, and the lives, all in some way displaced, that the narrator evokes" (3). In Sebald's texts, the focus is mostly a dark one, upon destructive epochs such as that of World War II. Sontag was early in recognizing what distinguished Sebald's kind of travel: "whereas the traditional tour brought one close to nature, here it measures degrees of devastation" (3).

Proust and his characters, in their tracings of the "nervature of past life," stay in France, mostly in Paris, or the environs of one main rural location, Combray. Sebald's journeys and those of his characters are to places further afield, if only because the writer left his native Germany in 1966 and lived in voluntary exile thereafter almost all of his life in England until his death in a car crash near his Norwich home in 2001. Sebald's techniques of mental travel and association have been likened to those of the seventeenth-century English writer who greatly inspired him and whom he writes about directly, Sir Thomas Browne. As in the case of Browne (a much earlier Norwich resident) we are aware in Sebald not so much of traditional characters as of the tracing of a series of preoccupations, often involving lives from the past. As paradigmatic for Sebald as travel is, there is nevertheless a chicken and egg question to be posed as to whether it was real travel that stimulated mental travel on his part or the other way around. Both real and mental traveling are intimate aspects of his writing: indeed, it is virtually impossible to disentangle the two and they are for the most part bound up with one another. Take the following passage from Sebald's book *The Rings of Saturn* as exemplary of how literal travel and speculative mental enquiry fuse together in his writing:

No matter whether one is flying over Newfoundland or the sea of lights that stretches from Boston to Philadelphia after nightfall, over the Arabian deserts which gleam like mother-of-pearl, over the Ruhr or the city of Frankfurt, it is as though there were no people, only the things they have made and in which they are hiding. One sees the places where they live and the roads that link them, one sees the smoke rising from their houses and factories, one sees the vehicles in which they sit, but one sees not the people themselves. And yet they are present everywhere on the face of the earth, extending their dominion by the hour, moving around the honeycombs of towering buildings and tied into networks of a complexity that goes far beyond the power of any one individual to imagine, from the thousands of hoists and winches that once worked the South African diamond mines to the floors of today's stock and commodity exchanges, through which the global tides of information flow without cease. If we view ourselves from a great height, it is frightening to realize how little we know about our species, our purpose and our end, I thought, as we crossed the coastline and flew out over the jelly-green sea. (91-92)

In teaching us "how little we know of our species, our purpose and our end," flying so high provides an important lesson. But in point of fact airplane travel as a mode of experiencing the world is rare in Sebald's writing. I cannot recall another instance where it figures importantly. And no wonder, for flying sets added distance from the main object of study, which is always for Sebald "people themselves" and the "honeycombs" and "networks" of their civilization — the "things they have made," especially architecturally, and the perpetual acts of natural destruction or deliberate human devastation that carry people and cultures away. It is a premise of all of Sebald's writing that those

"honeycombs" and "networks" of humankind are (before they eventually come to dust) "of a complexity that goes far beyond the power of any one individual to imagine." Such being the case, it is very much the challenge of that unfathomable complexity that drove Sebald to write. For the reader, it is certainly aspects of the complexity – if never its entirety, for that would be impossible – that are being revealed, in uncommon and intensive ways. Much of what I go on to say will attempt to fathom how and why this is so.

Sebald was born in Germany in 1944, the year before the end of the Second World War, and grew up in a land which had been considerably destroyed by the Allies, in particular its great cities. Much of Sebald's writing, even that which charts real journeys along the East Anglian coastline, as in *The Rings of Saturn*, hearkens back in mental travel to the land of his birth. Meditations on English towns and cities, and sites of munitions testing such as on Orford Ness along the East Anglian coastline, raise for Sebald sharp questions about the Germany of his birth; both the destruction that it caused and that which was wrecked upon it. Sebald himself grew up in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the rural Algäu, a lower Alpine area. He attests in *The Emigrants* his ignorance during his youth of German metropolises: "ever since I had once visited Munich I had felt nothing to be so unambiguously linked to the word city as the presence of heaps of rubble, fire-scorched walls, and the gaps of windows through which one could see the vacant air" (30). In thought if not always in reality, the writer and his largely alter-ego characters such as Austerlitz journey back in time and place; to haunting realities of the Holocaust and to the destruction of Germany itself by the devastations of aerial fire-bombing. Sebald seeks to come to terms with the enormity of such human destruction in one text after another, each a different attempt to focus the theme.

For Sebald, destruction is as important as its counterpart, creation. But it has had far less study because it is a subject people often prefer to avoid, even repress, as he claimed Germans of the generation before his repressed their traumatic (and in many cases self-compromising) recent memories of the war. In Sebald's childhood and adolescence in Germany there had been, by his reckoning, a "conspiracy of silence" about the immediately preceding years of nazism. As he once said in an interview, "if you imagine that you have gone through such a dreadful phase of history, implicated in it in the most horrendous way, you might think that there might be an urge to talk about it" (*The Emergence of Memory* 44). On the contrary the "taboo zone" that his own parents and so many other Germans observed was not penetrated, even during Sebald's university years of the early 1960s. According to his various written and oral accounts, the conspiracy of silence had dominated the German nation, including its universities, throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Sebald himself, by contrast, wanted to know the worst, and therefore felt impelled to study the largely repressed history that had led into and shaped the Germany in which he had grown up. As he frequently recounted – indeed entire works by Sebald are founded upon this principle – knowledge of what had happened in the only slightly earlier epoch of the Third Reich had to be accessed through painstaking study. His various texts constitute journeys on his part, mainly by highly oblique mental and spatial routes, "in search of places and people ... on the far side of time" (*Austerlitz* 360); in his case, on the far side of the moment in his infancy when the war finally ended. The journeys are taken not simply because of some special personal connection that such people and places often held with himself – although they indeed did – but because the whole of recent European history (affecting the lives of virtually all living on that continent, and well beyond it too) is overdetermined by such "connection." The travels that he took did not need to be – in fact mostly were not – in Germany itself. On the contrary, even in his adopted East Anglia, in a relatively quiet county such as Suffolk, which is the setting for meditations in his masterpiece *The Rings of Saturn*, he experiences (as he notes on the very first page) a "paralysing horror ... when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place" (3). Such "traces of destruction" evident in Suffolk are intricately interconnected with the more extensive history of destruction in Europe, including in particular his native Germany.

In spite of repression on the part of the senior generation, Sebald lived his own intellectual and literary life, once he had left Germany behind (after his years as a student in Freiburg and in Switzerland), dominated by a condition very like that which Marianne Hirsch has called postmemory. In Hirsch's sense of it, "postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful,

often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 103). Sebald's words for the ways in which postmemory (even if he does not call it by that term) operated upon his adult existence are as follows: "to this day, when I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war I feel as if I were a child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience had cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge" (*On the History* 71). Although the drive to understand the horrors Sebald did not directly experience was a personal one, there was a far larger moral quest — because one which concerned nothing less than the underlying history of recent Europe — behind his journeys beyond the border year of 1945 (so nearly his own birth year). Sebald's studies had made him bold in relation to such metaphysical border zones. For instance, his eponymous character Austerlitz reports that reading Balzac's short novel *Le colonel Chabert* — a story in which a hero of the Napoleonic wars, believed dead on the fields of the battle of Eylau, comes back to Paris twelve years later in post-Napoleonic times to claim his property and his wife (now happily married to another) — "reinforced the suspicion I had always entertained that the border between life and death is less impermeable than we commonly think" (*Austerlitz* 395).

We need to focus still more precisely upon how Sebald attends to appointments between the living and the dead. What have been the more successful access routes for Sebald or his characters across that border between life and death, if, as claimed here by Austerlitz, it is "less impermeable than we commonly think"? In answer, consider first the matter of places for such appointments (I shall go on to study people involved in them shortly). In his East Anglian home Sebald was aware, as befitted a psychogeographer before the term was coined, that particular places he visited (e.g., on what the German subtitle of *The Rings of Saturn* termed his *English Pilgrimage*) had a deeper human history, indeed were sometimes even haunted by it. Think of the many airfields used during the Second World War on the flat landscapes of Suffolk and Norfolk. Here is what his narrating persona on that English pilgrimage, a lightly veiled version of himself, has to say about such locations: "Grass has grown over the runways, and the dilapidated control towers, bunkers and corrugated iron huts stand in an often eerie landscape where you sense the dead souls of the men who never came back from their missions, and of those who perished in the vast fires" (*The Rings of Saturn* 77). Note that the dead referred to are on both sides of the conflict; the pilots who never returned to their landing fields, but also the unnumbered dead in the "vast fires" caused by such Allied bombers over German cities. The grass of the airfields mentioned here is like a cover over the history in question, as in a cemetery where actual bodies lie beneath the earth's crust. In memory terms, these airfields do actually perform the function of a kind a burial ground of the history in question. The very dilapidation of their control towers, bunkers and corrugated iron huts functions — as postmodern ruins often do — as a metonym for something not named, namely the concentration camps that are the unspoken matter of Nazism in the given meditation.

In an interview with Sebald only days before he passed away (in the same month of December 2001), Michael Silverblatt spoke well in his questions to the writer about the way there is often the "referent" of the concentration camp behind Sebald's use of other locations — nocturama, train stations, panopticon-style fortresses, penitentiaries and insane asylums; or, as here, airfields for strategic bombing of Germany. Any such place may become what Silverblatt called a metaphor for talking about a "missing term." As Sebald himself confirmed in his replies to Silverblatt, "the main scenes of horror are never directly addressed" because direct images of them "militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things" (*The Emergence of Memory* 79-80). My own point is that in journeying to the disused airfields of East Anglia and spending time in them, Sebald was thinking about horrors that included the death camps as well as firestorms lit by the bombing of Dresden, Hamburg, Berlin and other cities. The airfields were not themselves the scenes of such horror, but nonetheless they were one cog in the war's extensive industry of killing. Dwelling upon their ruins helped Sebald (as it unquestionably helps us in turn as readers) achieve appointment with souls of the dead, from those years of Europe in conflagration. "Souls," you will note, is the spiritual terminology that Sebald himself used in the quotation under investigation.

More could be said about Sebald's use of places, but I feel that I have made my key points for the sake of the present argument. What about appointments needing to be kept in the past with

representative people? Is there in Sebald's writing some method, or what the character Austerlitz boldly called "laws governing our return to the past" (261)? How does Sebald, or how do his various journeying characters, search for and make contact with "people who have some connection with us on the far side of time"? In tackling this challenging question we should not underestimate the role that photographs play in his texts. Analysing their function may not provide the only answer, but certainly helps in our understanding, because of the ways in which such photographs function as sites of rendezvous between past and present; even sometimes, we can be so bold as to say, between the dead and the living. How does this work?

There is a key moment in *Austerlitz* when the eponymous character has made contact in the early 1990s with Vera, his first nanny in Prague, now an elderly woman. In her presence he begins to recall scenes from the time before he was put on his *kindertransport* across Europe in 1939, which had taken him by stages from Prague to London. Austerlitz had previously suppressed memory of the almost idyllically happy time of his first childhood, because it was so irretrievable during his gloomy subsequent upbringing by a childless Welsh couple. Vera has lived for decades in the same dwelling in Prague vacated by the young boy Jacob and shortly afterwards vacated also by his mother, when the latter was rounded up and taken along with other Jews to the concentration camp in Theresienstadt. Vera has never expected to see again the boy whom she dearly loved but who had departed so many decades before. So already this section of the novel is working in an elemental sense, as a coming together of people who have connection on a far side of time. Austerlitz and Vera are both (almost miraculously it would seem) still alive and able to re-forge the bond of former years, even if this time as sentient and bereaved adults; bereaved because of the lost others, and because of the long-ago years of their common past that are irretrievable except through falterings of memory. Not for nothing is it from out of the leaves of that novel by Balzac, *Le Colonel Chabert* — symbol for Sebald in this part of his own novel of resurrection from the dead — that Vera produces two momentous photographs. One of them is of Austerlitz's parents after their marriage in 1935, before the Nazi race laws had begun to affect their lives in serious ways. The other is of the young boy Jacob, dressed as a pageboy, all in white; a photograph reproduced on the cover of Sebald's novel. At this point in Sebald's text we have two different, equally amazing meditations, the first of them from Vera on the role old photographs play more generally in our lives, the other from Austerlitz on what this specific photograph of himself when younger seems to be saying to him. Let us tackle the two moments sequentially. Vera's point is about the "mysterious quality peculiar to such photographs when they surface from oblivion": "One has the impression, she said, of something stirring in them, as if one caught small sighs of despair, *gémissements de désespoir* was her expression, said Austerlitz, as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives" (*Austerlitz* 182).

By this amazing reckoning photographs are alive. They quicken in us what we may have forgotten but that they have not. They are alive because, in the profound shock to our thinking selves that they cause, they communicate forward to us, who may well be (in this specific case are) survivors from the time that they record. They are undeniable proof of what has changed irreversibly, possibly through the death of those recorded, as in the case of Austerlitz's parents. Vera's idea here (one suspects it is Sebald's own main theory about photographs) is reminiscent of communication between the living and the dead in Dante, with the exception that for the most part in Dante's *Commedia* specific spirits actually speak with him in words, whereas here the photographs only seem to emit (as many souls in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* also do) "sighs of despair." Vera's account of gazing at photographs involves a notion of two-way communication. As we gaze at them, the photographs gaze at us in their turn, in wordless regret, "as if one caught small sighs of despair" coming from them. All-important is the way such photographs record former lives, our own earlier selves included, and significantly also those of non-survivors. When the photographs were taken, both those who are still alive at the later time when they are looked at, as well as those no longer alive, existed in connection with one another. In the present time, as we gaze at the photographs, their seeming "small sighs of despair" express the irretrievability of the dead intervening years, as well as the disappearance of those people now literally dead whom the images record. There is, paradoxically, communication between the living and the

dead, but also its lack: and the paradox itself is the fullest groundwork of the despair that emotionally monopolizes such moments, as they surface "from oblivion."

Sebald himself in interview took a position similar to the one held by his character Vera that I have just been analyzing. Here is what he says: "I have always had a thing about old photographs. The older pictures have an uncanny ability of suggesting that there is another world where the departed are. A black-and-white photograph is a document of an absence, and is almost curiously metaphysical. I have always hoarded them. They represent a sense of otherness. The figures in photographs have been muted, and they stare out at you as if they are asking for a chance to say something. They have become part of my working process, part of the way in which I declare my position ... I don't think one can now attempt to write a book which hasn't got that notion of relativity in it" (Green <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/feature.html?ie=UTF8&docId=21586>>). For Sebald's term "relativity" at the end of that quotation, we must understand communication between the living and the dead; or at the very least an interrelating of them in narrative – a placing of them in moral, social, cultural and even personal relationship. There is, it must be admitted, as with Vera, the philosophical guardedness of the words "as if" – "The figures in photographs have been muted, and they stare out at you *as if* they are asking for a chance to say something" (emphasis added). Two things are of note. First, Dante too uses this same expression in Italian at points in the *Commedia* – in Italian the two words are *come se* – to help maintain the reader's belief that what he is suggesting by way of communication between his living self and the spirits of the dead actually occurred (there is, for instance, a very important philosophical "as if" used in Dante's poetic commentary on the "visible speech" produced by certain bas-relief sculptings of persons along the ledge of the proud in *Purgatorio*). Second, in Sebald's accounting here in interview, just as in Vera's in his novel *Austerlitz*, the figures in the photographs do not actually speak; however because of their "uncanny ability" to suggest "another world where the departed are" they none the less "stare out at you" from the photographs, as if "asking for a chance to say something." As in Vera's account, their communications with the still living who gaze at them are all the more filled with pathos for being "muted."

Austerlitz's meditation on the pageboy Jacob, his earlier self in the specific photograph (also used as the cover of Sebald's novel), is of a somewhat different cast than Vera's more general account of the effect of old photographs. Looking at the image of his boy-self repeatedly, Austerlitz confesses "I always felt the piercing, inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues, who was waiting in the grey light of dawn on the empty field for me to accept the challenge and avert the misfortune lying ahead of him" (260). Here two time zones are collapsed into one. There is the time zone of the adult onlooker at the photograph, who, because of his malign destiny of enforced exile, experiences life as a form (as he will shortly afterwards say) of "rejection and annihilation" (322). Such a being is gazing at the boy in the photograph that he formerly was. But there is also the earlier time zone of the boy himself, photographed in 1939, who gazes out from the image at the much older Austerlitz, and, as if on a dueling field, "in the grey light of dawn" lays down a challenge to him. That challenge is the one that Austerlitz is least able to accept and accomplish, because to do so would be to reconfigure the intervening history – "the misfortune lying ahead" of the boy – in ways that it was never in his power to do, as year succeeded year during his subsequent Welsh upbringing and then predominantly disappointing maturity. The pageboy was happy in his dressing up, and his solemn wish, as understood by the figure of the onlooker Austerlitz (who is the same person, only much older), is to stay happy – to have somehow "averted" the misfortune that actually befell the individual that he subsequently became. The adult who looks at the photograph decades later is saddened by the long disappointments of a drastically unfulfilled life, since that brief pre-war time of relative happiness. If we ask ourselves, what was it that turned the happiness into misfortune, there is only one answer. It is the same answer for so many millions of other European individuals and peoples, namely the multifarious evil that was Nazism.

For Sebald everything is in the end destroyed, whether by nature or by human agency. I consider two further instances of Sebald's journeying into the past, in quest of unparalleled realities from a time before they disappeared. My instances are equally ones of place and of people; are indeed miraculous works of art and civilization. While on his "English Pilgrimage" in *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald goes in search of all that is most appreciable but has vanished, whether by actions of time and

tide or else through human violence. He does so physically and in terms of supplementary mental travel. To be so hyperconscious of natural and human destruction depends upon a fine appreciation of what was once a part of reality but is so no longer. Often, that which has disappeared is interpreted in terms of some remnant, standing as evidence of a missing former wholeness. For example, an important part of Sebald's journey takes him to the few dwellings that are all that remains of the once thriving medieval port of Dunwich. As he reports, the city "reached the high point of its evolution in the thirteenth century" (157): "Dunwich, with its towers and many thousand souls, has dissolved into water, sand and thin air. If you look out from the cliff-top across the sea towards where the town must once have been, you can sense the immense power of emptiness" (159). Sebald stares out to sea from one of the easternmost points of the British landscape, which has been eroded over centuries by the furies of the North Sea. Dunwich's urban structures, its streets and buildings, have been swallowed by water, then buried under the alluvial sand and gravel that the sea ceaselessly shifts about: "The Dunwich of the present is what remains of a town that was one of the most important ports in Europe in the Middle Ages. There were more than fifty churches, monasteries and convents, and hospitals here; there were shipyards and fortifications and a fisheries and merchant fleet of eighty vessels; and there were dozens of windmills. All of it has gone under, quite literally, and is now beside the sea, beneath alluvial sand and gravel, over an area of two or three square miles. The parish churches of St James, St Leonard, St Martin, St Bartholomew, St Michael, St Patrick, St Mary, St John, St Peter, St Nicholas and St Felix, one after the other, toppled down the steadily receding cliff-face and sank in the depths, along with the earth and stone of which the town had been built" (155).

As Sebald tells over the list of parish churches that have toppled down, one senses a kind of knell for the dead and gone. We tend to think of British culture as one from which not nearly so much has gone missing as from other human contexts over which, for instance, battles have raged. There are exceptions of course to this assumption. In times of great ideological upheaval in Britain, such as during the period of dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII or the later Puritan rule of Oliver Cromwell, much was "rooted out," to use Shakespeare's imagery from Sonnet 55 ("wasteful war shall statues overturn / And broils root out the work of masonry" [162]). Sebald draws to our attention a medieval glory of England, now well-nigh obliterated, "a town that was one of the most important ports in Europe." He is all the more skilled in such descriptions, coming as he did from a different European culture that had recently, around the very time of his birth, had much of its own medieval and later heritage destroyed under the rain of Allied incendiary bombs. With his theory that German literature had paid too little attention to both the destruction in question and the human suffering that occurred in consequence, Sebald tackles the issues of Allied bombing directly, but also collateral subjects such as this natural destruction of Dunwich by the North Sea. The more that we can respond to the value of what has been lost to the sea in the case of Dunwich, the more trained we become in responding to the magnitude of destruction on German soil, which, like the Holocaust, is usually an implied subject of Sebald's main text, even when not being explicitly discussed.

Not all Sebald's subjects are irremediably melancholy. Sometimes a topic that he pursues raises for our consideration so much of past beauty that its splendours are somehow recuperated in the very description. My final instance is the tribute Sebald pays to the Norwich weavers of early modernity, samples of whose work can still be seen in the little-known Stranger's Hall Museum in that city where for many years Sebald lived and worked as a professor of European literature:

When we consider the weavers' mental illnesses we should also bear in mind that many of the materials produced in the factories in Norwich in the decades before the Industrial Revolution began – silk brocades and watered tabinets, satins and satinettes, camblets and cheveretts, prunelles, callimancoes and Florentines, diamantines and grenadines, blondines, bombazines, belle-isles and martiniques – were of a truly fabulous variety, and of an iridescent, quite indescribable beauty as if they had been produced by Nature itself, like the plumage of birds. That, at any rate, is what I think when I look at the marvelous strips of colour in the pattern books, the edges and gaps filled with mysterious figures and symbols, that are kept in the small museum of Strangers Hall, which was once the town house of just such a family of silk weavers who had been exiled from France. Until the decline of the Norwich manufactories towards the end of the eighteenth century, these catalogues of samples, the pages of which seem to me to be leaves from the only true book which none of our textual and pictorial works can ever begin to rival, were to be found in the offices of importers throughout Europe, from Riga to Rotterdam and from St Petersburg to Seville. And the materials themselves were sent from Norwich to the trade fairs at Copenhagen, Leipzig and Zürich, and from there to the warehouses of wholesalers and retailers, and some half-silk wedding

shawl might reach Isny, Weingarten or Wangen in the pannier on a Jewish peddler's back. (*The Rings of Saturn* 285-86)

The prose at this point in Sebald's text seems to me to constitute an almost ecstatic tribute to the work of an entire artisanal class of former weavers in his adoptive city. Whereas much of what Sebald takes note of in his writing is either on the point of disappearing, or else has already gone, here the beauties of the cloths seem to return from near oblivion, through being so intensely evoked. Once again Sebald's activity of listing — "silk brocades and watered tabinets, satins and satinettes, camblets and cheveretts, prunelles, callimancoes and Florentines, diamantines and grenadines, blondines, bombazines, belle-isles and martiniques" — enacts the beauties to which it refers. And whereas Sebald usually stresses a sense that the former intensities of reality have passed away — as voiced, for instance, by a character in the novel *Austerlitz* who stresses that "everything was fading before our eyes, and ... many of the loveliest of colours had already disappeared, or existed only where no one saw them, in the submarine gardens fathoms deep below the surface of the sea" (126) — here, in the description of the Norwich weavers' works, there is a sense given that all the bright hues in their work are still available for scrutiny, even if in a rare and largely unvisited museum.

Sebald came to England in the 1960s with a developing sense that his native culture of Germany had repressed and was still not coming to terms with its recent past. In succeeding years he had developed his theory of a "conspiracy of silence" in Germany over the evil that nazism had sown by making war on much of the rest of Europe and by the horrors of the death camps. Such a conspiracy of silence extended to the whirlwind that Germany had reaped in terms of Allied destruction of its cities. All these thoughts are what make Sebald's figure of the early-modern Jewish peddler going in an opposite trajectory to his own — taking beautiful Norwich cloth manufactures from entrepôts on the continent to towns in Germany — one of the most haunting vignette scenes in the entirety of this great writer's work. From such a vantage point in earlier history as that Jewish peddler trading wares from one country into another, what happened by way of anti-Semitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ought not to have been an inevitable future for Europe. There were the seeds of something so much better by way of integration and tolerance of other peoples; positive possibilities that abounded for the then future, which in the event turned out so terribly. It is the sheer fact that those positive possibilities existed in a now distant past that teaches us not to be irremediably pessimistic about equivalent possibilities existing today, and brightening our common future if we do not close them down.

In addressing his methods of writing, Sebald once wrote that he adhered to "an exact historical perspective, in patiently engraving and linking together apparently disparate things in the manner of a still life." This made possible his further activity of enquiry, which he immediately went on to enunciate: "I have kept asking myself ... what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run" (*Campo Santo* 200-01). I have tried in this article to account for the journeying — real and by means of mental travel — by which Sebald followed such "invisible connections." While virtually no writer before or since has made similar journeys to such surpassing effect, Sebald's procedures are not inimitable. We should emulate his journeying, and try out his characteristic modes of mental travel more than we customarily do. He has created certain trails, and they are neither forbidding nor impossibly difficult to tread. We can learn from him the lesson of not becoming caught up in conspiracies of silence over people and cultures of "another world where the departed are" either through guilt at how implicated we perhaps feel in their destruction, or simply from the hedonism of our living mainly in and for the present. Sebald's routes are to that far side of time to a realm of the uncanny, the *unheimlich*, but he teaches us some canny ways of getting there.

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