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**COUNTING THE BLADES OF GRASS:
SERIES, PUNCTUM, AND THE AVERTED GAZE IN
W. G. SEBALD'S *THE EMIGRANTS***

by

Lane Glisson

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
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Abstract

COUNTING THE BLADES OF GRASS:

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by

Lane Glisson

Advisor: Professor Rachel M. Brownstein

W. G. Sebald's novel *The Emigrants* presents an oblique view of the suppressed history of the Nazi era, through the lives of four emigrants from Germany. Sebald's unique manner of weaving biographical material, evidence, and photographs into his fiction, creates a misty world, neither fact nor fiction, in which the reader is never certain what is true or counterfeit. A series of recurring motifs and visual themes run through all the stories. This work examines how new forms of understanding arise in the spaces between *The Emigrants'* themes, punctuated by recurring imagery. It examines the nineteenth and twentieth century authors who influenced his style and haunt the text of *The Emigrants*: Johann Peter Hebel, Gottfried Keller, Robert Walser, Vladimir Nabokov and Marcel Proust. Within the context of post-modern aesthetics and theory, his strategies are linked to the music, films, and paintings of his contemporaries: Steve Reich, Werner Herzog, Frank Auerbach, and Jan Peter Tripp.

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INTRODUCTION

Affinities

A long time ago, at one of those faceless strip malls that litter America, Hitler's bulletproof Mercedes was on display in the parking lot. Someone had decided that it would be a great idea to tour around the country with a vehicle that shielded the Führer, as an object of interest or possibly, a way to earn some cash. A child (this author), upon seeing the bulletproof car, asked her mother why Hitler had shot himself. Somewhere she had heard that Hitler, who had avoided bullets in this car, had committed suicide with a pistol at the end of the war. The mother (my mother) was distracted by her errands and didn't hear the question. So I repeated, "Mommy, why did Hitler shoot himself?" Perhaps my mother was not ready to explain the not very nice details of Herr Hitler's program of extermination. After all, I was quite young. So she replied rather carelessly, 'Because his bulletproof car broke down.' How does one explain to a child about camps and ovens and railroad lines shipping people on a voyage of death -- particularly in a bland suburban setting, on a sunny summer day, at lunch time, with the Beach Boys crooning *Wouldn't It Be Nice* from someone's car window? Her answer seemed to evade the question. I was pretty certain that no one shoots himself because his car breaks down, and I had heard people say that Hitler was a very bad man. Of course, a few years later, in our nondescript suburban synagogue that resembled a bunker tucked into a hillside, we were shown the films of the camps, *Night and Fog* and so on. So then we knew. But really, how does anyone make sense of the vast carnage that took place in Europe during the Second World War, or at other times throughout history—or now? And how does one write about it? To account for it

would be, in the words of W. G. Sebald's character Dr. Henry Selwyn, like "counting the blades of grass."

Sebald once said, "The only way in which one can approach these things is obliquely, tangentially, by reference, rather than by direct communication," a conviction that led to the hybrid forms of his novels ("W. G. Sebald" *Bookworm*). In *The Emigrants*, Sebald resurrects and scrutinizes the suppressed history of the Nazi era through the lives of four emigrants from Germany. The uneasy relationship between memory and fiction is his recurrent theme. At first, *The Emigrants* appears to be four discrete biographies connected by a narrator. Then the seemingly separate stories reverberate in corresponding progressions. The pastime of counting moves the narrator and his readers across the distance of time in a series of tableaux, placeholders for the greater catastrophe. Vibrations resonate within the silent spaces of omission. A misty world, neither fact nor fiction, in which the reader is never certain what is true or counterfeit, requires us to hover in emptiness, embrace emptiness, and make a tentative treaty with uncertainty as we uneasily dance with the narration. *The Emigrants* examines the subtle interplay between personal narrative, evidence and history.

Arthur Lubow observed that "One might aptly say of Sebald's books, as Walter Benjamin wrote of Proust's, that all great works of literature found a genre or dissolve one" (Lubow, "Crossing Boundaries" 161). However, the structure and tone of Sebald's work was influenced by the careful study of his predecessors. He acknowledged the influence of Thomas Bernhard, who brought "a new radicality" to postwar fiction writing in the German language, at a time when a lot of German writers' positions were morally compromised. Bernhard renounced the omniscient narrator, a puppeteer who, as Sebald described it, "pushes around the flats on the stage of the novel . . . one sees

him constantly working behind the scenes" ("W. G. Sebald," *Bookworm*). Bernhard's narrator, in contrast, relates what he has heard from others, a form that we see Sebald using in *The Emigrants*.

Yet Sebald was not simply a follower of Bernhard. He took what he called Bernhard's "periscopic" style and introduced a completely different tone of voice, with a gentle, old-fashioned, mournful quality that was influenced by nineteenth century writers: Johann Peter Hebel, Gottfried Keller, and Robert Walser, to whom he pays homage in his book of essays, *A Place in the Country*. As Mark A. Anderson observed in his biographical chapter on Sebald's origins, his native region of the Allgäu was "different from the rest of Bavaria, a kind of geographical, linguistic, and cultural borderland that borrows significant parts of its identity from Swabia, Switzerland, and Austria. Sebald's favourite authors tended to come from these same regions, which shared with the Allgäu not only the southern mountainous landscape but a similar dialect and linguistic sensibility" (Catling and Hibbitt 20). Sebald told Michael Silverblatt that he used the "old-fashionedness" of his diction to create a contrast to the effects of devastation, "heightening the awareness" of what had been lost, not only during the war but since the Industrial Revolution ("W. G. Sebald," *Bookworm*). Sebald drew inspiration from Hebel's simple and sincere prose style. In his essay on the *Treasure Chest of the Rhineland Family Friend*, Sebald describes the way Hebel evokes devastation through the art of omission:

The strange constellation, in which sympathy and indifference are elided, is as it were the professional secret of the chronicler, who sometimes covers a whole century in a single page, and yet keeps a watchful eye on even the most insignificant circumstances, who does not speak of poverty

in general but describes how back at home the children's nails are blue
with hunger (Sebald, *A Place in the Country* 17-18).

Sebald, like Hebel, favored detailed description over generalization. Constellations of interlocking circumstances played a large part in Sebald's universe. He wondered at the serendipitous coincidence that linked his randomly discovered photographs with the characters' lives in *The Emigrants*, stories that he drew from the lives of actual people. He was obsessed by a series of uncanny correspondences between his own work and the work of Robert Walser (125). Sebald's essay on Walser is a meditation on wandering, madness and solitude, themes that touch all the stories in *The Emigrants* (158-159).

Sebald's interest in exile and loss shares affinities with Gottfried Keller. Keller's novel *Green Henry* depicts Henry returning home to find all his family, the living and the dead, gathered there to greet him. "And so they are ever returning to us, the dead," writes Sebald in *The Emigrants* (3). This habit of placing oneself adjacent to the dead in a position of intimate listening he acquired from a close reading of Vladimir Nabokov's memoir, *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov, describing his mother's last years in exile from their former estate in Russia, reduced to "pitiable lodgings" in Prague, writes that she did not need the photographs in crumbling frames that she kept near her couch because nothing had been lost. "As a company of traveling players carry with them everywhere, while they still remember a windy heath, a misty castle, an enchanted island, so she had with her all that her soul had stored" (33). He describes her fourth finger, which bears two wedding rings—her own and her assassinated husband's—joined together by a bit of black thread. The Shakespearean references to exile and

memory, and the rings that link the living and the dead, exist in our minds in the space we travel from the past to the present.

From Gottfried Keller, Sebald inherited the collector's habit; he admired the way Keller filled his stories with cabinets of wonders in miniature:

a cherry-stone carved with the passion of Christ another cherry stone wherein rattled a tiny game of ninepins; a walnut which when opened revealed a little image of the Virgin behind glass; a silver heart with a small perfumed sponge inside (Sebald, *A Place in the Country* 110-111).

Sebald admired what he termed "painfully focused images viewed from the closest proximity," a perspective that he would use to great advantage in *The Emigrants* and also in his last novel *Austerlitz*. This he had in common with Walter Benjamin's microscopic gaze, described by Susan Sontag in her essay "Under the Sign of Saturn" (123-124). Sontag makes the point that the wanderer or refugee must miniaturize in order to make things portable—to travel across space and time and to cope with the unthinkable. In *The Emigrants*, the microscopic is in counterpoint to immensity, as embodied by the catastrophe that surrounds the characters. Sebald writes, "More and more, he sensed that Nature itself was groaning and collapsing beneath the burden we placed upon it" (7).

The Emigrants' spare, gestural quality and its carefully arranged images share aesthetic similarities with postmodern works of music. Its themes that echo back and forth share commonalities with composer Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, a composition for string quartet that was commissioned by the Kronos Quartet in 1988. As a young boy in the years 1938–1941, Reich, whose parents were divorced, traveled back and forth by train between New York and Los Angeles. Reflecting back many years later, he

realized that while he was traveling on those trains, the Jews of Europe were put on trains for a very different reason (Reich, *Writings on Music* 181). The composition is divided into three sections. For the first part, *America—Before the War*, Reich recorded the voices of his governess Virginia Mitchell and Lawrence Davis, a retired Pullman porter who worked on that line, remembering those train journeys. The string instruments imitate the speech melody of their recorded voices, in the rhythm of a train in motion. For the second section, *Europe—During the War*, Reich gathered phrases from the recorded memories of three Holocaust survivors Paul, Rachella and Rachel. The survivors' speech melodies, introduced with the sound of sirens, are echoed by the strings (181-182). In the first two sections, a paradiddle drumming pattern, with American and European train whistles, creates the wall of sound that, as Reich described it, "pulls the trains" through the piece (219). In the third section *After the War*, the voices of the Americans and the Europeans merge in counterpoint to the music, a structure that links what happened during the war with its aftermath (182). The section ends with the punctum: Rachella's memory from the camp:

There was one girl who had a beautiful voice
and they loved to listen to the singing, the Germans,
and when she stopped singing, they said, 'More more,' and they applauded
(Reich, *Different Trains*).

Using fragments organized into three discrete sections, Reich ties his own story to the story of the Jews of Europe and then, with Rachella's story, expands it into a statement about the irrationality of war. The metaphor of the speeding train has its correlation in the insurmountable force of history that profoundly affects the fate of Sebald's four characters. Reich's use of a carefully controlled palette of musical and vocal elements

has strong ties to Sebald's aesthetic choices. His employment of irony in the insertion of Rachella's story about the performance of music in the camp has profound similarities to the way Sebald inserts music ironically into the narrative.

Reich, like Sebald, learned from his predecessors. They have eclecticism in common as well; Reich's early influences were as diverse as Johann Sebastian Bach, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, the drummer Kenny Clarke, and Igor Stravinsky. Later, he explored African drumming and the Gamelan orchestras of Indonesia. In a recent interview on Tom Robinson's radio program (BBC 6), Reich expressed his admiration for the structure of the first movement of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, which influenced his later work:

What's extraordinary about this composition is everything: the orchestration, the use of the bassoon at the beginning, in its extreme high register, but that's the least of it; the contrapuntal interplay of the woodwinds in the first movement is incredible, the harmonies are unprecedented, the density of those chords and their placement at the bottom of the piano is incredible; it's dark . . . and yet it is vaguely tonal; also the use of the folk materials; these are all fragments and then repeating the fragments; now that's something that obviously foreshadows the kind of music that I and others would make much, much, much later. Taking a small melodic fragment and then having it repeat but varying the repetition and placing it in different rhythmic positions—it's all there! The rhythmic profile of course was astounding and that's probably what shocked people the most. There's a ferocity, of course, at the end (Reich, *The Tom Robinson Show*).

Reich's descriptions of Stravinsky's rhythmic patterns, use of fragments, and melodies borrowed from folk tradition can be said to describe Sebald's compositional strategies as well. Ruth Franklin wrote that his fiction "springs from the roots of actual documents—postcards, letters, diaries—but blossoms into its own creation, in which the original source might recognize itself, as Sebald once put it, "as if through a dark mirror." (Franklin 187). The use of found objects, scavenged materials, photographs, songs, and objects that are weighted with dense significance, rhythmically placed in series with the meaning reverberating between the phrases, links Sebald's strategies with the work of Steve Reich and contemporaries such as Philip Glass.

Grainy black and white photographs punctuate *The Emigrants'* four narratives. Although they appear to be a form of evidence, Sebald discredits their authority in subtle ways. The photographs that illustrate the stories are, in fact, a half-step away from them, adding disquieting chords to the text. The people and events in the photographs are falsely identified. The propaganda photograph of the book-burning really existed, but the event it was supposed to capture was faked, photographed in daylight to represent a rally that had happened at night (Lubow, *Crossing Boundaries* 162-163). The photograph of Uncle Adelwarth in Arab dress was a picture of his own uncle who had a different name. Yet the photograph of the character Ferber as a young boy is not a picture of either of the living men who inspired the creation of Ferber. "Ninety percent of the photographs are genuine, but that leaves ten percent which aren't," he told Carole Angier (Angier 71-73). Sensing that the relationship between text and photographs is unstable, we are asked to dig deeper. Like Marcel Proust, Sebald invites us to throw off habitual thinking.

The second function of the photographs, according to Sebald, is to arrest time; again, the ghost of Proust. The photographs, he has said, “act like barriers or weirs which stem the flow You are taken out of time and that is in a sense a form of redemption, if you can release yourself from the passage of time.” (Wachtel 41-42). What are we being released to do? And what is the redemption? In a sense, traversing time, one is able to merge the present with the past and enter the text, and through it, Germany’s past. The past lives again in us and the dead are allowed to speak. We recognize that the catastrophe of the past is the catastrophe of the present, whether it takes place in 1941 in Germany or in 2015 in Syria. As Sebald told Michael Zeeman in an interview for the *Sebald Sound Archive*:

As a phenomenon of evolution, the way we have developed is one great aberration And of course, increasingly we know this and the great fires of the Second World War were only the first fires of the kinds of fires that are lit now It would be a false piety to look back upon 1940 to 1945 and say, “What horrible times these were!” We’re still living in the middle of them, I feel (28).

The photographs, a form of punctuation in Sebald’s narrative, recall Roland Barthes’ *punctum* of Time: “the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme*...” —the essence— “*this will be and this has been*” (96). The past, present, and future merge as one is released from the passage of time. Susan Sontag, writing about Walter Benjamin’s *Berlin Chronicle* in “Under the Sign of Saturn,” wrote that he “regards everything he chooses to recall in his past as prophetic of the future, because the work of memory (reading oneself backward, he called it) collapses time.” Chronological autobiography is irrelevant because Benjamin is “talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities.”

Sontag makes the connection that Benjamin, Proust's translator, learned from Proust how to collapse time and space. "Memory, the staging of the past, turns the flow of events into tableaux." As Sontag writes of Benjamin, "Since the Saturnine temperament is slow, prone to indecisiveness, sometimes one has to cut one's way through with a knife. Sometimes one ends by turning the knife against oneself" (115-117). Her intuition is pertinent to the work of Sebald, who reminds us that moving back and forth across time—in fragmented discontinuities—is a half-step toward madness.

The gaze held unceasingly destroys, as it does in *The Emigrants*, when a flickering photographic slide of a mountaintop, held for too long in the Dr. Selwyn's projector, shatters (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 17). As the eyesight of the second character Paul Bereyter, who never came to terms with what happened during the war, deteriorates. "Soon all he could see were fragmented or shattered images" (59). Uncle Adelwarth undergoes electroshock therapy because of a "longing for an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember" (114). To survive, it is critical to determine one's bearings in relation to the past. Thus, Sebald, Reich, and Proust are concerned with the role of authenticity and position in the resurrection of memory. Throughout *The Emigrants*, there are progressions of themes that correspond, and the meaning is gathered by a series of repeated images that build over time, punctuated by signifiers that link the stories to each other. This essay will examine Sebald's technique, by looking carefully at each chapter and noting common repeating elements that refer obliquely to Germany's history, disrupting the averted gaze.

CHAPTER ONE

Counterfeits

The question of authenticity is suggested right away, in *The Emigrants'* first sentence. The narrator, a German academic who is about to "take up his position" in Norwich, drives out to Higham "in search of somewhere to live." Read literally and figuratively, position signifies identity and also stance regarding what is true. Sebald, in the guise of the narrator, describes the surrounding countryside and the town with undeniable realism. Yet he inserts disturbing elements into the text that sabotage the solidity of his depiction. The marketplace of Higham is deserted, "lined with silent façades." Prior's Gate, the house that the narrator and Clara are seeking, is hidden behind "a two-meter wall and a thick shrubbery," giving the impression that no one lived there. Its "gleaming and blind" windows remind him of a French château that he had once seen, built by "two crazy brothers, one a parliamentarian and the other an architect." The château's frontage is "a replica of the façade of the palace of Versailles, an utterly pointless counterfeit, though one which made a powerful impression from a distance" (3-4). The *silent façades* suggest the unwillingness to speak. The deserted marketplace, the home, hidden behind high shrubbery, with the impression that *no one lived there*, imply absence, something irrevocably lost. The reference to the parliamentarian and the architect's *pointless counterfeit* suggests a construction that hides a past that has lost its meaning. The narration prompts the reader to look behind the construction for what is concealed in the narrative.

Sebald, who worked for many years at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, resembles the narrator. Ruth Franklin, in her book *A Thousand Darknenses, Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction*, disagrees with some scholars who insist that it doesn't matter if

Sebald's books are fact or fiction, since "the books present themselves as deliberately ambiguous facsimiles of reality and they should be understood as such." In contrast to this view, Ruth Franklin suspects that "the percentage of authentic material in these texts could actually be quite high," since Sebald has stated that the four stories were based on actual lives (Franklin 187). Their direct relationship to real events is open to interpretation; it is certainly true that the novel does present itself as a facsimile of reality, with enough ciphers to keep a cryptographer happily employed for many months. Nevertheless, certain themes in *The Emigrants* have their roots in the history that the author shares with Germans who grew up during the years that followed the Second World War. In the last interview that Sebald granted before his death, speaking with the journalist Maya Jaggi of *The Guardian*, he described the situation in Germany after World War II, and the unwillingness of Germans to discuss what had occurred:

My parents came from working-class, small-peasant, farm-laborer backgrounds, and had made the grade during the fascist years; my father came out of the army as a captain... Then the German 'economic miracle' unfolded, so the family rose again; my father occupied a 'proper' place in lower-middle-class society. It was that social stratum where the so-called conspiracy of silence was at its most present. Until I was 16 or 17, I had heard practically nothing about the history that preceded 1945. Only when we were 17 were we confronted with a documentary film of the opening of the Belsen camp. There it was, and we somehow had to get our minds around it—which of course we didn't. In the mid-60s, I could not conceive that these events had happened only a few years back (Jaggi 2).

The Emigrants begins with the epigraph, “and the last remnants memory destroys.” His generation’s experience is fundamental to his depiction of the political and economic interests that suppressed the history of the Third Reich, which inspired the author’s focused interest in the mute victims of the Holocaust and of the war itself. He links his analysis of the German catastrophe to its roots in Europe’s failed revolutions of 1848. The word *catastrophe* is used here consciously to suggest that the Holocaust led to a second catastrophe, the removal of Palestinians from their ancestral lands, and to link the persecution of Jews to that of other minorities in the past and the present. In his essay *Gottfried Keller*, Sebald writes, “Not the least of Keller’s achievements is that he was one of the first to recognize the havoc which the proliferation of capital inevitably unleashes upon the natural world, upon society, and upon the emotional life of mankind” (Sebald, *A Place in the Country* 101). Keller detested the rampant spread of capitalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, and its effects on the lives of those who did not benefit, who were forced to look elsewhere for a livelihood. “As a result of the political upheavals and the expansion of the market economy—which created as many bankrupts as it did nouveau riches—all through the nineteenth century, a growing number of Germans and Swiss were forced to emigrate for a life in the diaspora,” from which they would likely never return (106-107). This emigration, and later, the flight of Jews who were fortunate enough to escape Europe, continues today in the dispersion of new emigrants, fleeing war or poverty. The deserted marketplace of Higham and Selwyn’s empty home conceal the buried history of diaspora and Dr. Selwyn’s need to reinvent himself. In his garden, the three aging horses that Dr. Selwyn saved from the knacker [slaughterhouse] are ciphers: one horse bears the frequently Jewish name Herschel. Another has the Anglicized name

Humphrey. Selwyn's original name was Hersch Serewyn before he changed it in England to Henry Selwyn. The third horse is called Hippolytus, a reference to disguise and false testimony (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 6). Secrets, accompanied by silence, thread their way through the lives of the emigrants. They are revealed on mountain summits, by alpine guides.

Images of mountains, clouds, and mist pervade the novel. As the narrator and Clara eat dinner with Dr. Selwyn and his close friend Edwin Elliott, "The light of the west lay on the horizon, though with mountains of cloud whose snowy formations reminded me of the snowy alpine massifs, as the night descended" (13). Talking of Switzerland, Selwyn reminisces about his time in Berne, just before the First World War and a friendship he formed with Johannes Naegeli, an alpine guide.

He went everywhere with Naegeli—up the Zinggenstock, the Scheuchzerhorn and the Rosenhorn, the Lauteraarhorn, the Schreckhorn and the Ewigschneehorn—and never in his life, neither before nor later, did he feel as good as he did then, in the company of that man. When war broke out and I returned to England and was called up, Dr. Selwyn said, nothing felt as hard, as I realize looking back, as saying goodbye to Johannes Naegeli (14).

Embedded in the text is an acknowledgement of an intimate relationship, and a foreshadowing of a longer separation. Naegeli disappears after Dr. Selwyn's mobilization, apparently having fallen into a crevasse in the Aare glacier. Selwyn's grief for his friend made him feel as if he himself were "buried under snow and ice." He reflects that over time, he has become estranged from his wife Elli—his marriage is the counterfeit—while Naegeli seems the true friend, despite the fact that he never saw him

again (13-15). Their relationship is ambiguously intimate. And yet Mark M. Anderson has drawn the conclusion that the true model for this “guide” was not a lover, but instead the maternal grandfather Josef Engelhofer who effectively raised Sebald, while his father was away during and after the war. Engelhofer and his wife’s position in the village as “‘Zugereiste’ . . . outsiders to the native villagers even after living there for half a century” prompted Sebald to notice affinities between his grandfather and Robert Walser. Anderson also draws connections between the “accent and diction” of Sebald’s narrator and Engelhofer’s way of speaking German (Catling and Hibbitt 33-4). Sebald was never able to reconcile himself to Engelhofer’s death in 1956, as he states in *A Place in the Country* (135). As Anderson observed, “Quite simply, his grandfather represented the security and happiness of what could be called in German the ‘heile Welt’—an intact, safe world not yet fissured by the awareness of history in the larger sense.” Perhaps also, Sebald could not *reconcile* himself to the fact that the honest and humane principles that his grandfather imparted were betrayed by the reverse values of the Third Reich. Anderson suggests that Engelhofer, a passionate walker, was the source of Sebald’s lifelong interest in the natural world. Once Sebald’s soldier father returned home, his emphasis on “order and discipline” was in marked contrast to Engelhofer’s gentler approach (Catling and Hibbitt 32-33).

Selwyn’s anecdote about Naegeli is followed by a slide show of pictures from a trip to Crete that Selwyn and Elliott had taken ten years earlier. Seeing a slide of Dr. Selwyn carrying a butterfly net, the narrator is reminded of the author Vladimir Nabokov. Sebald inserts an actual photograph of Nabokov in the text, another example of the false attribution of photographs. The narrator observes that viewing their photographs was an occasion for “some emotion.” As they gaze raptly at a slide

depicting the Lasithi plateau, it remains stationary for such a long time in the projector that it shatters (17). The gaze held too long or too fixedly is destructive. It is better to avert one's eyes. Silence accompanies their relationship, as it also envelops Dr. Selwyn's history with Naegeli. The narrator connects the image of the Lasithi Plateau with one that he views a few years later in a London cinema, while watching a film that is not named, but clearly describes Werner Herzog's film *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* [*Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle.*] Why does Sebald include this brief reference? Herzog was working in the same vein, with similar themes. The opening of Herzog's film shows a poetic montage of nature, accompanied by classical German music. A rye field blowing in the wind resembles a roiling sea. The voiceover says:

Don't you hear that horrible screaming all around you?

That screaming that men call silence?

Herzog has said that he held that shot for an unusually long time because he "wanted audiences to empathise with Kaspar by looking anew at certain things and seeing them with his untainted eyes" (Herzog *A Guide for the Perplexed* 125). Kaspar is problematic because he forces the townspeople to look at their existence with "new eyes" (125). The life of the historical person Kaspar Hauser (1812-1833), who was shut up in a *dark prison* as a child, who was *practically mute* when he appeared in Nürnberg, was marked by controversy about his *true origins*. He was criticized by several of his guardians for telling *outlandish lies*. In Herzog's film, walking in the garden with his teacher Daumer allows Kaspar to develop his mind. Kaspar is learning how to distinguish between dream and reality:

"It has dreamed in me," says Kaspar.

“You should tell me”, says Daumer After a while Daumer says he is pleased with Kaspar’s progress, for only two weeks ago he still thought his dreams were for real

It was also strange that he, Kaspar, hadn’t begun to dream earlier; in his first prison he hadn’t dreamed at all, since he had been unable to imagine anything, but afterwards—why hadn’t he dreamed then? Or had he dreamed and mistaken it for reality, not recognizing the difference? After some strenuous reflection, Kaspar says he can’t be sure if he was actually in his prison, and as for this walking, whether or not it is a dream. It had dreamed in him from the Caucasus, he had been in the Caucasus. Yes, he had learned about that during his lessons, Daumer says, pleased; that is where the dream must have come from. But, says Kaspar, he had seen the Caucasus very distinctly. There had been a strange village on a mountainside, with white houses and steps rather than streets, and on the steps there was water running (Herzog, *Screenplay: The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* 142-145).

The film cuts to a vision of Kaspar’s Caucasus—strange, flickering scenes of towering mountains and a vast plain filled with mysterious temples. In an interview included on the 2001 CD of the film, Herzog told film critic Norman Hill that this footage was shot by his brother Lucki Stipetic with an 8mm camera, on a trip to Burma. Stipetic hated the jerky, unstable shot and wanted to discard it. Instead, Herzog took the footage and re-photographed it on 35 mm film at a different speed to give it an otherworldly quality that was perfect for what he imagined Kaspar’s dream of the Caucasus might look like.

Daumer asks Kaspar if it can really be true, as he says, that the only place he is happy is in his bed? Does he not like the garden? Is it not beautiful? Kaspar replies, "Well, it seems to me that my coming into this world was a terribly hard fall." Daumer tries to console him, but is helpless because Kaspar has uttered something that is true. Like the characters in Sebald's novel, Kaspar has a hard time living with the unjustness of his past and the isolation of his difference. Herzog told Norman Hill that he loves this scene, because Kaspar's words (interpreted by the extraordinary actor Bruno Schleinstein) embody the hard truth. (Herzog and Hill interview, *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* [DVD]). Herzog, from the same generation as Sebald, was fascinated by questions of truth and illusion, exploring them in his other films, such as *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* and *Fitzcarraldo*. In *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*, Kaspar's dream, depicted by found images of the Caucasus, which is in fact not the Caucasus at all, but an amateur film shot in the mountains of Burma, has much in common with Sebald's found photographs that claim to be something that they are not. They are false and yet they demand that we look for an underlying meaning. Sontag, in *On Photography*, observed, "All that photography's program of realism actually implies is the belief that reality is hidden. And, being hidden, is something to be unveiled. Whatever the camera records is a disclosure" (120-121). In Herzog's pastoral portrait of Kaspar Hauser, who emerged from a cellar, of mysterious origin, a strange authenticity is born from fabrication. Strangely, Kaspar is the guide, the truth teller, even as educated people attempt to teach him to become a "civilized" man. Sebald's excavation offers a similar narrative. What has been kept underground must come to light eventually, as it does in the appearance of Kaspar and the reappearance of Naegeli's corpse. For Dr. Selwyn, what is uncovered is his identity, behind the English mask. As they become better

acquainted, Dr. Selwyn admits to the narrator that recently, he has been “beset with homesickness more and more”. At the age of seven, in 1899, he and his family had left a village near Grodno in Lithuania. Sebald switches from the narrator’s voice to Dr. Selwyn’s voice in the first person:

I can see the teacher who taught the children in the *cheder*, where I had been going for two years by then, placing his hand on my parting; I can still see the empty rooms of our house. I see myself sitting topmost on the cart, see the horse’s crupper, the vast brown earth, the geese with their outstretched necks in the farmyard mires and the waiting room at Grodno station, overheated by a free-standing railed-off stove, the families of emigrants lying around it, I can see the telegraph wires rising across the train window, the façades of the Riga houses, the ship in the docks and the dark corner on the deck where we did our best to make ourselves at home in such confined circumstances. The high seas, the trail of smoke, the distant greyness, the lifting and falling of the ship, the fear and hope within us, all of it (Dr. Selwyn told me) I can now live through again, as if it were only yesterday (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 18-19).

In this passage, Dr. Selwyn allows his true self to speak. He re-enters his native village and reconnects with his culture. The new persona that he adopted in England is futile because it is not integrated with his former self. His arrival in England is also marked by a misidentification: Thinking they have arrived at their destination, the United States, the emigrants mistakenly disembark in England. Therefore, through a failure to *see* and *hear*, they become Englishmen, instead of Americans. Interestingly, Sebald makes Selwyn’s father—his ancestor—a *lens grinder*, one who labors so that others can

see. As a brilliant young medical student, Selwyn embraces assimilation, obscuring the ability of others to see his identity and alienating himself from authenticity. Given that their family is fleeing the anti-Semitic pogroms of Eastern Europe, this is not surprising. However, he chooses to not disclose his Jewish identity to his wife Elli until sometime after their marriage. The buried story-within-a-story allows the reader to *see* what is really troubling Dr. Selwyn.

Long after Dr. Selwyn's suicide, the narrator finds a newspaper article reporting the sudden appearance of Naegeli's corpse, exposed at the edge of the glacier seventy-two years after he disappeared (22-23). Sebald told Michael Zeeman that the news story is real, but the Naegeli character is made up. This is meant "to unsettle the reader, of course." He explains, "So I had the clipping. I only needed to invent the character that goes with it and associate him with the main figure in the text. In this case it [the article] happens to be true." Zeeman asks if all the stories are true. Sebald replies, "Most of them are true but there are several which I made up so the reader must be constantly asking, 'Is this so or isn't it so?'" (Sebald, Zeeman, and Turner 26-27). Also unsettling is the ambiguous nature of the friendship between Selwyn and Naegeli, Selwyn and Elliott, colored by vague hints of intimacy, calling attention to the suppression of nonconformist positions in German political culture of the thirties and forties. One of Sebald's prime strategies is to create a fiction, not a documentary work, with the intention of subverting the reader's trust in the narration, geared toward a greater awareness of how a story can be used as false evidence, pointing to the suppression or revision of history in Germany's past. But he takes that further: as he told Joseph Cuomo, he was creating a situation of paradox: "You have this string of lies, and by this

detour you arrive at a form of truth which is more precise, one hopes, than something which is strictly provable" (Cuomo 108).

The recovery of the buried guide refers to the gradual recovery of information regarding the genocide of the Jews that took place all across Europe during the war, but it also suggests Dr. Selwyn's burial of his Jewish past, the erasure of his lost identity. With a nod to the Nietzschean conception of eternal return, and its burden to prove that recurrence is real, the narrator comments, "certain things, as I am increasingly becoming aware, have a way of returning unexpectedly, often after a lengthy absence" (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 23). The *guide* that recovers memory is a true friend that helps the sufferer recover his sanity in the wake of catastrophe. What is buried is eventually unearthed, no matter how completely memory has been suppressed. If so, as Kaspar Hauser asks Daumer, how does one cope with the the burden? Selwyn escapes into nature, preferring to dwell in the garden, as though to escape a burdensome claustrophobia that eventually surrounds him. The "position" of the individual, and his choice of "place", referred to in the first paragraph of his story, determines whether he will choose memory or forgetting, life or death.

Sebald works with and subverts issues of legitimization in fiction and memoir. There are no fixed answers, only conjectures. The world of men is a chaotic and unforgiving place that can only be viewed metaphorically and ironically. A. S. Byatt, speaking of Sebald's work, stated, "Sebald's generation were not involved in the war, but they've had to look at their own parents with horror. They're a wandering, lost generation that felt they had no right to speak. He's started speaking painfully out of that silence" (quoted in Jaggi, "W.G. Sebald: Recovered Memories", n.p.). In not naming the narrator of *The Emigrants*, Sebald brings the story into the present. We are all the

narrator of this history; we cannot separate ourselves from the responsibility to examine the world with as much honesty as we can stomach. Both Sebald and Herzog manage to suggest the complexity of their positions by contrasting the sincere beauty that is possible in this world with a darker vision.

CHAPTER TWO

The Averted Gaze

The story of Paul Bereyter, the narrator's schoolteacher, is not a counterfeit. It was based on Sebald's beloved primary school teacher Armin Mueller, who died on the railroad tracks, a suicide (Catling and Hibbitt 38). Sebald was struck by the fact that this man, whom he so admired, had never told his students about his persecution during the Nazi era. Nor did anyone else, although it was well known in the small town (Wachtel 43). Paul Bereyter's obituary makes no mention of his suicide, but only of his great talents as a teacher, his creativity and love of music. Sebald writes, "Almost by way of an aside, the obituary added, with no further explanation, that during the Third Reich, Paul Bereyter had been prevented from practicing his chosen profession" (Sebald *The Emigrants* 26-27). This mention of an aside is crucial to understanding Sebald, for everything he says that is important is delivered obliquely, as a trifle. It is helpful to look closely at the things Sebald tosses us, as asides. While the first chapter "Dr. Henry Selwyn" is a meditation on what is true, the "Paul Bereyter" chapter teaches us to see what is hidden, just below the surface of the text. It is ironic that the story of Bereyter, a man who *loses his vision* and spends his remaining years as a *gardener*, is embedded in a chapter that is *seeded* with keys in the text that enable a careful reader to *see* aspects of the Germanic culture that enabled the events of the 1930s and 40s to occur. The shadow of vision introduced in Selwyn's story, with references to lens grinding and guides, is picked up in Paul Bereyter's chapter. Bereyter, though dead, is "employed" in the novel to teach an alternative perspective to Germany's dominant narrative. His lessons are heard through the reminiscences of his former lover, Lucy Landau, as told to the narrator and seen via a series of corresponding signs. In the same way that Proust

suggests corresponding themes through repetition in his great composition, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Sebald plants recurring images and situations that suggest the overarching themes of *The Emigrants*. Like Proust, Sebald refashions the way we read, forcing us to discard habitual illusions. Instead of working across the space of seven volumes in the manner of Proust, Sebald uses carefully focused cultural artifacts, photographs, and atmospheric settings that echo to one another across four very compressed chapters. The repetition of themes and images in series begins to work on the reader, who notices connections in the spaces between the stories. Paul's story begins and ends with the sound of thundering trains enveloped in clouds, surrounded by the jagged white Alps of the Lech Valley, creating a visual atmosphere that is repeated across the novel.

Paul's house tells a tale, just as Selwyn's does. He rented rooms "in a house built in 1970 on the land that had once been Dagobert Lerchenmüller's nursery and market garden, but he seldom lived there, and it was thought that he was mostly abroad, no one quite knew where." The narrator tries to imagine "what Paul's life was like in Lerchenmüller's old house, which had once stood where the present block of flats is now, amidst an array of green vegetable patches and colourful flower beds, in the garden where Paul often helped out in the afternoon" (28-29). The abandoned nursery and market garden surround the old house. After the war, the house is replaced by a modern block of flats that Paul deplores, an echo of Dr. Selwyn's empty home and neglected garden, vestiges of past abundance, now in ruin. When the narrator's family moves to the town from their village, the old blocks of houses are still surrounded by rubble from the war. This, he says, was the normal state of German cities at the time, to have magnificent facades standing next to ruined buildings. The juxtaposition of

respectability and devastation wanders from Dr. Selwyn's story into Paul's, and seeps into the other chapters in various forms. The primary schoolroom, a site of Jewish identity in Dr. Selwyn's story, becomes a German classroom immediately following the Second World War, examining German identity.

Paul is discounted by the townspeople, considered eccentric, despite his reputation as an exceptional teacher. He is partly an outsider because his grandfather was Jewish, making him not entirely German. The narrator believes that their habit of calling Paul by his first name is their way of treating him almost like a child. After his suicide, his well-known eccentricities allow the people of S. to justify Paul's death, because "things happened as they were bound to happen." (28). It is, of course, meant to suggest that the townspeople refuse responsibility for what happened to Paul and other German Jews during the war. As one quarter Jewish, he is forced to resign his job as a teacher and take a post as a tutor to French children. Cut off from his identity as a German, he is out of place in France and decides to return in 1939, where ironically, as three quarters Aryan, he is drafted into the German army. The narrator sets out to imagine what life was like for this disregarded man, and then to imagine his death as the roar of the train approaches, a blurred vista once he had removed his glasses, surrounded by "the snow white silhouettes of three mountains: the Kratzer, the Trettach, and the Himmelsshrofen." (29). The novel's characters are often placed in a setting of mountain peaks, a trope that weaves throughout the novel, juxtaposing the emigrants' unbearable isolation next to the grandeur of nature. Surely Sebald, who grew up surrounded by the idyllic beauty of the Alps in a secluded village, had to reckon with the contrast between his homeland's romantic traditions and the betrayal of those values in the era of National Socialism.

Paul's manner is unassuming and welcoming, in contrast to his wartime predecessor: "Hormayer, who had been feared for his pitiless regime and would have offenders kneel for hours on sharp-edged blocks of wood, had had the windows half whitewashed so that the children could not see out" (34). Hormayer's classroom with its whitewashed windows stands in for the larger cruelty going on before and during the war. Paul immediately removes the whitewash when he takes up his post again in 1946. This is a metaphor for Paul's alienation from the dominant culture of the town. He is repelled by the hypocrisy of "Catholic sanctimoniousness," espoused by the religious studies teachers Catechist Meier and Beneficiary Meyer, who can only be distinguished by the slightly different spellings of their names, a clever way of saying that their conformism has robbed them of any individuality. Paul's vigorous attempts to erase signs of the Catholic presence in the classroom once they had left indicate his distrust of their false piety, after the massacres that took place in the 1930s and 40s, with little or no resistance from the church. It is worth paying attention to the names in this chapter: *Hormayer, Meier, Mayer* in the classroom; the two employees *Hermann Müller and Heinrich Müller* (no relation as they incessantly insisted), who work in his father Theodor's "emporium," suggest the Nazi obsession with ethnic uniformity. Sebald used homophonic names to link characters in a manner similar to Proust.

The classroom is German society in miniature. While the Paul Bereyter chapter is the shortest section in *The Emigrants*, it is densely packed with metaphor in the form of stories and songs. Paul ignores the intended textbooks, replacing them with natural history lessons, algebra and readings from Hebel's *Rheinische Hausfreund*. What stories does the narrator choose to include from Hebel's work?

A decapitation performed in secret made the most vivid impression on me, and those impressions have not faded to this day; more than anything else (why I cannot say) I clearly recall the words said by the passing pilgrim to the woman who kept the Baselstab Inn: When I return, I shall bring you a sacred cockleshell from the Strand at Askalon, or a rose from Jericho (37-38).

The decapitation recalls Paul's suicide, the placement of his head on the railroad tracks. Askalon, a port city, now part of Israel, was contested many times in history by different cultures because it was the key entry point for the conquest of southern Palestine. Christians unsuccessfully tried to take it during both Crusades, but it remained a Muslim stronghold, known as al-Majdal. It is the site of a sacred 11th century mosque Mash'had Nabi Hussein, amid the ruins of ancient Askalon ("Ashqelon." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Despite efforts of Israeli archeologists to save it, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) destroyed the site in 1950, as part of a larger operation ordered by Moshe Dayan that included other mosques, in an effort to erase the vestiges of Palestine's Arab past in the foundation of a Jewish state (Rapoport n.p.). Askalon is an Arab city whose history was erased, which is why it deserves a place in this book. However, there is no concrete evidence that Sebald knew its recent history; perhaps he was using the passage for the emotional resonance of its *sacred cockleshell* and *rose*, in contrast to the brutality of decapitation, a common strategy of Sebald's. It is one of those strange coincidental, possibly accidental resonances that he would have loved, falling as it does in a text about erased histories.

The presence of the outdoors is everywhere here: Paul's character was forged by the *Wandervogel* (Wandering Bird) movement, with its emphasis on getting back to

nature, exploring German culture, and friendship. The field trips he plans for his students, what he terms his “object lessons,” are telling: a power station; the smelting furnaces and steam-powered forge of the iron foundry; the mash room at the brewery and the malt house, *where the silence was so total that none of us dared say a word*; a castle; a powder magazine where the veterans kept their ceremonial cannon; a derelict tunnel from a former coal mine; the abandoned cable railway that transported the coal (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 38-39). The derelict tunnel and its railroad tracks transport the classroom to the chimneys and railways of the Third Reich. Abandoned industries and squandered spoils accompany the narrator on his journey. Power, fortresses, furnaces and steam, oiled by the social lubricant of German beer, are the images of war.

Music also forms their lessons—the songs Paul teaches them are eloquent. The narrator lists four song titles and says no more about them (41). It is worth examining their lyrics:

“Zu Straßburg auf der Schanz, da fing mein Trauern an” [On the Ramparts of Straßburg, My Troubles Began], in Mahler’s “Des Knaben Wunderhorn,” is derived from a German folk poem. A conscripted soldier hears the sound of a shepherd boy’s alphorn from his homeland across the mountain, and tries to swim over to Germany, but is caught by the guards and sent back. Here is a loose translation of the stanzas from the German Lied (author’s translations with Gabi Dehn-Knight):

On the ramparts of Straßburg,
My troubles began.
I heard the alphorn begin to play,
Had to swim over to the Fatherland,
That did not go well.

One hour that night
They brought me straight
away to the captain's house
Lord, they fished me out of the river
I'm finished now.

In the morning at 10 o'clock
Put in front of the regiment,
I'm meant to beg for pardon
And I'll receive my due,
I know it well.

All you brothers,
You'll see me for the last time;
It's that little shepherd boy's fault,
the Alphorn did that to me.
It's them I blame.

You three brothers,
Just shoot me straight away
Don't spare my young life,
Shoot so my red blood flows,
This I beg you.

Oh King of Heaven, Lord!

Take my poor soul,

Take it to you in Heaven,

Let it always be with you,

and forget me not.

(Volklied. *Zu Straßburg auf der Schanz*. 18th century).

“Auf den Bergen die Burgen” [On the Mountain the Fortress], written in 1847, is from the period of emigration from Germany and Switzerland that Sebald describes in his essay on Keller (Sebald, *A Place in the Country* 100-108). The lives of ordinary people are cast to the four winds, due to economic adversity:

On the mountain the fortress,

in the valley, the Saale,

the girls in the little town,

then as it is now.

My dear companions

where are you now

my loved ones?

Ach, all dispersed!

Some, they weep;

the others, they wander;

the third, still in the midst of

the changing times;

Many reached their destination,
sent to the dead,
wasted and died
in joy and in sorrow.

I, alone, the one
once again looking down
on the Saale in the valley,
but sad and mute.

A Linden tree in the wind
that rocks and bends,
rustles darkly, somberly;
I well know why!

(Leberecht Dreves and Jenaer Burchenschaft, *Auf den Bergen die Burgen*. 1842).

The third song, “Im Krug zum grünen Kranze” [In the Pitcher of the Green Wreath], was popular in Germany from 1815, the year of the Congress of Vienna, to the time of the Vormärz period, just before the March 1848 revolution. A man goes to a tavern to slake his thirst and establishes a rapport with a wandering stranger, after copious glasses of cold wine. The song ends with these lines:

And the wandering stranger
Also looked me in the eye
And he filled my cup
and looked again at me.

Hei! How the glasses were clinking,
How it burned, hand in hand,
Long live your love,
Dear brother in the Fatherland!
(Wilhelm Müller. *Im Krug zum Grünen Kranze*. 1821).

And finally, "Wir gleiten hinunter das Ufer entlang" [We're Gliding Down along the Shore], a folk song known as "Auf den Wellen" [On the Waves], is a metaphoric boat ride in the third person plural that mirrors the course of a life. In the beginning, we follow the waves joyfully, drifting with the breakers in the rosy morning light; we are young and still don't know the sorrows of life. The singer laments the quick passing of youth and pure joy:

Oh morning, oh youth, how fast you rush by,
Just like laughing children in the blooming month of May!
Like playful breezes, like clouds in the valley,
blossoms and perfume flee like a morning sunbeam.

And the shadows are growing and the night is approaching,
In somber, in still, even more serene splendor,
Again we return to our father's house;
We land at the shore and turn toward silence.
(Josef v. Poggi, *Auf den Wellen*. 19th. century).

Looking at these four songs, patterns emerge. *Zu Straßburg auf der Schanz, da fing mein Trauern an* suggests the longing associated with exile, the conscript's desire for freedom, the conflict between the needs of the individual and the state, and the condemned man's resignation in the face of death. All these themes are part of Paul Bereyter's story. *Auf den Bergen die Burgen* is an encapsulated expression of the economic conditions after 1848 that led to the catastrophe of the Third Reich, as Sebald framed them in *A Place in the Country*. The song narrates the emotional cost of emigration and separation from everything one loves, one's culture, family, friends, and identity itself. Its lines: *I, alone, the one / once again looking down / on the Saale in the valley, / but sad and mute*, point to the characters in *The Emigrants* who, from mountain summits or from their own isolation from heimat (homeland), look down into the abyss. The wanderlied *Im Krug zum grünen Kranze*, suggests the Wandervogel hiking spirit that inspires (and perhaps also deludes) Paul Bereyter and Dr. Selwyn. The song expresses male intimacy, as is suggested in the "Dr. Henry Selwyn" and "Ambros Adelwarth" chapters. In a society in which difference is not admissible and conformity is everything, what can't be spoken emerges from underground. The cost of keeping difference underground is the source of alienation. The dark tones of the first three lieder are answered more philosophically in the fourth, *Wir gleiten hinunter das Ufer entlang*, an appreciation of life's exquisite beauty, even when tinged with shadows. The inevitable *turn toward silence* leads the reader to the themes of the third chapter, "Ambros Adelwarth." In the section that contains the song titles, the narrator, in speaking of Paul's strong emotions, so close to the surface, gathers "fragmentary recollections" that help him piece together an understanding of his former teacher's desolation. Fragments play an important role in *The Emigrants*, in expressing its

characters' shattered sense of identity as well as the narrator's (and our) partial recovery of the past. Collections of artifacts, in this case a list of songs, refer to Sebald's displaced referent, the economic and political history of the region. Sebald used collections of artifacts in a similar manner in last his novel *Austerlitz*, when he describes the objects in the window of the antique shop in Terezín, the remaining traces of those who died there (194-197).

As Steve Reich said of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, we can also say of *The Emigrants*, "it's dark...and yet it is vaguely tonal; also the use of the folk materials... Taking a small melodic fragment and then having it repeat but varying the repetition and placing it in different rhythmic positions—it's all there!" It's *all there* in Proust as well, with his desire to articulate and re-articulate the nuances of affect. As in Proust, it's *all there* in the forms that Reich and Sebald chose: an embedded referent, obliquely articulated in a series of images and stories with repeating themes. Meaning is excavated from the spaces between the elements of the series. Rather than speak literally about trauma, Sebald goes at it from an oblique angle, weaving selections of images, gathered from the detritus of culture. The weaving metaphor is apt, because Sebald ends the novel with three female weavers from a Jewish ghetto whom he compares to the Three Fates of destiny, who control the threads of each person's life.

The story-within-a-story of the "Paul Bereyter" chapter is formed by the recollections of Lucy Landau, a character whose name speaks: Lucy, of course, suggests light, the illumination of Paul's life story. The last name Landau has its origins in the history of Polish Jews whose families were expelled from Landau, Germany in the 16th century (Singer, *The Jewish Encyclopedia* n.p.). In using this name, Sebald pointedly refers to the wandering of itinerant Jews throughout European history and their Christian

neighbors' misapprehension, drawing a line from the modern period to a history of discrimination going back to medieval times. Sebald admired how Gottfried Keller portrayed the tentative marginality of Jewish lives in *Green Henry*:

Frau Margaret's house becomes a kind of hostelry, offering shelter not just to favored local people, but to itinerant traders, for example the Jewish peddlers If then talk should turn among those present to the misdemeanors of Hebrew peoples, to the poisoning of wells... the Jews merely listen to these scaremongering tales, smile good-humoredly and politely, and refuse to be provoked. This good-natured smile on the part of the Jewish traders at the credulity and foolishness of the unenlightened Christian folk, which Keller captures here, is the epitome of true tolerance: the tolerance of the oppressed, barely endured minority toward those who control the vagaries of their fate (Sebald, *A Place in the Country* 104-105).

In the same essay, Sebald observed the German Jews' identification with the Germanic culture and topography of those German-speaking lands, including the adoption of the names of towns as their surnames: Frankfurt, Hamburger or Wiener. He perceived how difficult it must have been for Jews leaving Germany to "abandon all this and forget about it" (Wachtel 47). Paul's tragedy is that he has been formed by the ideals of German romanticism and yet is living in a world where those ideals have been distorted, as though seen through a shattered lens, by fascism. Lucy and her father, like their forbears, are forced to flee Germany. They share a similar narrative with Paul, who lost his teaching position in the early 1930s, due to discrimination. Although Lucy's father is forced to deplete most of his wealth to buy the Swiss villa, it seems to her "a happy turn of events." Her childhood in Switzerland is made magical by an unspoken

gift, freedom. "The empty house, with its wide-open windows and the trees about it softly swaying was her backdrop for a magical theatre show" (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 42-43). Lucy benefits from the civility of her surroundings, in which silence does not hide an ugly truth, but is instead a form of tolerance. Her childhood friend Ernest is a model of tact, allowing her to believe that the bonfires on the shores of the lake are built in celebration of her birthday, rather than an expression of the Swiss National Day. Lucy's celebratory bonfires are in sharp contrast to the Nazi bonfires that silence banned books in Max Ferber's chapter.

The narrator visits Lucy in her lakeside home in Yverdon, in Switzerland, on a day that, he remembers was *curiously soundless*, in an attitude of attentive listening (42). The reader takes the narrator's position of concentration. Lucy describes her meeting with Paul, at Salins-Les-Bains in the French Jura. Looking at a map of Europe, one sees that the locations named in *The Emigrants* are not far from each other, and form a constellation of relationships between Sebald's native Allgau region in southwestern Germany and its neighbors Austria, Switzerland, and the eastern edge of France. Sebald not only writes within the spaces of connecting narratives, but also within a very particular geography, drawing our attention to the distinctions between societies that, although in close proximity, either protect freedom or crush it. Survival is simply a matter of which side of the border you are on. And in fact, there is a fine line between tolerance and discrimination that any society can cross, to the detriment of its citizens. The political is just under the surface in his narrative. The lake region of Yverdon, Salins-Les-Bains and of course Montreux, the final resting spot of Vladimir Nabokov, has a special meaning for Sebald who fled the desiccated atmosphere of Germany's postwar universities to study in French-speaking Switzerland and hike its alpine trails

(Angier 65-68). It is important to remember that Sebald and Nabokov spent the greater part of their lives as emigrants.

Lucy meets Paul while reading a copy of Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* on a park bench in 1971. Nabokov's Swiss governess, one of the many characters who populate his memoir, was one of those expatriate women that Sebald describes in his essay on Keller—unable to find work at home, due to the financial speculation that ruined the German and Swiss economies—exiled as a retainer to wealthy Russian families before the Revolution wiped that life away (Sebald, *A Place in the Country* 107). Despite her low position in the family as a foreign servant, Mademoiselle, as Nabokov recounts, spoke a scintillating French that “had a singularly bracing effect on me.” While no one else at the dinner table was listening, Nabokov had his ears wide open to her intense pronouncements:

Thinking that someone referred to music, ‘But Silence, too, may be beautiful,’ she would bubble. ‘Why one evening, in a desolate valley of the Alps, I actually *heard* Silence’ (Nabokov, *Speak Memory* 85).

Nabokov remarks at the end in the chapter that Mademoiselle's insistence on her ability to *hear* silence was a form of lying. But one wonders. There are other forms of listening than the literal. Emptiness itself, felt in exile, has a voice that Sebald succeeded in capturing. Lucy, remembering her lover Paul, falls into *pensive silence* before she continues his story. Paul had come to Salin-Les-Bains to treat his melancholia, and a sense of claustrophobia that had required him to give up teaching entirely. A growing feeling of contempt for everything in the town had ruined his former affection for the students. “Thus, Madame Landau said, he had told her only a few days after they met, with an irony that made everything seem light and unimportant, that he had attempted

to take his own life." To console Paul, Lucy takes him out into nature. They visit thermal baths, salt galleries, and the fort. They gaze "down from the bridges into the green water of the Furieuse," tell each other stories, listening closely. Paul "had linked the bourgeois concept of Utopia and order, as expressed in the designs and buildings of Nicholas Ledoux, with the progressive destruction of natural life." This obsession with perfect order is examined more closely in the following chapter, "Ambros Adelwarth." Lucy Landau revives the images that she has *buried beneath* her grief. She remembers their trip up Montrond in which they *gaze down for an eternity* at Lake Geneva and a miniature landscape that is *intended for a model railway*:

The tiny features below, taken together with the gentle mass of Montblanc towering above them, the Vanois glacier almost invisible in the shimmering distance, and the Alpine panorama that occupied half the horizon, had for the first time in her life awoken in her a sense of the contrarities that are in all our longings (45).

Again, the traveler *gazes down* from the mountains in silence, haunted by the specter of railways, but this time it is we who are intently listening, attuned by Sebald to the reverberation of parallels that he constructs: the contrarities in the longings of the exiled person. Images of landscapes, haunted by the omnipresent railroad tracks, forts and institutional buildings, suggest the destruction of nature through the relentless imposition of order.

It is at this point that the narrator introduces Paul's photo album, accompanied by ironic asides that illustrate Paul's happy early years, including his enrollment in the "teacher processing factory" at Lauingen. After a probation year as a classroom teacher at S, Paul falls in love with an independent young Viennese woman, Helen Hollaender.

Her pictures are glossed by a *double exclamation mark*. Helen is the punctum that is buried in Paul's story. Photographs document their growing relationship, which is disrupted by fascism. Paul's future collapses as he receives notice that he cannot pursue his profession under the new laws banning Jews from teaching. "All his prospects blurred. For the first time, he experienced the insuperable sense of defeat that was so often to beset him in later times, and which, finally, he could not shake off." Lucy surmises that Helen and her mother were deported in "one of those special trains that left Vienna at dawn, probably to Theresienstadt" Paul, left with a crushing sense of having failed her, never speaks of it (48-50). Paul's father, Theodor, dies of heart failure in 1936, due to the "fury and fear that had been consuming him" since his neighbors of his family back home in Gunzenhausen were killed and their stores looted. After Theodor's death, although their successful store cannot be legally "Aryanized" because Thekla is a Christian, she is forced to sell it for "next to nothing" to a livestock and real estate agent. Afterward she succumbs to a deep depression and dies. Paul, working in France, gets the news too late to be of help. His misfortunes impair his ability to "think even as far as a single day ahead" (53-54). His distance impairs his ability to see what is really happening. Here, the emphasis on the ability to *listen* shifts to the other sense, the ability to *see*. In 1939, Germans, and especially German Jews, were divided between those who were willing to see what was happening and those who could not bear to face what was really going on. Lucy's father could *see* that he had to pull up stakes and move her to safety. Paul and his family were amongst those who were not so prescient. The townspeople of S, after the war, were not willing to look closely at (acknowledge) their complicity in the events of the Nazi period.

Now the emphasis shifts from the ability to *see* to the ability to *speak*. The terrible fate of Helen Hollaender, her mother, and Paul's parents is the fissure in the glacier that enables Lucy to speak her outrage out loud, something Paul could never bring himself to do. Lucy Landau becomes his voice. In response to the narrator's admission that he never knew Paul's father was half Jewish, Lucy permits herself this uncharacteristic outburst:

Do you know, she said on one of my visits to Yverdon, the systematic thoroughness with which these people kept silent in the years after the war, kept their secrets, and even, I sometimes think, really did forget, is nothing more than the other side of the perfidious way in which Schöferle, who ran a coffee house in S, informed Paul's mother Thekla, who had been on the stage for some time in Nuremberg, that the presence of a lady who was married to a half Jew might be embarrassing to his respectable clientele I do not find it surprising, said Mme Landau, not in the slightest, that you were unaware of the meanness and treachery that a family like the Bereyters were exposed to in a miserable hole such as S then was, and such as it still is despite all the so-called progress; it does not surprise me at all, since that is inherent in the whole wretched sequence of events (50).

Sebald had admired Gottfried Keller's ability to articulate how a seemingly decent town of thrifty citizens is complicit in ruining those they consider to be marginal. Keller, in his novel *Green Henry*, knew how to articulate moral outrage through a character's voice. The chapter "The Master's Folly and his Pupil's" is a model for Lucy's outburst. Henry, an aspiring artist, has made steady progress studying with an eccentric itinerant

painter named Römer. All goes well until Römer, short of cash, asks Henry to pay a little something for his lessons. Influenced by the neighbors, who see his mentor as a kind of swindler, Henry demands that Römer return the small sum that had been paid. Römer complies and leaves town. A month later, Henry receives a letter from his former teacher, laced with bitter sarcasm. Having paid the money back, Römer is forced to sell all his belongings “for a song”—including the tools of his trade and his remaining samples—to survive. From an asylum in Paris, he writes:

. . . . and it was not until I was at last happily rid of all my artist's trappings and every bit of artistic apparatus, and was walking the streets, starving, without shelter, without clothes, but rejoicing in my freedom, that faithful servants of my illustrious house [an asylum] found me and led me in triumph home! In the meantime, accept my thanks for the favourable turn of events which you brought about! May every misery of the earth enter your heart, my youthful hero! May hunger, suspicion and mistrust caress you, and misfortune be the companion of your bed and board! As pages wait on you, I send you my everlasting maledictions, with which, for the present, and in all sincerity, I bid you farewell! (Keller 346-347).

Keller observes the narrow-minded and complacent hypocrisy of Henry and his neighbors. Sebald had his own reasons to admire Keller's ability to give a voice to moral outrage. He articulated his own troubled relationship with the German postwar mentality in many interviews.

Sebald's village, Wertach, and the nearby town, Sonthofen, share the same initials as the village and town in Paul's chapter. When his earlier book *Vertigo* was

published, his mother was mortified by the book's details about their ancestral village, and afterwards refused to go back there. Sebald told Carole Angier that where he was raised, what was most important was "that people don't think badly of you. There's nothing that you could describe as civilian courage." The villagers were outraged that their past was displayed in his fiction. To illustrate the inverted thinking of his countrymen, Sebald told her that in the 1990s, he visited a deserted Jewish cemetery in a small town near Freiburg, situated near a local camping site. Someone had posted a notice there that stated, "that the visitors to the cemetery are not permitted to enter the camping site. Not the other way around" (Angier 68). Sebald collected evidence of Germany's historical attitude toward Jews, that he felt defied reason. In Herzog's film about Kaspar Hauser, a professor of logic asks Kaspar to tell him what question can be asked to determine if a man is from "the village of truth-tellers or the village of liars?" Kaspar gives him a completely nonsensical answer: you can ask him if he's a tree frog. In Germany after the war, the question of truth itself is absurd (Herzog, *A Guide for the Perplexed* 122-123).

Failing to *see* what is ahead and to act accordingly is Paul's tragedy. Lacking foresight, he returns to Germany in 1939 and is conscripted into the German motorized artillery. Moving constantly where the war takes him, Paul's singular identity is effaced. In the course of his travels, he *sees* more "than any heart or eye can bear... and day by day, hour by hour, one lost more and more of one's qualities, becoming less comprehensible to oneself, increasingly abstract." When he returns to teach after the war, even his home has been erased, pulled down for a "hideous block of flats" (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 56-57). His identification with his homeland is annihilated, along with everything else in the war. The figurative inability to see is accompanied by the

deterioration of his physical eyesight. Paul, in the end, can only see “fragmented and shattered images.” Attempting to regain his perspective, he begins to research what happened to the Jews in his father’s hometown of Gunzenhausen, which the narrator suggests is his way of “gathering evidence that he belonged with the exiles and not the people of S.”

Sebald experimented with the theme of insight and memory later on, in poems that he was working on before his death, in collaboration with the artist Jean Peter Tripp. The book, *Unrecounted* [*Unerzählt*], published posthumously, is a series of Tripp’s super realist lithographs of pairs of eyes in extreme closeup, on facing pages with Sebald’s very short haiku-like verses. The portraits of eyes belong to a range of men and women—and Sebald’s dog Moritz—some well-known and some not, some old and some young, the living and the dead: Sebald, Tripp, Michael Hamburger, Sebald’s daughter Anna, Francis Bacon, Justine Landat, Marcel Proust, Rembrandt, Samuel Beckett, Jasper Johns, William Burroughs, Jorge Luis Borges, and others. The poem opposite his daughter’s portrait reads, “unrecounted / it will always remain / the story of the averted / faces” (81). The question of the averted gaze influenced Sebald and others of his generation.

As Paul loses his eyesight, Lucy offers to console him by reading from Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi’s “The Evening Hours of a Hermit,” an essay in which the pioneering Swiss educator (1746–1827) outlined his democratic principles of education. Disillusioned by the ability of the government and the privileged elite to create a more equitable system that included the education of poor children, Pestalozzi created a three-stage educational system that he called *Menschenbildung*. Good politics, he wrote, is useless if people’s moral judgment is not properly developed. The first stage of

education must start in the home, he said, where the parents develop the child's moral sense. The second stage is the practice, in everyday life, of the altruistic principles learned in the first stage. The third step teaches the child to reflect on these principles in action, developing the child's moral judgment. In contrast to the Enlightenment ideal of the *citoyen* and its emphasis on patriotism, Pestalozzi wrote, "I am not a Zuricher, I'm not Swiss anymore. We don't have a fatherland anymore. Let us stay human beings and not forget the concerns of mankind until our death" (Pestalozzi, qtd. in Tröhler 64-69). Pestalozzi believed that the moral voice was embedded in man's true nature, and we can be taught to listen to that voice and act justly. For Paul, however, Pestalozzi's message is a consolation that counters bitter experience. Like Pestalozzi, Paul realized that he didn't have a fatherland anymore, despite his former identification with it.

The theme of Paul's isolation echoes that of Dr. Selwyn and Kaspar Hauser. Kaspar, in Herzog's film, begins to weep when a baby is placed in his arms. "I am so far from everything," he says. Herzog used the spontaneous lines of his actor Bruno Schleinstein, who had been severely abused in childhood. Lines such as, "The people are like wolves to me," expressed Kaspar's vulnerability (Herzog, *A Guide for the Perplexed* 126). Like Kaspar, Paul is trapped by his estrangement, which explains Lucy Landau's feeling that Paul's uncle's innocent remark, *that he would end up on the railroads*, cast a shadow of inevitability on Paul's death. Rather than depict an historical Kaspar Hauser, Herzog chose to delineate an emotional truth created through a fiction (123-124). Similarly, the stories in *The Emigrants*, although they are inspired by real events, generate an empathetic response in the reader through the strength of the fictional compositions that the narrator creates. Ruth Klüger has noted that he flouts the

conventions of German literary scholarship, which generally avoids naïve 'biographism':

Sebald blithely connects life and work, for as far as he is concerned, the one is the expression of the other It is precisely this principle that he carries over into his own literary work, where he narrates biographies that are partly authentic, partly invented, and brings himself into the stories as he does so (Klüger, qtd. by Schütte in Catling and Hibbitt 175).

The ambiguous relationship of biography and fiction posed moral questions for the English translator of *The Emigrants* Michael Hulse, who questioned Sebald during their collaboration about some German critics' insistence that the texts were pure fictions:

... now, the impression conveyed—that your narratives are fictions—troubles me, since my own reading of them depends to a substantial extent, I think, on my feeling that what matters in them is true. I'm not trying to be simple-minded about the word 'true': I realise that in reconstructing past lives and circumstances to which one wasn't privy, one is going to use a generous license, and furthermore (as we are tirelessly reminded) the past may always be a kind of fiction anyway. What I mean, in a very elementary way, is that it matters to me that these people and the shapes of their lives are genuine.

Sebald, in his response, understood that for Hulse, the moral authority of the work depended upon the stories being not made up, because what was at stake was authenticity. He assured Hulse that "all four stories are, almost entirely, grounded in fact," and then proceeded to elaborate on the small and in some cases, larger tweaks that he made in the process of creating a fiction out of essentially true stories, for

example adding “a very few touches of Wittgenstein’s life as a primary school teacher” to the Paul Bereyter story and combining two lives (that of his landlord in Manchester and the painter Frank Auerbach) to create the character Max Ferber, and pairing up the Nabokov sightings with locations in all four stories. As Hulse wryly observes:

This answer, I felt, though canny and perhaps even wily, marked a genuine attempt by Max to address what he realized was, for me, potentially a moral rather than an aesthetic dilemma raised by his writing; his answer nonetheless foregrounded aesthetic criteria (Catling and Hibbitt 197-198).

What Hulse, a gifted poet himself, worries about is the authenticity of the address in the novel. Sebald, like Herzog, has a different perspective, realizing that truth, when arrived at indirectly, may achieve a lightness of manner that is more moving than if all the details were arrived at using a documentary approach. In working this way, Sebald actually subverts the averted gaze of Germany, to bring the past forward and into the light.

CHAPTER THREE

Emptiness

The third chapter, “Ambros Adelwarth,” is a variation on the theme of erased history. Uncle Adelwarth, a man of distinct qualities and prodigious powers of recall, deliberately chooses to erase the traces of his personal history. The narrator hints at this motif at the beginning of the chapter when he writes, “I have barely any recollection of my own of Great-Uncle Adelwarth” (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 67). While the “Paul Bereyter” chapter maps the geographic and cultural relationship between southwestern Germany and its neighbors—Austria, Switzerland, and the eastern edge of France—this chapter situates itself inside a map of the narrator’s extended family of “American” emigrants: Kasimir, Fini, Theres, and Great-Uncle Ambros Adelwarth. Aunts Fini and Theres leave Germany in the late 1920s to find work as domestic servants in the homes of wealthy American Jewish families, thanks to Adelwarth’s assistance. Sebald once again embeds a message in these seemingly innocent details. Aunt Fini tells the narrator that Theres worked as a lady’s maid to Mrs. Wallerstein, whose husband came from somewhere near Ulm (76). The use of those names is probably not accidental. Wallerstein Cemetery was a Bavarian Jewish burial ground that had existed since 1510, the primary cemetery for the Jews of many surrounding towns, including Oberdorf, which is situated just eighteen miles away from Sebald’s home village of Wertach. Ulm, southwest of Wallerstein, was a city where Jews had lived since the 14th century. The cemetery was badly desecrated in 1926 and by the end of World War II, was completely destroyed. The last Jew was buried there in 1941. In Wallerstein, where Jews had lived since the 14th century, the only non-emigrant Jew who survived the Nazi era was the wife of a Christian. After the end of the war, any remaining gravestones that hadn’t

been smashed were brought back and arbitrarily installed again. The gravestones have been cleaned and studied in 2013 by scholars (“Wallerstein (Landkreis Donau-Ries) Jüdischer Friedhof” n.p.; “Wallerstein” n.p.).

Theres and Fini’s brother Kasimir, a metal worker, finds work on the dome of Augsburg’s Jewish synagogue in Germany in 1928 (81). Augsburg’s synagogue, which was gutted by the Nazis during the Second World War and restored in the 1980s, is significant. Philip Dean Bell has written that Jews lived in the Bavarian city of Augsburg since the thirteenth century. In 1278, a civic law was passed that regulated the lives of Jews in Augsburg, including the establishment of a Jewish court, a requirement that all Jews wear a special hat, and laws forbidding Christians and Jews to intermarry. The Jews of southern Germany were murdered in the Rindfleisch massacres of 1298, the Arnleider massacres of 1335-37, and pogroms that took place in Germany and other parts of Europe. The massacre of Augsburg’s Jews in 1348 is mentioned “only in passing” in its town records. By 1355, they were invited back to Augsburg, to benefit the economy. In 1440, Augsburg’s Jews were expelled again. Five years later, the stones in Augsburg’s Jewish cemetery were removed to repair the city hall’s steps. (Bell 130-133). By these oblique references, Sebald suggests that Germany’s persecution of Jews has a long history that predates the National Socialist German Worker’s Party. Sebald lets the names to speak for themselves.

Sorrow describes the longing of those who wander. Theres, who is the only sister who can afford to come home after the 1950s, is drowned in tears: “Three weeks after she arrived, on every visit, she would still be weeping with the joy of reunion, and three weeks before she left she would again be weeping with the pain of separation.” Her weekly letters, “My dear ones at home, how are you?” (69) recall the lyrics to “Auf Den

Bergen die Burgen," one of Paul Bereyter's school songs: *My dear companions / Where are you now / my loved ones? / Ach, all dispersed!* There is obliterated by nostalgia; after a brief illness, she and her letters fade away in a faraway land. Throughout the chapter, there is a sense that almost everything is forgotten in the dust of traveling. Kasimir, leaving Germany to find work in America, cannot remember a single detail about crossing Germany, yet clearly remembers the office of the shipping line where he embarked, with its teeming emigrants, presided over by an ornate clock with the ironic motto, *Mein Feld ist die Welt* [My Field is the World] (82). Time and distance erase all traces of the past as the emigrants disappear on the horizon, but the voyage remains in the memory as the primary site of severance, with the faces left behind growing ever fainter.

Sebald writes, "Emigrants, as is well known, tend to seek out their own kind" (67). But who are one's own kind in an environment of cultural assimilation and centuries of living shoulder to shoulder with the other? Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in his book *Identity* has questioned the fixed nature of where or with whom we belong:

One becomes aware that 'belonging' and 'identity' are not cut in rock, that they are not secured by a lifetime guarantee, that they are eminently negotiable and irrevocable; and that one's own decisions, the steps that one takes, the way that one acts—and the determination to stick by all that—are crucial factors of both. In other words, the thought of 'having an identity' will not occur to people as long as 'belonging' remains their fate, a condition with no alternative (11-12).

Bauman is correct to distinguish between identity and belonging. Most people, as he points out in his book, have multiple identities, at work, at home, and in social situations. As he says, the series of steps one takes to belong determine the ability to

survive. The wish to be seen, to not be marginal, is the subtext underlying the emigrant stories. The fourth chapter is different, because the character Ferber carves out an identity based on his work as an artist, painting seven days a week, never stopping. But even Ferber is constantly interrogating the question of identity in the clouded, constantly erased faces of the models who pose for him. Sebald was quite interested in the relationship between minorities and the dominant culture. As he explained to Eleanor Wachtel, "I'm essentially interested in cultural and social history and the relationship between the Jewish minority in Germany and the larger population is one of the most central and most important chapters in German cultural history from the eighteenth century to the present day in one form or another" (47). The need to hide one's identity and the oppressive quality of assimilation lends a dark, suffocating quality to the "Ambros Adelwarth" chapter, characterized by the "low, inky black sky" that hangs over the narrator when he drives out to the beach with Uncle Kasimir (86).

His uncle seeks refuge from his claustrophobic feelings in nature, driving out frequently to wander the Jersey shore. "I often come out here, said Uncle Kasimir, it makes me feel that I am a long way away, though I never know quite from where" (89). He takes a snapshot of the narrator on the darkened beach. The photograph shows the black silhouette of the narrator, set off against a grey background, in which land and sky are only distinguishable because they are divided by a line of crashing waves. We see an image of a voided man. Kasimir has lost his sense of position. Even in the supposed safety of America, the sense of never being at home and the disinclination to remember follow the emigrants. Bereft of a shared history, the emigrants' new world is home to a monstrous emptiness.

In the article "Preoccupied by Death, but Still Funny," Arthur Lubow described Sebald's home. "They live in a Victorian brick house with a large garden on the outskirts of Norwich, where Mr. Sebald remains chronically unsettled. 'I don't feel in the least at home here,' he said" (2). Sebald told interviewers that although he preferred to live in England, he did not call it home. Nor was he completely comfortable in his native Allgau; he couldn't stay for more than a few days before he needed to escape again (Angier 67-69). Yet Sebald is well aware that it is impossible to deny one's place of origin, even if it includes some very dark corners. In Zeeman's interview, the author reflects:

However short the period of time is, even if it is only a decade, if you only spend your childhood in the place you were born, it remains, I think, the primal landscape that determines a good deal of your makeup I don't think you ever lose the imprint the more your future horizon shrinks, the more prominent the outlines of your place of origin seem to become in your mind (Sebald, W. G., Michael Zeeman, and Gordon Turner 22-23).

Kasimir has unwittingly lost his bearings in America. Great-Uncle Adelwarth, on the other hand hides his former identity behind a carefully created persona. Although he also comes from humble stock, Adelwarth has completely reinvented himself. The narrator observes that Adelwarth "out-classed" them all. He is the only family member to speak German without the local dialect (68). He masters several languages "without apparent effort and without any teaching aids, within a year or two solely by (as he once explained to me) making certain adjustments to his inner self" (78). A homosexual, he has a second reason to wear a mask beyond his cosmopolitan aspirations. Uncle Kasimir tells the narrator that he feels sorry for Uncle Adelwarth "because he could

never, his whole life long, permit anything to ruffle his composure" (88). In contrast to the very ordinary Theres, Kasimir, and Fini, Adelwarth can never let down his guard. The perfect mask negates his authenticity.

After apprenticing at the Eden Hotel in Montreux, Adelwarth works at London's Savoy Hotel, where a relationship with a lady from Shanghai "marked the beginnings of my career in misfortune," a punctum-like reference to the covert relationships that he attempts to conceal. He then travels for two years as the valet and companion to a counselor with the Japanese Legation, sharing his "wonderful house set on a lake, near Kyoto." Aunt Fini describes his time in Japan as a string of unconnected fragments that she remembers from the stories Uncle Adelwarth told: paper walls, archery, evergreen laurel, myrtle and wild camellia, an old hollow camphor tree with room for fifteen people inside, a decapitation story and his skilled imitation of the call of the Japanese cuckoo, hototogisu (79-80). Again, as in the other two stories, there is a *garden*, a *decapitation*, the theme of *imitation*, and *homes that are not one's own*. When one's address is anywhere, home is nowhere. As Kasimir tells the narrator, "The older Uncle Adelwarth grew, the more hollowed out he seemed to me, and the last time I saw him... it was as if his clothes were holding him together" (88). Like the hollowed out camphor tree, in which 15 people can fit, Adelwarth can be anyone, and so he is no one.

Before the First World War, Adelwarth is hired to look after the dissolute son of a rich Jewish banking family, Cosmo Solomon. Cosmo's name embodies his life: cosmopolitan and rich as the Biblical king. The name, an undulating repetition of the letter O, turns circles of sensuality, like the loops he inscribes in the air while flying his private plane (92). He travels to Europe, with Adelwarth as his guide, in a frenetic dash from wealthy watering holes to casinos, a series of exclamation points that tail off into

periods of dark depression. Cosmo works the gaming tables with what appears to be a prescient ability to *see* the winning moves. The master-servant relationship develops into an exclusive relationship. They become inseparable (91-92). Cosmo's quirky creativity fascinates European society, but his brilliance masks his instability. Adelwarth is occupied keeping him safe, watching over him "like a sleeping child" (91) and sharing his bed, becoming "Ambros" in their growing intimacy. In the earlier part of the chapter, he is known as *Great-Uncle Adelwarth* or *Uncle Adelwarth*. Then, as the nature of his relationship to Cosmo is revealed, he is simply called *Ambros*, signifying the personal, rather than professional, aspects of Ambros's character. Sebald does this through a transition from Kasimir's voice to the voice of Fini, who refers to Ambros by his given name.

Cosmo and Ambros, flush with their casino winnings, travel to Constantinople and Jerusalem. Cosmo signs their names "*Frères Solomon*" in the hotel register (130). Fini can relate nothing about what happened there, because Ambros would never talk about it. All that remains is a photograph of a handsome young Ambros in "Arab costume"—Sebald used an actual photograph of his own uncle, who had a different name, of course (Angier 71)—and the character Ambros's diary. The term *costume* indicates the acting of a role, highlighting the confounding of identities. Otherwise, one would say *Arab clothing* or *Arab dress*. The diary is also a counterfeit: The story-within-a-story encloses a third story, which the narrator decodes from the tiny handwriting—the author Sebald's own handwriting—in Ambros's diary (72). What are we to make of this evidence: a false diary, written by Sebald and a falsely attributed photograph of his real uncle? Sebald is calling attention to the fictional nature of *The Emigrants* and its relationship to what may really have happened.

The narration shifts to the character Ambros's voice, recorded in the diary. It is a chronicle of disequilibrium. Sleeping under the stars in Greece, Ambros reflects that the constellations are the same ones he observed in the Alps, in Japan, in America: can he really be the same person in all these places? (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 129). The mountain views of Constantinople remind him of Germany. In wandering, Adelwarth loses his bearings: "Or are we no longer a part of time? What meaning has a date like the 24th of September?" (132). In the midst of this blurred position, Cosmo and Adelwarth visit a Turkish mosque. Reciting prayers, a prostrated man stands, "casting a deferential glance to right and left, over his shoulders, to greet his guardian angels who stand behind him." His guardian angels are the mirror image of Ambros, who watches over Cosmo. Suddenly, outside the mosque, an "extraordinarily beautiful" twelve-year-old dervish boy appears (134), whom Cosmo returns to photograph. What is this Sufi mystic, this punctum in a long white gown, a close-fitting jacket and a tall camel hair toque, doing in Sebald's novel? Roland Barthes's ghost and his book *Camera Lucida* join us, as we (the readers) gaze at the handsome boy's photograph.

The Turkish Mevlevi order of whirling dervishes was founded on the teachings of the thirteenth century poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, whose life was transformed by a close relationship with his spiritual teacher Shams al-Din of Tabriz. Rumi believed in losing oneself in the divine, through union with one's spiritual beloved. After his jealous followers drove Shams away, Rumi had intense relationships with two other male disciples (Nicholson 19-21). One of his most influential works, the *Masnawi*, composed in rhyming couplets, was inspired by his relationship with Husamu'l-Din Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn Hasan ibn Akhi Turk during the last decade of Rumi's life. Reynold A. Nicholson, one of the earliest and most influential English translators and scholars of

the *Masnavi*, wrote that Rumi “likens himself to a flute on the lips of Husamu'l-Din, pouring forth “the wailful music that he made” (20-21). The work, written in a series of parables, is believed to unveil secrets of knowledge and union. It begins with “The Lament of the Reed-Flute,” expressing the soul’s sorrow at being parted from the Divine Beloved:

Listen to the reed and the tale it tells,
how it sings of separation:
Ever since they cut me from the reed bed,
my wail has caused men and women to weep.
I want a heart torn open with longing
to share the pain of this love.
Whoever has been parted from his source
longs to return to that state of union.
At every gathering I play my lament
I’m a friend to both happy and sad.
Each befriended me for his own reasons,
yet none searched out the secrets I contain.
(Rumi 220).

Separation; the state of being cut off from one’s origins; the agony of yearning; isolation; the untold secrets of one’s heart: these seem to describe Ambros’s spiritual malaise and also his alienated state. Ambros has covert relationships, in which he is also a paid servant. His position is ambiguous. He bears the primary responsibility for someone who is unstable, whom he loves. Perhaps Sebald inserts the dervish into the text in reference to problems of spiritual connection that Ambros Adelwarth and Cosmo

Solomon cannot surmount. Or is it one of those serendipitous accidents, figurations in the spaces of the text that proliferate in Sebald's fiction? We cannot be sure, but we can observe that the image of the praying man and mystic boy, in stillness and silence, play in counterpoint to the frenetic pace of Cosmo Solomon and the trance-like search that eventually drives him mad.

The First World War disrupts their wanderings, forcing them to return to New York. Cosmo visits their old haunts in his imagination; he claims to be able to "see what was happening in Europe: the inferno, the dying, the rotting bodies in the sun in open fields" (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 95). He recovers after the war, but a second breakdown begins when he and Ambros travel to Egypt in "an attempt to regain the past, an attempt that appears to have failed in every respect" (96-97). Cosmo is unsettled by a film about a gambler that he senses is "a labyrinth devised to imprison him and drive him mad, with all its mirror reversals." The scene from the film that Aunt Fini describes is from Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*, released in 1922. Dr. Mabuse, disguised as the hypnotist Sandor Weltmann, mesmerizes the audience with a vision of an Arab caravan that descends from the stage, moves down to the aisle, and then abruptly disappears into thin air. Cosmo insists that in watching the (filmed) trick, "he himself had somehow gone from the hall together with the caravan, and now could no longer tell where he was" (97). The introduction of Lang's *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* is significant. At the University of East Anglia, Sebald taught a course that focused on German cinema of the 1920s that included this film and two other films by Lang (Catling and Hibbitt 134). The film paints an incisive picture of the financial speculation and decadence of the Weimar era (represented by the gamblers) that led to the rise of National Socialism. Lang, a Jew, spent the war years in the United States in order to escape Nazi

persecution, like many other German artists and intellectuals. The atmosphere of claustrophobic paranoia portrayed in Lang's film mirrors the enervated state of Cosmo and Ambros who become unhinged during their travels. The Arab caravan in the movie theatre is in series with the Caucasus scene in Herzog's film, the scene of Cosmo and Ambros traveling to Jerusalem, caked with dust, and the caravan mural in the final chapter. Dream spaces of caravans move in repetition, proliferating. Cosmo commits himself to an asylum in Ithaca with the strangely Middle Eastern name Samaria Sanitarium, where he soon fades away like a mirage. Ambros goes back to being Adelwarth, the impeccable servant of Cosmo's father. No one sees him there, except in his usefulness as a servant. There is no space for grief or passion. As Rumi writes in the "Song of the Reed":

My secret is not different from my lament,
Yet this is not for the senses to perceive,
The body is not hidden from the soul,
Nor is the soul hidden from the body,
And yet the soul is not for everyone to see.
This flute is played with fire, not with wind,
and without this fire, you would not exist.
It is the fire of love that inspires the flute.
(Rumi 220).

The connection of spirit and body is severed. With the spirit gone, the man is a shell. Ambros follows his mentor to a similar fate. Perhaps to obliterate his homosexual tendencies or to treat an increasingly depressed state of mind, he undergoes an

unrelenting regime of electroshock treatments at the Samaria Sanitarium. Soon there is no trace but remnants: his photo album and diary.

The epigraph “my crop of corn is but a field of tears” that begins “Uncle Adelwarth” is attributable to a literary source, the poem commonly known as “Tichbornes’s Elegy,” composed in 1586. Chidioc Tichborne, twenty-eight years old, wrote the poem in the Tower of London and enclosed it in a letter to his wife, shortly before he and his Catholic co-conspirators in the Babington Plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth I were disemboweled and hanged for treason (“Chidioc Tichborne” n.p.). A look at the first two stanzas of the poem clarifies why Sebald alludes to it:

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares,
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain,
My crop of corn is but a field of tares,
and all my good is but vain hope of gain.
The day is gone and yet I saw no sun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

The spring is past, and yet it hath not sprung,
The fruit is dead, and yet the leaves are green.
My youth is gone, and yet I am but young,
I saw the world, and yet I was not seen,
My thread is cut, and yet it was not spun,
And now I live, and now my life is done. (Tichborne n.p.)

The Emigrants resides in two realms, the historical and the personal. Living in Britain, Sebald was well aware of the brutal history of the English Reformation. By embedding this history in the text of *The Emigrants*, Sebald makes an important distinction; his story

is not only about the Germans or the twentieth century; it is the history of humanity. By referring obliquely to Tichborne and to the Arab world, he draws a line to other erased religious and political persecutions. The “Ambros Adelwarth” chapter expands the specifically German account that began in the narrator’s native Allgau region to an outward-spiraling travel narrative that ends in postwar America. Sebald is quite clear about the importance of articulating public responsibility for all forms of violence. He speaks directly to that problem in the voice of the beekeeper Dr. Abramsky, who “served” as the assistant psychiatrist to Dr. Fahnstock when Ambros was treated.

The poem’s lines describe the spiritual realization that causes Dr. Abramsky to renounce psychiatry and take up beekeeping. The condition of Ambros Adelwarth, after submitting to “more than a hundred electric shocks at intervals of only a few days” on the orders of the supervising psychiatrist Dr. Fahnstock, causes his assistant Dr. Abramsky to question the moral authority of psychiatric science. His faint-hearted attempts to dissuade Fahnstock are ignored. Abramsky’s growing concern comes too late for Adelwarth; after a final treatment, he is “now destroyed, all but a vestige of him” (116). Abramsky understands that Fahnstock’s “fanatical interest as well as my own vacillation were, in the end, merely proof of our appalling ignorance and corruptibility” (*The Emigrants* 114-115). They had not cured Adelwarth’s depression; he had merely been put out of his misery, like a sick animal.

Abramsky, like Selwyn and Paul, loses all interest in the world of men, retreating in nature, attending to his bees. He says that giving up the mental hospital “was the step I had to take in order to free myself from any involvement with life. I do not imagine that anyone can imagine the pain and wretchedness once store up in this extravagant timber palace, and I hope all this misfortune will gradually melt away now

as it falls apart" (110). He hopes that the many mice have eaten all documentation of their program. He "can hear the pathetic song of a thousand tiny upraised throats. Nowadays I place all my hope in the mice, and in the woodworm and deathwatch beetles" (112). Are tiny upraised throats only mice? One hears the mirror image—the upraised throats of those who were tortured there. With a goose wing in his hand, like an exterminating angel, Dr. Abramsky dreams of annihilation: the destruction of records, the collapse of the building and its shameful history into "a heap of fine wood dust, like pollen," destroyed like Adelwarth's infallible memory (112-113). Abramsky, in making his peace with his own complicity, erases everything through benign neglect. *My crop of corn is but a field of tares, / and all my good is but vain hope of gain.*

The timber asylum is only one of many monstrously large dormitory buildings that populate *The Emigrants*. The Hotel Eden in Montreux, the Banff Springs Hotel, the decaying Grand Hôtel des Roches Noires and the Hôtel Normandy all speak of artificial glamour that has gone to rack and ruin, a theme that is picked up again in the "Max Ferber" chapter. Ambros Adelwarth was intelligent enough to understand that he had created a persona that was, after the Second World War, as outdated as the immense establishments he had served in and inhabited. Cosmo Solomon, his master and intimate friend, is gone. *I saw the world, and yet I was not seen, / My thread is cut and yet it is not spun.* The narrator attempts to visit Deauville's archive and library; both are shuttered; a way of life and its history tipped into the dustbin. In his dreams, the narrator returns to Deauville as it once was, in the summer of 1913, searching for Ambros and Cosmo:

They were silent, as the dead usually are when they appear in our dreams, and seemed to be somewhat downcast and dejected. Generally, in fact

they behaved as if their altered condition, so to speak, were a terrible family secret not to be revealed under any circumstances. If I approached them, they dissolved before my very eyes, leaving behind them nothing but the vacant space they occupied (122-123).

Death is a shameful secret not to be revealed. The abyss recurs in Ambros's diary, a meditation on nothingness. Ambros records a dream of traveling through glaring emptiness. The inhabitants are "beggars and footpads" that he realizes are the inhabitants of his native village Gopprechts, transported to the ancient site of Jericho. Ambros dreams of the oasis of Jericho in the same way that Kaspar Hauser dreams of the Caucasus and Sandor Weltman's audience dreams of the caravan, as a yearning for paradise that eludes the visionary. The following day, from the crest of the Mount of Olives, he and Cosmo stare down into a different valley, nocturnal Jerusalem, deserted, empty and washed in a flood of light. He is reminded of the valley of Jehoshaphat, where men will gather to be judged at the end of time. "Over the rooftops not a sound, not a trace of smoke, nothing. Nowhere, as far as the eye can see, is there any sign of life." Destroyed by many centuries of battle, the verdant land is now a desert, awaiting judgement that will not come. In a reversal of the common name for Palestine, the *Promised Land*, Ambros writes, "*On dirait que c'est la terre maudit* [One might say that it's the cursed land]." (141). Camped near what was once the rich lands of "Gomorrhah, Ruma, Sodom, Seadeh and Seboah," Ambros reflects that only traces remain of its former beauty (144). Sebald extends this metaphor to Ambros and Cosmo, who have the talent to see clearly, who lean toward the mysticism of the Sufi dervish—but because of their marginal status, expressed in the narrator's dream, the *terrible family secret*, squander their gifts. Sebald ends the chapter with a veiled literary quotation from

Proust's *Le Temps Retrouvé*, the seventh volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Looking at both paragraphs is instructive. First, here are Proust's words:

And I felt, as I say, a sensation of weariness and almost of terror at the thought that all this length of Time has not only, without interruption been lived, experienced, and secreted by me, that it was my life, was in fact me, but also that I was compelled so long as I was alive to keep it attached to me, that it supported me and that perched on its giddy summit, I could not myself make a movement without displacing it. A feeling of vertigo seized me as I looked down beneath me, yet within me, as though from a great height, which was my own height, of many leagues, at the long series of the years. (Proust, Trans. Enright et al., *Time Regained* 530-531).

Here is Proust's sense of the telescopic that Julia Kristeva refers to when she writes about Proust's perception of time (56-57). The narrator Marcel takes comfort in his memories, despite the pain he experienced over time and the vertiginous sense of his attachment. It has been *lived, experienced, secreted* by him and he lays claim to that. In fact, he couldn't make a movement without it. In the final paragraph of Proust's novel, he observes that while men may resemble monsters, in time they are like *giants plunged into the years, touching the distant epochs through which they have lived*. The passage has a heroic quality. Now look, in contrast, at Sebald's mournful quotation from Ambros's diary:

My great uncle also noted that late the previous afternoon it had begun to snow and that looking out of the hotel window at the city, white in the falling dusk, it made him think of times long gone. Memory, he added in a

postscript, often strikes me as a kind of dumbness. It makes one's head heavy and giddy, as if one were not looking back down the receding perspectives of time but rather down on the earth from a great height, from one of those towers whose tops are lost to view in the clouds. (Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 145).

It is very close to Proust's paragraph. Ambros equates memory with *dumbness*. Proust writes about the same thing before the quoted passage when he writes about going to a dinner party and nearly falling three times in one evening and feeling the sense afterward that he was no longer capable of remembering anything (Proust, *Time Regained*, 518). Proust and Sebald (that is, their English translators) both use the adjective *giddy* to describe a sense of vertigo. In Proust's French, it is *vertigineux* (Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé* 352). In Sebald's German, it is *schwindligen* (Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten* 215), which has the double sense of dizziness and sleight of hand, of being tricked. Both passages describe memory as being a view from a great height. Sebald gives the impression that Ambros is lost in the clouds while *looking down* to earth from a *great height*, which is of course one of the central tropes in *The Emigrants*. Dust and clouds occur throughout the book, obscuring vision. Ambros, who suffers from an "appalling grief" (111), seeks "an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember" (114). In contrast, the narrator Marcel sharpens vision through an examination of the past that is framed with tenderness and the emphasis on sincerity—authenticity—that was a commonly expressed ideal in la Belle Époque (Caballero 13-15). This is the opposite of Ambros's objective, but one could argue that the writer Sebald looks back on the ideal of sincerity with deep regret. His project revives a sincerity that is delivered as an aside, obliquely, with great tact. Despite their different

perspectives, based on the times in which they lived, both authors excavated the past and, as Proust so aptly called it, the intermittencies of the heart, through a masterful handling of detail, repetition, and atmospheric effects. These techniques will be examined in a discussion of the final chapter, "Max Ferber," which links *The Emigrants* to the work of Vladimir Nabokov and the paintings of Frank Auerbach.

CHAPTER FOUR

Smoke and Mirrors

Sebald found a model for authenticity in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*. In his memoir, Nabokov found ways of coming to terms with his family's loss after the Russian Revolution, by writing an elegy to a world that would never return. He lovingly described his childhood before the revolution and his subsequent exile, mining the vast treasure of his memory for details that fed his prodigious imagination. More importantly, he was empowered by his "position," the allusion to one's territory that Sebald makes in the first page of *The Emigrants*. Although Nabokov's family lost everything when they fled Russia, and worse, suffered the loss of his father who was assassinated, they nevertheless benefitted from a lifetime of privilege and education. Nabokov had the ingrained arrogance of his class and the personal courage to speak with candor. When he escaped to Berlin, then Paris, and later, to a brilliant career in the United States, Nabokov was not afraid to tap into that reservoir of Russian culture and use his prodigious talent to recreate his longed-for past.

The experience of exile and loss haunts the ninth chapter of *Speak Memory*, his moving elegy to his father Vladimir Dimitrievich Nabokov, an aristocrat and liberal statesman. The young Nabokov's horrified discovery that his father has challenged a man to a duel, and the subsequent relief experienced when the duel is cancelled, are followed by a reference to his father's murder ten years later. The author describes his naïve joy at his father's reprieve from death:

I saw my mother's serene everyday face, but I could not look at my father.

And then it happened: my heart welled in me like that wave in which the *Buyniy* rose when her captain brought her alongside the *Suvorov*, and I

had no handkerchief, and ten years were to pass before a certain night in 1922, at a public lecture in Berlin, when my father shielded the lecturer (his old friend Mulyukov) from the bullets of two Russian Fascists and while vigorously knocking down one of the assassins, was fatally shot by the other. But no shadow was cast by that future event upon the bright stairs of our St. Petersburg house; the large cool hand that rested on my head did not quaver, and several lines of play in a difficult chess composition were not yet blended on the board (150).

The tone of dark irrevocability, the retrospective knowledge of the future that is now the past, is echoed in his novel *The Gift*. Nabokov, writing in the voice of his fictional character A.N. Suhoshchokov, describes Pushkin's way of forging literature from life:

In addition to the poet's extracting poetry out of his past, he also found in it tragic thoughts about the future. The triple formula of human existence: irrevocability, unrealizability, inevitability—was well known to him. But how he wanted to live! (99).

This firmness of stance (he wanted to live!) was derived from the foundation of place and culture that Nabokov inherited from his family and the Russian literary tradition. Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour called it a "profound sense of spiritual security, a knowledge of who and what he was" in her book *Alien Tongues* (84). His confidence, which may have been part of Nabokov's father's character as well, derives from a special reserve of knowledge forged in solitude that sets him apart. That inheritance enabled Nabokov to adroitly navigate an admittedly precarious existence: 20 years of European exile and 20 more years in the United States, never settling permanently anywhere until the Nabokovs' ultimate residence at the Montreux Palace Hotel in Switzerland. In a magazine

interview with Alvin Toffler from 1964, reprinted in *Strong Opinions*, Toffler asked why the Nabokovs, 20 years in America, “camped impermanently in motels, cabins, furnished apartments, and the rented homes of professors away on leave,” rather than settling down. Nabokov replied,

The main reason, the background reason is, I suppose, that nothing short of a replica of my childhood surroundings would have satisfied me...so why trouble with hopeless approximations? Then there are some special considerations: For instance the question of impetus, the habit of impetus. I propelled myself out of Russia so vigorously, with such indignant force that I have been rolling on and on ever since (27).

In Simona Morini’s interview for *Vogue* in 1972, Nabokov remarks ironically, “The fact that of our Russian heritage, the hardiest survivor proved to be a traveling bag is both logical and emblematic” (*Strong Opinions*, 204). Switzerland itself, with its three official languages and storied neutrality, seemed an appropriate place for the literary butterfly to alight. His independent spirit could range unmolested there, guarded by the Alps and his wife Véra’s protection.

Living hand to mouth in Paris, Nabokov composed the novel *The Gift* [*Dar*, in Russian], drawing from his emigrant experience. “The most enchanting things in nature and art are based on deception,” says Fyodor, Vladimir Nabokov’s poet-hero. This refers to nature’s designs and the writer’s craft. Fyodor plans to “shuffle, twist, mix, re-chew, and re-belch everything, add spices of my own and impregnate things so much with myself that nothing remains of the autobiography but dust” – hence the deception. (344-345). It is a vivid sort of dust that resists burial and haunts the mind of the poet.

Living in exile in Berlin seven years after the Russian Revolution, he struggles to embody the past in words:

Alas, it is already difficult for me to gather all the parts of the past; already I am beginning to forget relationships and connections between objects that still thrive in my memory, objects I thereby condemned to extinction (25).

In fact, the past has infested Fyodor's present with longings that cannot be reconciled and barely spoken, a past that must be written cryptically to avoid pathos, in a tone that is light, insouciant, masking the darkest knowledge of betrayal. In *The Gift*, Nabokov uses narrative and poetic transitions to bring Fyodor's ghosts into the present, merging the voice of Pushkin with that of the character's father (98). The narration, written in the third person when speaking of Pushkin, then abruptly changes into the first person singular (101). The effect is like driving into a dark tunnel on a rainy day and upon exiting, emerging into the sunshine.

Fyodor is speaking as "I." This is intentional; the reader crosses a border into the realm of the personal, recounting Fyodor's memories of his own intense and magical apprenticeship with his father, an entomologist. The father's field trips are recounted in spectacular visual detail. The passage is broken abruptly by a thought: was his mother happy when his father was in the field? Nabokov then inserts his mother's letter, describing their separations and reunions. His mother, in retrospect, reflects on their former separations, compared to the present separation that is forever: "It sometimes seemed to me then that I was unhappy, but now I know that I was always happy, that that unhappiness was one of the colours of happiness" (104). The entire section has a strongly nostalgic tint, delicate as the wings of a butterfly, but eternal. Then Fyodor

follows her reflection with his first person narration, describing his father's many attributes and anecdotal stories. He uses interesting bridges to transition from one perspective to another:

However that may have been, I am convinced now that our life then really was imbued with a magic unknown in other families. From conversations with my father, from daydreams in his absence, from the neighborhood of thousands of books full of drawings with animals, from the precious shimmer of the collections, from the maps, from all the heraldry of nature and the cabbalism of Latin names, life took on a kind of bewitching lightness that made me feel as if my own travels were about to begin.

Thence I borrow my wings today (114).

In fiction as well as memoir, Nabokov traces his *wings* to his own parents' strong example. Fyodor's fictional journey to find his father departs from an old reproduction of a painting of Marco Polo departing from Venice that hangs in his father's study. Note that it is not the painting, but a cheap reproduction, a counterfeit. The view is a visual bridge to the caravan in Przhevalsk, where his father went with post-horses from Tashkent, and never returned (114). Fyodor, in his imagination, enters the painting. Suddenly, his first person narrative reports from the caravan, where Cossacks make preparations for his father's collecting expedition. He *sees* the caravan entering the mountains. He is there with his father on the last fatal trip. In a shift of positioning, he relates the story in his father's voice. In this remarkable narration, told in the first person, Fyodor *becomes* his father, in his imagination:

In this desert are preserved traces of an ancient road that Marco Polo passed six centuries before I did: its markers are piles of stones I also

saw and heard the same as Marco Polo: the ‘whisper of spirits calling you aside’ and the queer flicker of air, and endless progression of caravans and armies of phantoms coming to meet you, thousands of spectral faces in their corporeal way pressing upon you, through you and suddenly dispersing” (122).

The whisper of spirits, the armies of phantoms, and the spectral faces are the traces of the dead, brought back to life. Fyodor follows this with an historical anecdote: Marco Polo on his deathbed, when asked to recant the truth of the stories he brought back from the east, insisted that he had not told even half of the incredible things he had seen. The link to Fyodor’s father and his lost story is implied. The anecdote is the bridge back to the third person narration, and back to Fyodor’s present, a most incredible plasticity of storytelling craft, similar to cinematic flashback technique. Nabokov’s ability to transform time, place, mood, tense, and narrative voice through the use of visual imagery is extraordinary in this passage. It is possible that Sebald, who loved *Speak, Memory*, may have also been familiar with the caravan scenes in *The Gift*. A list of Nabokov’s library holdings at the time of his death, cataloged by literary scholar Jo Catling, in *Saturn’s Moons: W. G. Sebald – a Handbook*, includes many works by Nabokov, but does not list *The Gift* (406). However, that does not prove he never read it.

Speculation aside, in ghostlike appearances, Nabokov flits silently through *The Emigrants* like the Parnassius mnemosyne butterflies that he collected in the park at Vyra. As Nabokov scholar Leland de la Durantaye has written, Sebald made the presence of Vladimir Nabokov a “thematic thread” in *The Emigrants* (de la Durantaye, 426). The butterfly man’s position in the novel, in opposition to some of the other characters, is that of a true guide who suggests an alternative response to catastrophe. The narrator first

mentions Nabokov in a description of a photograph of Selwyn with a butterfly net that reminds him of the Russian author. In one of Sebald's subtle visual jokes, the photograph that accompanies the text is an actual picture of Nabokov. Paul meets Lucy Landau when she is reading a copy of *Speak, Memory* on a park bench. Uncle Adelwarth stays at the Hotel Eden in Montreux, not far from Nabokov's last home in the Palace Hotel. At the end of his life, Adelwarth commits himself to an asylum in Ithaca, New York where he frequently observes a man with a butterfly net, hunting on the grounds. This happens to occur during the same year—1953—when Nabokov was finishing the text of *Speak Memory* in Ithaca, while teaching at Cornell University (429). Adelwarth's final electric shock treatment, causing "an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember," is delayed because he has become distracted "waiting for the butterfly man" (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 114-115). But the interruption is merely a temporary reprieve, because Adelwarth has chosen to obliterate memory, something the butterfly man would never do. In *The Gift*, Nabokov invokes Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory and time, the inventor of language, and the mother of the nine Muses. Nabokov's character Fyodor contemplates naming his girlfriend Zina "Half-Mnemosyne" in the poem he is writing to her. Yet Nabokov wrote in his introduction to *The Gift* that its real heroine is not Zina, but Russian Literature (8). Memory's role is to serve the creation of a work of art. Fyodor's poem ends, "Oh swear to me that while the heartblood stirs, you will be true to what we shall invent" (151-152). The act of creation in *The Gift* and *Speak, Memory* is elegiac. Nabokov drew the following connections between the role of memory and creativity:

I would say that imagination is a form of memory When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our

capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne's mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may use when combining it with later recollections and inventions. In this sense, both memory and imagination are a negation of time (Appel and Nabokov 140).

In his remark, Nabokov was being Proustian in the same way as Walter Benjamin, who wrote that memories of the past are prophetic of the future, because the work of memory collapses time. In order to traverse the spaces of time, it is not enough to merely remember. It is necessary to allow memory to speak, in the creation of a work of art. In the first three chapters of *The Emigrants*, the 'butterfly man' is silent; in the fourth chapter, he *speaks* to Max Ferber, an artist who lost his family in the camps. Ferber tells the narrator a story about ascending Switzerland's Mont Grammont. Reaching the top, he is so mesmerized by the still lake below that he nearly leaps into the void. But he is interrupted:

. . . a man of about sixty suddenly appeared before him—like someone who's popped out of the bloody ground. He was carrying a large white butterfly net and said in an English voice that was refined but quite unplaceable, that it was time to be thinking of going down if one was going to be in Montreux for dinner. He had no recollection of having made the descent with the butterfly man [or the return journey to England] (174).

It's curious that Ferber says, "the bloody ground," a common enough expression in England. Nabokov springs from that *bloody ground*, the carnage of Europe, as Sebald's artistic guide. And indeed, Nabokov is *quite unplaceable*, because he is in perpetual exile.

Max Ferber, on the contrary, finds an identity in his place of exile. Ferber's studio is on the docks of Manchester, a dark sooty city with an industrial past:

Ferber had set up his easel in the grey light that entered through a high north-facing window layered with the dust of decades. Since he applied the paint thickly, and then repeatedly scratched it off the canvas as his work proceeded, the floor was covered with a largely hardened and encrusted deposit of droppings mixed with coal dust, several centimeters thick at the center and thinning out toward the edges, in places resembling the flow of lava. This, said Ferber, was the true product of his continuing endeavors and the proof of his failure (161).

Ferber is insistent that his studio should never change. The only thing that is to be added is the debris from his process of painting and the "steady production of dust" that fell from the constant erasing and redrawing, culminating in "a portrait of great vividness" (162). Sebald told Eleanor Wachtel that he was uncomfortable with tidiness. "Dust has something very, very peaceful about it." He detested the cold order that is typical of the bourgeois salon. (58-59). After his encounter with the butterfly man in Switzerland, Ferber's memories of his trips with his father to sell art in Switzerland return, and he experiences an emotional breakthrough. He begins work on a painting called "Man with a Butterfly Net" that he paints, scrapes off, and repaints for over a year; he is frustrated, unsatisfied, because he never succeeds in capturing the face of the butterfly man (174). In darkness, Ferber paints on, responding to an unthinkable past whose face is invisible.

The model for Ferber was a hybrid of two men, Sebald's Manchester landlord who arrived at age fifteen and the artist Frank Auerbach who at eight years old, was

sent to school in England, thanks to the charity of the Anglo-Irish writer, Iris Origo, Marchesa of Val d'Orcia. (Angier 73-74; Hughes 17-19). Auerbach's painting and drawing technique is remarkably like Sebald's descriptions. In the original German version *Die Ausgewanderten*, the character's name is Max Aurach. To address Auerbach's objections, the name Aurach was changed to Ferber in the English translation. Auerbach has painted sitters repeatedly in series studies, who have had longstanding model relationships with him over the course of decades. Catherine Lampert, an art historian and one of Auerbach's most frequent sitters (Hughes 7), has noted his use of wetter paint and a process of renderings that are "invented and cancelled." Auerbach told her in 1984, "now one goes to put a colour on and it's placed somewhere else. Or one decides to put paint on a head by where the voice comes from" (Lampert, Rosenthal, and Carlisle 25). She has described Auerbach's paintings of Stella West, known in the paintings titles as E. O. W., as using "displacement" to create a strong emotional experience in the viewer:

Between 1961 – 1973 the paintings of Stella move through a process of what psychologists (and art historians) call displacement. The liquidity of the paint is at the center of something almost alchemical in its ability to express feeling; a process that Auerbach takes, by himself, into virgin territory, in the 1980s. The brushstrokes, in contrast to mass, manage to convert us, almost like a stigmatism, to truth. Rembrandt's and Titian's late tonal paintings guided him, yet he began to act in the modern idiom, open to pungent attacks on our nerves as well as our acceptance of disorder (25).

One can make comparisons between Auerbach's sources of inspiration and Sebald's method of drawing inspiration from writers and artifacts of the past and using them in a post-modern manner that employs shifting (displacement), series, repetition, and gesture, as Lampert writes, *to convert us . . . to truth*, rather than telling the reader anything directly. Lampert wrote that Auerbach's paintings after 1980 "required him to enter a state of abandon, one he described recently as like 'sleepwalking,' while keeping to the present by keeping a humble and alert dialogue. Deborah Ratcliffe, his model at the time, described his abandon this way:

For the next forty minutes or so, I listened to the canvas being attacked. There was grunting, and groaning and rattling, and lunging. Paint was obviously being sloshed about, then scraped and blotted with paper... I couldn't see it but I could feel it and there was something quite sexual about it (29).

Sebald, on viewing Auerbach's work, probably picked up the multivalent quality of these paintings; they are somber, transcendent, and at the same time, communicate a powerful sensuality. However, it is crucially important to keep in mind that the painter Auerbach's personal story is significantly different that of the character Ferber, who is a fabrication of W. G. Sebald, and invented for the purposes of his novel.

The gutsy style of making art at the end of the twentieth century is embodied in the landscape of post-industrial Manchester, formerly the "industrial Jerusalem . . . its entrepreneurial spirit and progressive vigour the envy of the world" (165). Like Ambros Adelwarth's Jerusalem, Manchester's glory days are all in the past. Ferber, who arrived in the 1930s, describes a time he can remember, when Manchester was the largest inland port on earth. He and the narrator imagine this as they traverse a motionless,

deserted canal (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 165-166). The monstrously large Victorian buildings that haunt the other sections of *The Emigrants* are present in Manchester's cavernous abandoned warehouses, factories with smashed windows, silent docks, and the enormous Midland Hotel where Ferber lives after his success (232-234).

An industrial landscape is the natural place for artists seeking space. But there are other qualities that appeal to Ferber. Manchester has been a refuge for Jews since the 19th century. Remaining in Manchester is a constant reminder to Ferber of his Jewish parents' fate, after they said goodbye to him at Oberwiesefeld Airport, on the day in 1939 that he departed Germany, with the help of an English consul who was willing to take a bribe. His father's hesitance to leave proves fatal. His memory of his parents' faces that day, what they said to each other when they said their farewells, is as blank as the faces on his canvases (187). Ferber says, "when I arrived in Manchester, I had come home, in a sense, and with every year I have spent in this birthplace of industrialization, amidst the black façades, I have realized more clearly than ever that I am here, as they used to say, to serve under the chimney" (192). The chimneys of Manchester's industrial buildings recall the factories of death built by the Third Reich and the fate of his family. Ferber understands only too well his identity and his task. His artistic work is the task of remembrance but also his identity. The *Max Ferber* chapter reminds us that making art is its own redemption.

As in the other three chapters, there is a story-within-a-story, the memoir that Ferber's mother Luisa Lanzberg writes before her deportation. It is strongly reminiscent of Nabokov's elegiac, yet sparkling tone in *Speak, Memory*. Luisa describes in vivid detail the daily life of the Jews of Steinach, who had inhabited the town "at least as far back as the 17th century" (193). She recalls the exquisite landscape along the Saale river,

protected by the Alps. She depicts their lovely home and her aunt, so beautiful, “a real Germania” (195). One hears Sebald’s bitterness in using that term, and one wonders if Luisa, in choosing it, is using retrospective irony as she writes from the perspective of their tightening fate, or if it is just common parlance. Luisa describes the personalities of her neighbors, their lovely names, the food they enjoyed, the holidays, in short, their lives. It is not only a description of Jewish life; it makes clear that these Jews were part of the fabric and cultural life of their villages and towns. Luisa’s idyllic 18-page passage creates a pocket of exquisite memory within the bleak body of the novel. It recalls a Jewish way of life that was eradicated in Europe and makes audible the unspoken losses of Germany’s past. Of course, the reader knows in retrospect that these people are doomed. “It almost goes without saying that there are not Jews in Steinach now, and that those who live there have difficulty remembering those who were once their neighbors and whose homes and property they appropriated, if indeed they remember them at all,” writes the narrator (194).

In Steinach and Kissingen, all that remains of the Jews is “a wilderness of graves, neglected for years, crumbling and gradually sinking into the ground amidst tall grass and wild flowers under the shade of trees, which trembled in the slight movement of air.” The cemetery keys that the narrator is given don’t work and he is forced to climb the fence. The photograph inserted in this text is of the gate to a Jewish cemetery, with a sign in German that reads: “This cemetery is under the recommended protection of the general public. Destructive vandalism and every insulting piece of mischief will be prosecuted. – The City of Bad Kissingen” (author’s translation). Common on the gates of Jewish graveyards in southern Germany, the sign is a reference to the deliberate desecration of the Jewish past. Amongst the older gravestones, he finds a trace of Luisa

and her family in a new stone, erected by her surviving emigrant brother. The last words of her memoir, describing an ice-skating rink, written just before deportation are prescient. “When I think back to those days, I see shades of blue everywhere – a single empty space, stretching out into the twilight of late afternoon, crisscrossed with the tracks of ice-skaters long vanished” (218). Sebald builds on this image with descriptions of vast stretches of emptiness and abandoned industries, in his portrayal of a decaying Europe and a vanished heritage.

The caravan, the figure of migration, makes its appearance once more in the tacky fresco painted on the wall of Wadi Halfa, a “transport café” that Ferber and the narrator frequent, run by a disenfranchised Maasai chieftain and his sons with “incomparably stylish apathy” (162-163). Despite the artist’s efforts, the painted desert caravan has little rapport with the Sudanese port of Wadi Halfa on the banks of the Nile River that it is meant to depict. As usual, Sebald is sardonic in his choice of names. After Egypt built the Aswan High Dam, archeologists tried to protect Wadi Halfa’s ancient monuments from inundation, and the population was relocated to New Halfa, a replacement for the ancestral site (“Wadi Halfa” n. p.). Sebald describes the muralist’s hackwork, the opposite of Ferber’s artistic integrity:

The painter lacked the necessary skill, and the perspective he had chosen was a difficult one, as a result of which both the human figures and the beasts of burden were slightly distorted, so that, if you half shut your eyes, the scene looked like a mirage, quivering in the heat and light” (164).

The theme of migrants that end up far from home extends to immigrants from the global South in this chapter: the laconic servility of disenfranchised African chieftains and, near the end of the chapter, a Turkish motor launch captain on the Saale river in

Bad Kissingen, who states that “there was no end to stupidity, and nothing was as dangerous.” (226-227). Stupidity, the act of not seeing one another, is the primary cause of social suffering. The narrator says that he cannot tell one Maasai’s face from another’s; they are almost interchangeable. One wonders why on earth Sebald has written this. Then it becomes clear. There is a theme of faceless people whose existence is erased that runs like a thread throughout the Max Ferber chapter; faces of parents that it is too painful to remember; faces of Jews whom their German neighbors choose to erase, faces of the emigrants who live amongst us. With forgetfulness comes pain, the pain of suppressed remembrance that Ferber encounters, when he visits the Isenheim Altarpiece in Switzerland:

The monstrosity of that suffering, which emanating from the figures depicted, spread to cover the whole of Nature, only to flood back from the lifeless landscape to the humans marked by death, rose and ebbed within me like the tide. Looking at those gashed bodies, and at the witnesses of the execution, doubled up by grief like snapped reeds, I gradually understood that, beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced – consciousness – and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about this. What is certain, though, is that mental suffering is effectively without end. One may think one has reached the very limit, but there are always more torments to come. One plunges from one abyss to the next (169-172).

This paragraph encompasses almost everything Sebald is struggling with: cruelty that obliterates Nature, humans marked by death, social isolation, and the unbearable grief that severs us from consciousness. Rumi’s *grief like snapped reeds* are repeated here. For

his survival and sanity, it is necessary for Ferber to give the narrator his mother's memoir. The pain of reading it would annihilate his essential ability to create art, which is his refuge from the insanity of history. Characteristically, Ferber shifts his experience of the Isenheim Alterpiece to a memory of the excruciating pain that he suffered due to a slipped disc, an event that he somehow associates with a photograph that his father took of him, a boy bent over writing. The photograph of the writing boy links Ferber to the author Sebald and his own difficulties in coming to terms with the past and his father, the German soldier. Near the end of the chapter, speaking in the voice of the narrator, Sebald admits:

Often I could not get on for hours or days at a time, and not infrequently I unraveled what I had done, continuously tormented by scruples that were taking tighter hold and steadily paralyzing me. These scruples concerned not only the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to, no matter what approach I tried, but also the entire questionable business of writing By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions. Even what I had salvaged as a "final version" seemed to me a thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched (230-231).

Sebald, like other German language writers of the postwar period, struggled with the question of how to write about the legacy of his father's generation. The example of the German father was a problem for Sebald, in a way that was not problematic for Nabokov. The fact that he had the loving example of his maternal grandfather made his situation even more complicated, in that Sebald as a boy was juggling two guides, one true and one false. The true guide, exemplified by the values of his deceased grandfather, was buried under ice and waiting for recovery. The silence of the older

generation required postwar German writers to interrogate the past and speak out in unusually strong ways. In the voice of the narrator, Sebald admits, “the mental impoverishment and lack of memory that marked the Germans, and the efficiency with which they had cleaned everything up, were beginning to affect my head and my nerves” (225). For Sebald’s generation, there was a new challenge, the problem of representation, or as Sebald put it, *the entire questionable business of writing* about social suffering. However, Sebald found a way to do it, just as Ferber knew that Manchester was his destiny, through the use of inversions, something that he may have observed in Proust.

The countless mirror images in the novel, the blind glass windowpanes, characters gazing down from the mountains to the lakes and rivers below, reflections in the ice, the mist, the fog, speak of false illusions. This is especially evident in the songs that Sebald uses with bitter irony. In addition to the ones already mentioned, it is instructive to look briefly at the two in the last scene of the novel. They are throwaway lines, as the narrator reflects upon his own life in Manchester in the late sixties and remembers the tacky performances of amateur singers at Liston’s Music Hall, accompanied by a Wurlitzer organ. *The old home town looks the same / as I step down from the train*, are the first two lines of Claude “Curly” Putman, Jr.’s over-played and sentimental hit, “Green Green Grass of Home,” popularized by Porter Wagoner and Tom Jones. The other lines he uses, from the third act of Wagner’s *Parsifal*, set on Good Friday, in the domain of the Grail, are Parsifal’s: *Oh alas the day of greatest pain!* and *How beautiful the meadows seem today!* Gurnemanz tells Parsifal that there is no need for sorrow, because the tears of repentant sinners will make the fields and meadows fertile again. As men cannot see Christ on the cross, they must turn instead to their fellow man

redeemed. However, placed in the funhouse mirror setting of a decaying music hall, sung by a dwarf, these lines are used as an inversion. The speaker who dreams of the “Green Green Grass of Home,” wakes to find himself in prison, awaiting execution, and will only return home as a corpse. Sebald uses mythic German opera and a maudlin American song to challenge ideals of nobility that elevate the homeland to mythic status, so common in the Nazi period, and certainly at work today, when politicians invoke the flag and the founding fathers to manipulate crowds.

Where does Sebald leave us? The mad brothers, one a parliamentarian and the other an architect, seem to be still at work. His last images are taken from an exhibition of Nazi propaganda photographs of Jews in a model factory, in the Litzmannstadt ghetto in Lodz, which the narrator tells us is also a mirror image: the *polski Mانشester*. The evidence is presumably photographed before their extermination. He narrows in on the punctum: a photograph of three Jewish women, weaving on a loom in the ghetto factory—who, he tells us, may even have produced a fabric in the narrator’s family home, or something similar—whom he compares to the Three Fates that personify destiny. Nona spins the threads of life. Decuma measures them. Morta cuts the thread in death (237). *How does one account for the fate of these Jews*, he seems to ask. As the Fates, they hold our own destiny in their hands. From the dead, they measure, spin, and cut. In *Berlin Childhood*, Walter Benjamin wrote, “We can never entirely recover what has been forgotten. But we do understand it, and the more deeply what has been forgotten lies buried within us, the better we understand this longing” (Benjamin 140). Sebald reminds us that taking an authentic position can, at the very least, save one’s sanity and invite memory to speak.

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