

## Responsible Ruins? W.G. Sebald and the Responsibility of the German Writer

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The relationship of literature to politics and history is not adequately captured by the notion of political turns or new beginnings, nor is it adequately discussed in the notion of an autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, an idea that had a surprising rebirth in the 1990s.<sup>i</sup>

This observation from Andreas Huyssen comes in the context of a generally positive consideration of the work of W.G. Sebald. In the same article, Huyssen expresses admiration for this work, “which gains some of its power precisely because it remains outside of such reductive alternatives”. The reductive alternatives (autonomous aestheticism *or* social engagement) are the terms in which the responsibility of the German writer is couched in the so-called *Literaturstreit* of the 1990s. In both his essays and his literary writings, Sebald’s position appears on the surface to have little to do with those terms. Yet our reading of how Sebald configures the writer’s responsibility has to take into account the fact that Huyssen’s admiration is tempered by his disquiet that in his later writings, and particularly in his lectures on *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Sebald “had yielded to the temptation [...] to interpret the most recent historical developments simply as natural history.”<sup>ii</sup> This is, in Huyssen’s eyes, irresponsible, since “the discourse of the natural history of destruction remains too

closely tied to metaphysics and to the apocalyptic philosophy of history so prominent in the German tradition”.<sup>iii</sup> Huyssen’s concern is shared by other critics, such as Peter Morgan, who have found that Sebald fails to take “responsible ownership” of history. For Morgan, despite the works’ “intertextual complexity and European urbanity [...], Sebald’s ‘linke Melancholie’ [...] is the manifestation of extreme disappointment with the outcomes of quotidian post-enlightenment rationality in its social, cultural and political aspects. He is a traumatised member of his generation [...] whose disappointment at the failure of reason has produced a cultural pessimism of religious dimensions.”<sup>iv</sup>

The charge of irresponsibility only makes sense in the context of post-war German literary history, which has defined the responsibility of the writer as being towards the society of which he is part. That literary history begins with Thomas Mann’s revocation of the German tradition of cultural pessimism both in the controversial essay “Deutschland und die Deutschen” and in the novel *Doktor Faustus*, in which he employs the composer Adrian Leverkühn as the model of the “irresponsible” artist, demonstrating how an ostensibly “apolitical” art can in fact be in tune with the irrational barbarism of its time.<sup>v</sup> Mann’s essay and novel were, in effect, critiques of those “inner emigration” writers of the period who claimed that they had remained responsible for German culture during the dark days of National Socialism. The compromised status of those writers and artists who were now seen as having operated “irresponsibly” in Germany during the “Third Reich” seemed to discredit the tradition of cultural pessimism in which Huyssen and Morgan place Sebald. A group of younger writers gathered under the name

*Gruppe 47* helped establish the idea of “Stunde Null”, “Kahlschlag” and a “fresh start” in the post-war era.<sup>vi</sup> It was in the 1960s that the writers associated with the *Gruppe 47*, Martin Walser, Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass, moved into a position of pre-eminence and at the same time cultivated an image of the engaged writer, responsible to society, playing a role as writers to bring about social change through engagement with the public sphere.<sup>vii</sup>

### *The German Literaturstreit*

The role of the writer established in the post-war period came under attack in the *Literaturstreit* of the early 1990s, which really gathered momentum around a series of *feuilleton* reviews of Christa Wolf’s *Was bleibt*. This debate established aesthetic and literary positions in what was perceived as an era of new beginnings.<sup>viii</sup> The term *Literaturstreit* has its own history, derived from the *Historikerstreit* of the mid-1980s, which was fought between those who insisted on a critical understanding of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, and those who wanted to move towards the “normalisation” of Germany’s past within a wider context of mid-century totalitarianism. It divided German intellectuals between those with a continuing faith in the “Projekt Moderne” and those who rejected such a position.<sup>ix</sup> Analogous positions were assumed in the *Literaturstreit*, where the rebirth of an autonomous aesthetic sphere was propagated in articles by Frank Schirrmacher, Karl-Heinz Bohrer and Ulrich Greiner, who shared three common assumptions.<sup>x</sup> First, they argued that German literature and society after 1945 had

witnessed the “Erklärungs- und Selbsterklärungsprozeß einer Generation” through the construction of a public sphere where writers had performed “eine lebenswichtige Ersatzfunktion” (Greiner). A certain kind of literary production had become paradigmatic: according to Schirmacher, the *Gruppe 47* became “ein[e] der Produktionszentralen des dritten Bewußtseins”. In the novels of Walser, Grass, Böll and others we would find the “westdeutschen Zivilisationstyp; in ihnen spricht die Stimme, mit der die Öffentlichkeit mit sich selber reden wird”(Schirmacher).

Second, post-war literary production had been inextricably connected to moral positions. This generation “protegierte diese jungen, moralisch aufgewühlten Autoren. Sie sah sich veranlaßt, die Vergangenheit als Erinnerung wachzuhalten” (Schirmacher). For Schirmacher, it was a backward step for literature to be involved in the progressive *construction* of identity, “ein aus den Katastrophen wieder hervorgegangenes [...] Ich, wie es etwa von dem konservativen Gottfried Benn längst zerstört worden war”. According to Greiner, such literature judges the author and his work solely on the basis of his moral position, not the quality of his writing: “Der Text ist der moralische Selbstentwurf des Autors. Und der Autor ist identisch mit seiner moralischen Absicht”. We see this identification at work in the critiques of Huysen and Morgan as they disregard the complex ironies of Sebald’s narrative voice.

Third, while it may have been necessary for the “moralisch engagierten Autoren der BRD” to deal with “ein humanitäres und politisches Debet” (Greiner) – in other words, to be responsible towards a national community – this did not

mean that literature and morality had to continue their “Vernunftfehe”, where the morality of an art work lay in its “geschichtsphilosophischen Anwendungsfall” (Greiner). Literature should now be free to “normalise” itself, free from all teleological obligations: literary production need not follow the dictates of the past. In discussing what constitutes “normal” literary production, the generational debate encompasses a wider tradition. With a remarkable sense of moral imperative, all three critics argued that literature should in fact follow the dictates of a different aesthetic tradition. For Schirmmacher it meant reconnecting with European modernism. Similarly, for Bohrer, it meant a return to Nietzsche, Baudelaire and, even further back, to Friedrich Schlegel, and a sense that “das Ästhetische ist das Ästhetische, nichts sonst”. This was in contrast to what Greiner describes as having begun (with Hegel) as “Geschichtsphilosophie” and having come to a conclusion in the “Gesinnungsästhetik” of the post-war era, which does not accept art as something “in itself”, but subordinates it to “die bürgerliche Moral, auf den Klassenpunkt, auf humanitäre Ziele oder neuerdings auf die ökologische Apocalypse”: in other words, such literature was expected to offer a “praktische Handlungsanweisung”. The positions taken up in the debate here are not unique to post-45 West Germany, but are informed by a Romantic, anti-Enlightenment impulse, as indicated by Schirmmacher’s reference to the “Zivilisationstyp”, which harks back to the *Zivilisation/Kultur* debate at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>xi</sup> This anti-Enlightenment, anti-modern (but not necessarily anti-modernist) tradition operates with a timeless conception of *Kultur* and art. Such a position comes back into currency at a time when the

historical march of Enlightenment progress appears to have ground to a halt, and, with the apparently successful “conclusion” of German unification, an opportunity arises to hammer the final nail into the coffin of the long-standing tradition of literature as a tool of enlightenment.

### *Luftkrieg und Literatur*

The debate about conceptions of *Kultur* is given a new inflection in the 1990s by the fact that it is the role to be played by a “unified” German literature within a “normalised” German nation that is at stake.<sup>xii</sup> The furore raised by Sebald’s lectures, delivered in Switzerland and published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in 1997, on the experience of the air war and its representation in German literature looks like the result of a calculated attempt by a writer to touch upon what he believes to be a societal taboo, as if to illustrate that any narrative of Germany’s literary, historical and societal normalisation was far from complete.<sup>xiii</sup> In that sense, Sebald was continuing the practice of the *Gruppe 47* in the (necessary) production of the public sphere, enabling public debate about something that had not been properly discussed.

The essays on the air war, now published as a book with an epilogue in which the author reflects on the public response to this lectures, are significant not only because they show Sebald fulfilling the role of a writer engaging with a German audience apparently out of a sense of duty to bring to public consciousness a traumatic societal wound that he feels has never been confronted,

but because they reveal his high expectations of literature through his argument that, through strategies of metaphysical mythologization, post-war German literature had dealt inappropriately with the experience of historical trauma.<sup>xiv</sup>

Long before they were delivered in Switzerland, however, the lectures had already been published in a different form and a very different context. They are a reworking of a scholarly article that Sebald had published in 1982 under the title “Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte” (“Between History and Natural History”) at a time when he still held an academic university position. Andreas Huyssen compares the philosophy of history embodied in the Zürich lectures with that of the 1982 article, contending that in 1982 Sebald had argued in favour of the possibility of a progressive learning process through the critical labour of memory work, whereas in 1999 he “had yielded to the temptation [...] to interpret the most recent historical events simply as natural history”.<sup>xv</sup> While it is difficult to disagree that a metaphysical understanding of history informs Sebald’s writing,<sup>xvi</sup> the point at which such a metaphysics becomes “irresponsible” is actually addressed by Sebald in his readings of the literature on the air war.<sup>xvii</sup>

Sebald makes it clear where he stands on the representation of experience as “natural history” in his disapproval of the “key work” in both pieces, Hermann Kasack’s *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom*, written between 1942 and 1944 and completed in 1946. His disapproval derives from the fact that Kasack’s work brings “die realen Schrecken der Zeit durch Abstraktionskunst und metaphysischen Schwindel zum Verschwinden.”<sup>xviii</sup> For Sebald, the construction of a “präsumptiven metaphysischen Sinn” out of the experiences of the “mit dem

blanken Leben Davongekommenen”,<sup>xix</sup> or, as he puts it, “die Herstellung von ästhetischen oder pseudo-ästhetischen Effekten aus den Trümmern einer vernichteten Welt”, is “ein Verfahren, mit dem die Literatur sich ihrer Berechtigung entzieht”.<sup>xx</sup> Kasack not only fails to grasp the experience of the victims of suffering, but also employs a “magical realist” style, “der im großen und ganzen auf der Ebene der Mythisierung der erfahrenen und erfahrbaren Wirklichkeit operiert”.<sup>xxi</sup> Sebald here outlines the position from which, over the course of two decades, he would develop a literary method, setting out his own frame of reference for what constitutes the responsibility of the writer. Sebald implies that literature has a responsibility towards the victims of the kind of traumatic experience that should not be subordinated to an overriding metaphysics. In other words, he reconfigures literature’s responsibility in different terms from those used in the *Literaturstreit*. Literature may not be simply responsible towards itself as art, but, beyond the fact that his lectures rehearse an academic position in a wider public sphere, he does not suggest a social context in which the enactment of responsibility towards the victims of the historical process might take place.

In his radical rejection of the traditional strategies of literary fiction, Sebald glosses over how Kasack’s literary imagination actually engages with the “rubble of a destroyed world”, something that will be important when we come to examine Sebald’s own strategies for representing the remnants of traumatic experience. In *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom*, the ruins are seen by Robert, the central protagonist, on his arrival in a strange place beyond a river:



Als er seine Blicke umherschweifen ließ, um mit der Umgebung vertrauter zu werden, machte er eine sonderbare Entdeckung. Von den Häusern der umliegenden Straßenzeilen ragten nur die Fassaden auf, so daß man im schrägen Aufblick durch die kahlen Fensterreihen die Fläche des Himmels sehen konnte. Überrascht war Robert einige Schritte näher getreten und erkannte, daß fast überall hinter den nackten Außenmauern das offene Nichts lag. Der Anblick verlor indessen allmählich von seinem Schrecken; vielmehr wirkten die wenigen Gebäude, die in einigen Abständen noch mit heilem Dach ausgerüstet geblieben waren, wie Fremtteile, die dem Ruinenbild der Stadtlandschaft als nicht zugehörig erschienen.<sup>xxii</sup>

In 1982 Sebald considered that “die reduzierten Lebens- und Wirtschaftsverhältnisse in solchen Passagen als die empirischen Grundlagen der Erzählung greifbar [werden]”,<sup>xxiii</sup> but the ‘documentary’ element is secondary to the way the passage highlights the act of seeing, of constructing an image (“seine Blicke umherschweifen ließ”, “man [...] sehen konnte”, “der Anblick”, “dem Ruinenbild der Stadtlandschaft”). The ruins are an object for aesthetic contemplation, but they also afford an opportunity for metaphysical reflection, as is demonstrated by the fact that behind “den nackten Außenmauern das offene Nichts lag,” “Nichts” implying both physical nothing and existential nothingness.<sup>xxiv</sup> The ruin here is a naturalized part of the environment, a self-evident emblem of “Naturgeschichte”, rather than the result of a process of ruination.

Sebald's lectures cite many literary sources (Böll, Arno Schmidt, Hans Erich Nossack), leading Huysen to suggest that *Luftkrieg und Literatur* gives us "a reinscription of the trauma [of the air raids] through quotation", but the lectures also see and reflect on precisely this danger.<sup>xxv</sup> Sebald continually foregrounds the mediated nature of his experience of the air war, even in the third section of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Discussing the many responses to his lectures, he refers to a dozen pages sent to him by Harald Hollenstein, who had grown up in Hamburg under the National Socialists and had experienced the first air attacks on the Hanseatic city. However, Sebald immediately interrupts this report with a recollection (and citation) from Chateaubriand's description of the burning of Moscow. As Sebald points out, this description was "nicht die eines Augenzeugen, sondern eine rein ästhetische Rekonstruktion", and such "im nachhinein imaginierte Katastrophenpanoramen" of the German cities were presumably impossible, suggests Sebald, "wohl aufgrund des von so vielen miterlebten und vielleicht nie wirklich verwundenen Grauens."<sup>xxvi</sup> He then contrasts Chateaubriand's panorama with Hollenstein's report of the destruction of a bunker during an air attack. What Sebald does not point out explicitly is that Hollenstein is not reporting directly as an eyewitness, but re-telling what his mother had told him. Indeed, in a style curiously reminiscent of Sebald's own, the report ends: "Viele mußten erbrechen, als sie dieses Bild sahen, viele erbrachen, als sie über die Toten trampelten, andere brachen zusammen, wurden ohnmächtig. Hatte meine Mutter erzählt."<sup>xxvii</sup>

Here we have the selected reproduction of a textual representation of the memory of a memory, interrupted by the selected reproduction of a “purely aesthetic reconstruction” of a real event by a self-consciously literary “writer”.<sup>xxviii</sup> An important word here is “purely” (“rein”), and it is also a key word in Sebald’s 1982 critique of “einer rein naturhistorischen Interpretation jüngster historischer Entwicklungen”<sup>xxix</sup>. The lack of purity in Alexander Kluge’s documentary-based writings is one of the strategies of which Sebald approves in 1982, although by 1999, citing one of Kluge’s sources, Sebald comments that it might well be one of Kluge’s “pseudodokumentarischen Kunstgriffen”.<sup>xxx</sup>

#### *Documentary (or) Fiction?*

Such a description of Kluge’s avant-garde aesthetics might be said to diminish the political and emancipatory intention behind such a lack of aesthetic purity.<sup>xxxi</sup> If we return to Sebald’s earlier essays we see him developing the position from which his own prose can be read and which gives us an indication of how to evaluate the term ‘pseudo-documentary’, which could easily be applied to Sebald’s use of textual sources and photographs. An essay on Grass and Hildesheimer from 1983 takes issue with Grass’s *Tagebuch einer Schnecke*, criticizing Grass’s fictional strategies and arguing for the power of the documentary elements which, according to Sebald, are “fast ausschließlich” down to the “Recherchen Lichtensteins”, a Polish historian.<sup>xxxii</sup> This observation is, for Sebald, evidence that “die Literatur heute, allein auf sich gestellt, zur Erfindung

der Wahrheit nicht mehr taugt.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In other words, literature does not use historical material as truth, but as a means of “inventing truth”. Fiction alone is not enough. One of the major contextual differences between the scholarly articles of the 1980s and the lectures published in 1999 is that, in the meantime, Sebald had developed his own aesthetic strategy of fictionalized documentary, in which, as we saw in the lectures, the traces of the past must necessarily be aesthetically appropriated, but that the process of appropriation is almost always signalled and placed in question.

We see an example of this strategy in the aesthetically and historically precise representation of the ruins of post-war Berlin in Sebald’s travelogue-essay *Die Ringe des Saturn*, The remembrances are (necessarily) not Sebald’s, but belong to the exiled Michael Hamburger. Again, it is telling that we are dealing not with the experience of the traumatic process of ruination (i.e. the air war itself), but the ruins of its aftermath.<sup>xxxiv</sup> These recollections are situated within a meditation on the workings of memory: “[...] in Wirklichkeit erinnert man sich natürlich nicht. Zu viele Bauwerke sind eingestürzt, zuviel Schutt ist aufgehäuft, unüberwindlich sind die Ablagerungen und Moränen.”<sup>xxxv</sup> This passage is significant because it *precedes* reference to the actual “Bauwerke” and “Schutt” of post-war Berlin. Important too is the use of the passive, a technique that Sebald often employs in the context of the ruin, and that implies the absence of, or at least a refusal to name, an active agent in the process of ruination. While the above passage does not clarify the nature of this “Bruchstück” of memory, the following excerpt gives us an inkling:

Schaue ich heute, schreibt Michael, zurück auf Berlin, dann sehe ich bloß einen schwarz-blauen Hintergrund und darauf einen grauen Fleck, eine Griffelzeichnung, undeutliche Ziffern und Buchstaben, ein scharfes Eß, ein Zet, ein Vogelvau, mit dem Tafellappen verschmiert und ausgelöscht. Möglicherweise ist die blinde Stelle auch ein Nachbild der Ruinenlandschaft, in der ich 1947 herumgegangen bin, als ich erstmals in meine Heimatstadt zurückkehrte, um nach Spuren zu suchen aus der mir abhanden gekommenen Zeit. (RS, 212).

On the one hand, this memory fragment is the (extinguished) trace of a piece of writing, perhaps on a blackboard; on the other it may be a blind spot that is the “after-image” of the ruined landscape. In other words, it is not the ruins themselves, nor the original image of them, but the retinal trace thereof. This section sets at several removes the material of the ruins themselves, “freistehenden Fassaden, Brandmauern und Trümmerfelder” (RS, 212) through which Hamburger wandered in a “fast ans Somnambule grenzender Zustand”. This is achieved, firstly, by means of the metaphor that precedes them; and secondly through the fact that they have actually become a blind spot blocking other, earlier memories, and, thirdly, through the fact that these are Hamburger’s recollections, and not those of Sebald’s narrator.

The image of the ruined Berlin that remains is a hallucinatory one of an empty site filled with “bricks retrieved from the ruins”. Hamburger’s vision, not of

ruins, but of the preparatory stage to a restoration, shares many characteristics of the “ways of seeing” we already noted in the Kasack ruin landscape:

Denke ich heute an diesen Lagerplatz zurück, so sehe ich keinen einzigen Menschen, nur Ziegel sehe ich, Millionen von Ziegeln [...] - ein totenstilles Vorwinterbild, von dem ich mich manchmal frage, ob es seinen Ursprung nicht hat in einer Halluzination, insbesondere wenn ich aus der über jedes Vorstellungsvermögen gehenden Leere heraus die letzten Takte der Freischütz-Ouverture zu vernehmen glaube und danach, unaufhörlich, tage- und wochenlang das Kratzen der Nadel eines Grammophons. (RS, 213-214)

Throughout the description of Berlin, the accessibility and authenticity of the act of remembrance is placed in question. The past is only retrievable in fragmentary form, and can be perceived only through a hallucinatory state of mind in which the mediated fragments of a ruined culture repeat themselves endlessly. The ruins of Berlin are the inaccessible memories overlaid with the “blind spot”, that is, the afterimage, of the ruined landscape.

As is evident from the above exemplary excerpts, Sebald interrogates the workings of memory in a painstakingly scrupulous fashion. The ruin is here no self-evident emblem of “Naturgeschichte”, but like most ruins in Sebald’s work, it is a site of broken narration, a realm where the imagination actively engages with, indeed transforms the material environment, and where the mediating writer inhabits an interstitial space, both past and present, perpetually pointing to the

mediated nature of writing (someone else's) memories.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Such complexity means that it is surely unhelpfully reductive to read such differentiated texts as the “moralische Selbstentwurf” of an author whose work is identical with his moral intention. For while the ruin can be read as an emblem of a natural-historical philosophy of history, in Sebald's work it is not a self-evident figure of melancholy, nor is the aesthetic potential of the ruin simply offered up for ready consumption. The ruin comes to illustrate the work of mourning by compelling the reader to undertake the work of piecing together the palimpsest that bears the traces of a process of artistic ruination.

#### *Allegory, Ruin and Walter Benjamin*

Any discussion of the emblem of the ruin and philosophies of natural history is helpfully informed by reference to Walter Benjamin, in whom we also have a thinker who actively engaged with traditions of “natural history”. It was Benjamin who, in his study of the Baroque tragedy, observed that anyone studying the debris of history had to acknowledge the complexities of the critical scholar's vantage point. Benjamin writes of the “necessity of a sovereign attitude”, but also concedes:

Die Gefahr, aus den Höhen des Erkennens in die ungeheuren Tiefen der Barockstimmung sich hinabstürzen zu lassen, bleibt selbst dann unverächtlich. Immer wieder begegnet, in den improvisierten Versuchen, den Sinn dieser Epoche

zu vergegenwärtigen, das bezeichnende Schwindelgefühl, in das der Anblick ihrer in Widersprüchen kreisenden Geistigkeit versetzt.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Benjamin recognizes the danger (or “temptation” as Huyssen would describe it), of the Baroque temperament to the critical historian. Such a dizzy vantage-point is also the point at which Sebald concludes his second lecture on the air war, looking back to Kluge’s version of the bombing of Halberstadt:

Kluge blickt hier im wörtlichen wie im metaphorischen Sinn von einer übergeordneten Warte hinab auf das Feld der Zerstörung. Die ironische Verwunderung, mit der er die Tatsachen registriert, erlaubt ihm die Einhaltung der für jede Erkenntnis unabdingbaren Distanz. Und noch rührt sich sogar in [...] diesem aufgeklärtesten aller Schriftsteller der Verdacht, daß wir aus dem von uns angerichteten Unglück nichts zu lernen vermögen [...] Kluges Blick auf seine zerstörte Heimatstadt ist darum, aller intellektuellen Unentwegtheit zum Trotz, auch der Entsetzensstarre des Engels der Geschichte [...].<sup>xxxviii</sup>

This quotation, at the end of the second section of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, relating the “aufgeklärtesten aller Schriftsteller”, Alexander Kluge, to Benjamin’s “angel of history” does not merely serve to give Sebald’s metaphysics some intellectual respectability, as Huyssen asserts.<sup>xxxix</sup> Nor need it simply be, as Anne Fuchs suggests, “die bemühte Reminszenz an eine verbrauchte Utopie”.<sup>xl</sup> Significantly Sebald attributes to Kluge, not himself, the temptation of giving up on



Enlightenment progress. It is as if to suggest (tendentiously) that Sebald is simply following on from questions posed by Kluge's work, questions about the dialectical relationship between Enlightenment progress and ruination, pointing towards Benjamin's complex aesthetic and philosophical position, which might place in question some of the post-war certainties of what could be learnt from a critical engagement with the German past, in the light of the provocative question: what if the past two hundred years are indeed best understood as a natural history of destruction? While Sebald's work bids farewell to the notion of a history which can be intellectually comprehended and, therefore, rationally directed through human intervention, there is, however, scant evidence in Sebald's work for Morgan's polemical assertion that "[the] end of the world as he knows it must necessarily foreshadow the beginning of a new order".<sup>xli</sup> I also do not think that he subordinates historical experience to an overriding metaphysics. Instead, in the face of what he sees as "Zurücksinken in die Geschichte der Natur", Sebald seeks, through the specifics of the literary discourse he develops, the kind of redemption of historical experience imagined by Benjamin as the angel's desire, in the face of the horrors of the historical process, to 'verweilen, die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen'.<sup>xlii</sup>

That redemption may no longer have a utopian impulse, but Benjamin's productive reading of the Baroque *Trauerspiel* for the European context after World War One is overlaid by Sebald's productive reading of Benjamin and Kluge in the post-World War Two context. In both cases, the writers are attempting to counter a traditional aesthetics that they feel is not appropriate to a representation

of history and of the contemporary situation. For both, the allegorical mode is a dialectical way of seeing, and Benjamin's understanding of allegory can be read as informing the operation of Sebald's self-questioning aesthetic of ruination. As Benjamin observes, the allegorist tries to do justice to the object, but ultimately must betray and devalue it, and thus the justification of his imposing meaning onto an object has to be found in the hidden (and now discovered) "Wissen".<sup>xliii</sup> This knowledge, rooted in the detail as a corrective to the danger of the aestheticization of the ruin, enables Benjamin to develop a method which seeks to preserve "the endangered semantic potential"<sup>xliv</sup> of historical experience: "Schönheit, die dauert, ist ein Gegenstand des Wissens. [...] Ja, ohne ein zumindest ahnendes Erfassen vom Leben des Details durch die Struktur bleibt alle Neigung zu dem Schönen Träumerei."<sup>xlv</sup>

That method can be glimpsed in the unique form of historical writing that constitutes Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades* project where the fragmented quotations, the "collection of concrete, factual images of urban experience" were intended to "awaken political consciousness amongst present-day readers".<sup>xlvi</sup> Working against the unconscious repression of the past by both writers and readers in the post-war era,<sup>xlvii</sup> Sebald similarly seeks to rescue the "semantic potential" of fragments (photographs, testimony) of the past, not to write a critical history with an emancipatory intention, but to compose a literature whose aesthetic purity is disrupted through the interplay of fictional invention and historical detail, intertextuality and quotation. As an "artificially constructed ruin", the literary work can become a site for the creative engagement of the reader with the work of

memory. This, it could be argued, is where a writer is truly responsible – towards the engagement of an active reader.<sup>xlviii</sup>

### *Art, Mourning and Responsibility*

In the light of these observations, we need to reconsider how Sebald's work reconfigures the intellectual positions and assumptions of the *Literaturstreit*. Whereas Schirmacher *et al* may have argued that the post-war generation of writers should have been less concerned with being “moralisch einwandfrei”, Sebald, while adopting the generational categorization, argues that that group of writers was neither morally nor aesthetically scrupulous enough, in that they shared, and did not question, the taboos and aesthetic prejudices of their contemporaries.

Given Sebald's insistence in the air war lectures that literature has a “justification” that it can lose, Andreas Huyssen is doubtless correct to suggest that Sebald's writing has little to do with “the autonomy of the aesthetic”.<sup>xlix</sup> In an unexpected reconfiguration of the entrenched positions of the *Literaturstreit*, Sebald actually combines the demand that literature have a moral responsibility with a radical faith in literary utterance. While Sebald's literary style of writing is unashamedly traditional, his historicization of literary production is perhaps more useful than the conception of literature that informs Schirmacher's position. The latter's nostalgic recollection of an aesthetically radical European modernism revealed itself as eminently outdated in the first decade of the united Germany,

where waves of *Pop-Literatur* swept over the *feuilletons*, that ostensible embracing of the world of the commodity fetish that was far removed from those writers, “mit [deren] Büchern sich keine Gesellschaften aufbauen und kein Staat machen [liessen]” as Schirrmacher put it.<sup>1</sup>

Sebald may operate with a transhistorical conception of the literary utterance when he argues that what literature always does (and has done) is to “invent truth”, but such a conception of literature is not necessarily coterminous with the ideas of Greiner, Bohrer and their ilk, in that Sebald acknowledges the limitations of both fiction and documentary as aesthetic modes. His faith in literary production is matched by a desire to develop a mode of writing that does justice to the scruples outlined in the essays from the 1980s and 1990s, scruples which also involve a pessimistic scepticism towards the prescriptions and expectations of an Enlightenment conceived as technocratic and rationalizing.

Where that mode of writing does relate to and refine the aesthetic pessimism of Karl-Heinz Bohrer is in the terms of an essay that Bohrer published in *Merkur* in 1987, well before the more notorious Christa Wolf dimensions of the *Literaturstreit*. Decoupling modernity and modernism from the ongoing societal discontinuities created by modernization, Bohrer’s essay, “Nach der Natur. Ansicht einer Moderne jenseits der Utopie”, characteristically argues for a re-reading of an intellectual history of modernity borne out of a “doppelten, janusköpfigen Ursprung – nämlich Aufklärung und Romantik, Teleologie und Zerstörung”,<sup>li</sup> a history that would allow both for the incorporation of pessimism into theories of modernism and for the recognition of the “Trauer” of the

modernist subject as “die emotionale Konstante moderner Literatur überhaupt”.<sup>lii</sup> Such mourning is “das Phantasma, das dem Verlust von Natur und Geschichte entspricht”,<sup>liii</sup> and, in Bohrer’s terms, is not necessarily linked to a “sprechenden Subjekt”. He recognizes that a mourning for alienated nature, as exemplified by Hölderlin, or for the lost promise of happiness, as in the work of Gottfried Benn, is historically no longer relevant. Rather, he suggests a re-reading of modernity *per se* as a “Theorie der Trauer”, identifying Baudelaire as the definitive modernist poet, and Walter Benjamin’s work on the Baroque as central for an “Ästhetik der Moderne”.<sup>liv</sup> Literature “vermag keine Handlungsanweisung für das praktische Leben mehr zu geben”, but can give expression to “Trauer”.<sup>lv</sup>

While the parallels between Bohrer’s and Sebald’s positions are striking, the latter’s sense of mourning is more clearly directed. While Bohrer is principally concerned with sketching the contours of an “aesthetic subjectivity” that experiences an undirected sense of mourning, Sebald’s sense of mourning is rooted in a responsibility towards an Other, through which his own legitimation for speaking, indeed the construction of his narrative voice, is first made possible. In his lectures on the air war and elsewhere, Sebald establishes “Trauer”, circumscribed as the attempt to do justice to the experience of the victims of historical processes, as a central category for a responsible literary production. This is evident in his 1983 essay on Grass and Wolfgang Hildesheimer, where Sebald’s reading of “Trauer” is contextually bound to the Mitscherlich’s diagnosis of post-war West Germany’s collective inability to mourn – there being no “adäquate Trauerarbeit um die Mitmenschen [...], die durch unsere Taten in

Massen getötet wurden". For Sebald, the Mitscherlichs' assertion that Germans failed to accept the "moralische Pflicht, Opfer unserer ideologischen Zielsetzungen mit zu betrauern" is associated with the literature of the time, "die kaum eine Einsicht [...] in die Notwendigkeit einer Beschreibung des angerichteten Unheils zu erkennen gibt".<sup>lvi</sup> From this perspective, Sebald criticizes Grass again. The "kontrapunktische Exkurs in die Trauer" in *Tagebuch einer Schnecke* represented by the history of the Danzig Jews has something "mühselig Konstruiertes, etwas von einer historischen Pflichtübung" about it.<sup>lvii</sup> Grass's work, in which mourning, in Sebald's eyes, is an addendum, must be an *aesthetic* failure compared with Hildesheimer's *Tynset*, which, according to Sebald, appears "aus dem Zentrum der Trauer selber entstanden zu sein."<sup>lviii</sup>

In his essay on Jean Améry, Sebald observed that "negative Denker wie Bataille oder Cioran hat es eben in der deutschen Nachkriegsliteratur nicht gegeben",<sup>lix</sup> and, while it would be a mistake to join with Bohrer and link Sebald's pessimism too closely with such writers whose historical context is radically different from his own, we can nevertheless see here how his approach can be seen as comparable to Bohrer *et al.* For all his condemnation of the failures of the post-war generation, Sebald ultimately sees those failures are aesthetic limitations, and he offers the reader little sense of a "Handlungsanweisung" for the pragmatics of living, other than in a perpetual state of mourning. It is a literature that makes nothing happen: there is no quotidian post-unification German state to be founded through these writings.<sup>lx</sup> Sebald's practice of mourning extends beyond a mourning for the victims of National Socialism to a mourning for all victims of a

potentially undifferentiated natural history of destruction. In terms of the German tradition of reading post-Holocaust history, such a view, which would elide perpetrators and victims, will often be seen as irresponsible. Commenting on Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, a key work on the artist and responsibility in German literary history, Sebald observes that the novel contains 'eine historische Kritik [...] von einer mehr und mehr dem apokalyptischen Weltverständnis zuneigenden Kunst und zugleich das Geständnis seiner eigenen Verstricktheit'.<sup>lxi</sup> In the terms set out for himself in the air war lectures, Sebald's writings not only illustrate his own complicity as a German and a writer, but also place in question the privileging of any overarching historical narrative, even his own, over and above the specifics of traumatic human experience.

This becomes clear when we do justice to the ironies of the narrative voice in his works. These are most evident in the final section of *Die Ausgewanderten*, perhaps the most uncomfortable passage in his whole *oeuvre*. This passage is 'set' in Manchester but soon moves in hallucinatory fashion to Lodz under German occupation, and finds the narrator looking at photographs of the 'ghetto factories', highly-constructed images of workers, "die eigens und einzig für den Sekundenbruchteil des Fotografierens aufgeschaut haben (und anschauen haben dürfen) von ihrer Arbeit."<sup>lxii</sup> The narrator notes a potential complicity, in that his perspective may be equivalent to the German photographer Genewein, but his feelings are not, since the women objectified in the picture become subjects, albeit (and very importantly) within the narrator's own subjectivity:

Während die auf der rechten Seite so unverwandt und unerbittlich mich ansieht, daß ich es nicht lange auszuhalten vermag. Ich überlege, wie die drei wohl geheißen haben – Roza, Lusia und Lea, oder Nona, Decuna und Morta, die Töchter der Nacht, mit Spindel und Faden und Schere. (A, 355)

Here the narrator drives the antinomy of the allegory to the point of collapse, because the need to discover meaning in the object also leads to the betrayal and devaluation of the photograph as the narrator imposes a mythical narrative upon it. Writing in *New Republic* about the relationship between art and personal experience, Ruth Franklin has expressed how this passage illustrated the dangers of the “illusory workings of art against memory”, for her grandmother is a real person “whose experiences during the Holocaust cannot be subsumed in the cycle of life’s sorrows”:

[...] My imagining her behind Sebald’s loom, like Sebald’s invocation of Altdorfer or Virgil to describe Nuremberg, merely substitutes an artistic image for a blank space. The blankness, however, is closer to the truth. When it seeks to do the work of memory, art may be a source of illusion. <sup>lxiii</sup>

Franklin’s response is a striking demonstration of the potential that art has to provoke both the imagination and the conscience of the reader, but “the workings of art against memory” describes the ambivalence of Sebald’s work precisely. <sup>lxiv</sup> Franklin understands art as artifice here, but art, in Sebald’s presentation of it, is



more than purely a conscious artifice, as is suggested during the narrator's description of Max Aurach's methods in *Die Ausgewanderten*:

Die Arbeit an dem Bild des Schmetterlingsfängers habe ihn ärger hergenommen als jede andere Arbeit zuvor, denn als er es nach Verfertigung zahlloser Vorstudien angegangen sei, habe er es nicht nur wieder und wieder übermalt, sondern er habe es, wenn die Leinwand der Beanspruchung durch das dauernde Herunterkratzen und Neuauftragen der Farbe nicht mehr standhielt, mehrmals völlig zerstört und verbrannt. (A, 260)

Whereas the environment reveals (only) traces of past lives, the danger of the artwork lies in its claim to straightforward representation as is made clear by the narrator in his repetition of Aurach's 'method' as he writes of the difficulty of writing Aurach's story:

Dieser Skrupulantismus bezog sich sowohl auf den Gegenstand meiner Erzählung, dem ich, wie ich es auch anstellte, nicht gerecht zu werden glaubte, als auch die Fragwürdigkeit der Schriftstellerei überhaupt. Hunderte von Seiten hatte ich bedeckt mit meinem Bleistift- und Kugelschreibergekritzel. Weitaus das meiste davon war durchgestrichen, verworfen oder bis zur Unleserlichkeit mit Zusätzen überschmiert. (A, 345)

This self-conscious repetition of Aurach's method is somewhat over-determined. Yet it is more profitable to consider these models as potential descriptors of a process of literary production (and a literary product) that is, almost neurotically, in search of analogies that will provide it with a justification for its existence. More significant, perhaps, is the paradox that the artistic process of ruination is the ruination of the representation, rather than of the traces (which are left after the process of artistic ruination) of the signified. Whereas time or some other process of destruction ruins the material, the artist sets about destroying his signifiers in order to arrive at an approximation of the trace. Sebald also offers another (natural) metaphor for artistic production in Aurach's studio: "Der Bodenbelag [ist] belegt von einer [...] verkrusteten Masse, die stellenweise einen Lavaausfluß gleicht und von der [er] behauptet, daß sie das wahre Ergebnis darstelle seiner fortwährenden Bemühung." (A, 237-38)

The process of artistic production is both a conscious act of ruination and also a natural eruption of material; a self-conscious art that is also, in part, a natural product. And so, while Sebald's texts may contain a metaphysics of the natural history of destruction, his response to that pessimism is not simply resignation, but is to be found in the production of an art that understands itself as part of nature, but only partially, and thus is able to offer a form of resistance to overriding narratives through its conscious process of symbiotic construction and ruination.

Moving dialectically between an assembled mass of empirical historical detail and the metaphysical vantage-point of critique and interpretation, such

complex, self-reflexive, self-erasing writing demands the work of memory and mourning, demands a response, and thereby hands responsibility over to the reader.<sup>lxv</sup> Sebald's works are not self-evident, and, whatever the "German tradition" in which they may be located, they do not fall back on the kinds of ostensibly self-evident myths of *Kultur* that sustained the writers of the "inner emigration" era and were revived in culturally conservative circles in the 1990s. Sebald's essays, but more importantly his literary writings reconfigure the responsibility of the German writer not in terms of any contemporary social or political function, but in terms of the work of mourning that he sees as the legitimation for any aesthetic project.<sup>lxvi</sup> That work is to be conducted not just by the writer, but also by the reader who is offered the potential for critical engagement with such writing.

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<sup>i</sup> A. Huyssen, "Rewritings and New Beginnings: W.G. Sebald and the Literature on the Air War", in *Past Presents: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA, 2003), pp. 138-57, pp. 156-7.

<sup>ii</sup> Huyssen, p. 156.

<sup>iii</sup> Huyssen, p. 156.

<sup>iv</sup> P. Morgan, "The Sign of Saturn: Melancholy, Homelessness and Apocalypse in W.G. Sebald's Prose Narratives", *German Life and Letters*, 58: 1 (2005), 75-92 (p. 91).

<sup>v</sup> T. Mann, "Deutschland und die Deutschen" in *Gesammelte Werke*, 12 vols (Frankfurt am Main, 1960), pp. 1126-1148; *Doktor Faustus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1947).

<sup>vi</sup> Literary culture in Germany may not actually have changed as radically as "Zero Hour" suggested. See H.D. Schäfer, "Zur Periodisierung der deutschen Literatur seit 1930", in *Das gespaltene Bewußtsein. Über deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit 1933 bis 1945*. (Munich, 1981), pp. 55-71. For some startling continuities, see S. Busch, "*Und gestern, da hörte uns Deutschland*" : *NS-Autoren in der Bundesrepublik : Kontinuität und Diskontinuität bei Friedrich Griese, Werner Beumelburg, Eberhard Wolfgang Möller und Kurt Ziesel* (Würzburg, 1998).

<sup>vii</sup> Cf. S. Taberner, *Distorted reflections : the public and private faces of the author in the work of Uwe Johnson, Gunter Grass and Martin Walser, 1965-1975*.

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(Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998). There remains a tension between the literary work and the public face of these authors, a tension that should also be borne in mind when reading Sebald, who also plays with an autobiographical presence in his writing

<sup>viii</sup> T. Anz, *“Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf” : der Literaturstreit im vereinigten Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995).

<sup>ix</sup> On the *Historikerstreit*, see E. Hennig, *Zum Historikerstreit : was heisst und zu welchem Ende studiert man Faschismus?* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988).

<sup>x</sup> F. Schirmacher, “Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik. Neue Pässe, neue Identitäten, neue Lebensläufe: über die Kündigung einiger Mythen des westdeutschen Bewußtseins”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2.10.90; U. Greiner, “Die deutsche Gesinnungsästhetik” *Die Zeit*, 2.11.90; K.-H. Bohrer, Die Ästhetik am Ausgang ihrer Unmündigkeit, *Merkur* 44 (1990), 851-865.

<sup>xi</sup> Cf. B. Beßlich, *Wege in den "Kulturkrieg" : Zivilisationskritik in Deutschland, 1890-1914* (Darmstadt, 2000).

<sup>xii</sup> Huyssen, p.139.

<sup>xiii</sup> More recently, Sebald’s lectures on the air war have been located within the context of the representation of victimhood in modern warfare. See the special issue of *FMLS* 41/2 (2005), and particularly the essays of L. Cohen-Pfister, N. Martin and I. Roberts, all of whom use the lectures as a reference-point either for broader cultural observations on contemporary German memory culture or for analyses of other writers (Günter Grass, Wolfdietrich Schnurre). While the politics of the contemporary memory debate and the *Historikerstreit* are linked through their narratives of German wartime experience, the *Literaturstreit* addresses different aesthetic questions as to the responsibility of the writer. On the question of German repression of the war experience, see W. Wilms, ‘Taboo and Repression in W.G. Sebald’s *On the Natural History of Destruction*’, in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion* (Edinburgh, 2004), pp. 175-189.

<sup>xiv</sup> As, in particular, the essay by Cohen-Pfister illustrates, in the past decade the German public sphere has been inundated with images and texts about the air war, most notably in the historical writings of Jörg Friedrich. This wave of memory work may have something to do with a German desire to portray themselves as victims, a point which was at the heart of the original *Historikerstreit*. See Cohen-Pfister, “The Suffering of the Perpetrators: Unleashing Collective Memory in German Literature of the Twenty-First Century”, *FMLS* 41 (2005), 123-36 (p. 132).

<sup>xv</sup> Huyssen, p. 156.

<sup>xvi</sup> For the most recent perspective on Sebald’s ambivalent use, and abuse, of history, see A. Fuchs, *Die Schmerzesspuren der Geschichte. Zur Poetik der Erinnerung in WG Sebalds Prosa*. (Cologne: Böhlau, 2005).

<sup>xvii</sup> The interesting question is why Sebald moved away from an unmitigated faith in “didactic history” in the intervening years. One potential reading of the prevalence of the ruins of modernity in recent German literature (by, for example, Heiner Müller, Christoph Ransmayr and Reinhard Jirgl) might well be to see them

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as the reverse of the positivistic “natural” reading of free-market capitalism that has become paradigmatic over the past two decades.

<sup>xviii</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, (Frankfurt am Main, 2001), p. 56.

<sup>xix</sup> Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, p. 57.

<sup>xx</sup> Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, p. 59.

<sup>xxi</sup> Sebald, “Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte”, *Orbis litterarum* 37 (1982), 345-66 (p. 348).

<sup>xxii</sup> Hermann Kasack, *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom*, (Leipzig, 1989), p. 8.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Sebald, “Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte”, p. 348.

<sup>xxiv</sup> The double sense of “Himmel” as both sky and heaven in the longer quotation is underlined by later passages in the novel. See Kasack, *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom*, p. 46 and p. 132. The architectural historian Robert Harbison has proposed that the ruin represents a “way of seeing”: the spectator’s perspective is always constitutive of the meaning of the ruin. Robert Harbison, *The built, the unbuilt, and the unbuildable: in pursuit of architectural meaning* (London, 1991), p. 99.

<sup>xxv</sup> Huyssen, p. 156.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, p. 92-3.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur.*, p. 92.

<sup>xxviii</sup> This is one example of the *Luftkrieg* book having an “ästhetische Reflektiertheit” which Anne Fuchs considers it not to possess. Fuchs, p. 156.

<sup>xxix</sup> Sebald, “Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte”, p. 366.

<sup>xxx</sup> Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, p. 32.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Indeed Sebald appears to reject the utopian impulse he originally identified in Kluge’s work. See Fuchs, p. 159-60.

<sup>xxxii</sup> W.G. Sebald, “Konstruktionen der Trauer. Günter Grass und Wolfgang Hildesheimer”, in *Campo Santo* (Munich, 2005), pp.101-27; p. 111.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Sebald, “Konstruktionen der Trauer”, p. 112.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> For all his emphasis on the traumatic process of ruination, Sebald is more concerned with the “after-images” of ruination.

<sup>xxxv</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturns* (Frankfurt am Main, 1997), p. 211.

Hereafter cited in the text as RS.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> For a more comprehensive reading of Sebald’s ruin landscapes, see S. Ward, “Poetics and Ruins in the works of W.G. Sebald”, in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion* (Edinburgh, 2004), pp. 58-71. Due to the complex nature of the figure of the ruin, intertwining modern and prehistorical ruination, in Sebald’s writing I am not entirely convinced of the solidity of the ‘barocken Unterboden’ on which Sebald unfolds his metaphysics of natural history. Fuchs, p. 161. Indeed I would argue that, through such self-reflexive representations of the ruin, Sebald places the narrative temptation of the baroque temperament under the microscope.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des barocken Trauerspiels* in *Gesammelte Schriften* 7 vols (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), Vol. 1:1, p. 237.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, p. 73.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Huyssen, p. 150.

<sup>xl</sup> A. Fuchs, p. 168.

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<sup>xli</sup> Morgan, p. 90.

<sup>xlii</sup> Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1:2, p. 691-707, p. 697f. On Sebald's use of photography as part of his aesthetic strategy to 'redeem' history, see J. J. Long, "History, Narrative, and Photography in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*", *MLR*, 98 (2003), 117-137.

<sup>xliii</sup> Benjamin, p. 359.

<sup>xliv</sup> J. Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique", in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. F.G. Lawrence (London: Heinemann, 1983), pp. 129-165, (p. 149)

<sup>xliv</sup> Benjamin, pp. 357-58.

<sup>xlv</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991), p.336.

<sup>xlvii</sup> "So ist der Vorwurf gerechtfertigt, daß die Autoren der fünfziger Jahre, prädestiniert, das Gewissen der neuen Gesellschaft zu repräsentieren, auf demselben Ohr taub waren wie diese selbst." Sebald, "Konstruktionen der Trauer", p. 103.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Literature, which, unlike history, generally does without the footnoted paraphernalia of positivism, does have the potential for a tendentious and irresponsible treatment of the "facts". See Fuchs's critical analysis of the Roger Casement section of *Die Ringe des Saturn* for a case in point. I think this is an important indication of the risks that Sebald's work takes in its faith in literary discourse over the truth ostensibly represented by historical writing.

<sup>xlix</sup> Huyssen, p. 154.

<sup>l</sup> Schirmacher, "Abschied". On "Pop-Literatur", see Stuart Taberner, *German literature of the 1990s and beyond : normalization and the Berlin Republic* (Rochester, NY, 2005), pp. 81-94.

<sup>li</sup> K.-H. Bohrer, "Nach der Natur. Ansicht einer Moderne jenseits der Utopie", *Merkur* 41/8 (1987), 631-645, (p. 645). An early prose poem by Sebald, from 1988, also happens to be entitled *Nach der Natur*.

<sup>lii</sup> Bohrer, p. 643.

<sup>liii</sup> Bohrer, p. 643.

<sup>liv</sup> Bohrer, p. 643.

<sup>lv</sup> Bohrer, p. 645.

<sup>lvi</sup> Sebald, "Konstruktionen der Trauer", p. 103.

<sup>lvii</sup> Sebald, "Konstruktionen der Trauer", p. 119.

<sup>lviii</sup> Sebald, "Konstruktionen der Trauer", p. 119.

<sup>lix</sup> Sebald, "Mit den Augen des Nachtvogels", in *Campo Santo*, pp. 149-170, p. 157. This connects with another essay by Bohrer on the place of 'evil' within the German cultural tradition. K.-H. Bohrer, "Die permanente Theodizee. Über das verfehlte Böse im deutschen Bewußtsein", *Merkur* 41 (1987), 267-286.

<sup>lx</sup> Sebald is here, as in other matters such as the ruins of a German-Jewish tradition, very close to the position of Wolfgang Iser, another post-war aesthetically radical melancholist influenced by Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. On Iser, see S. Ward, *Negotiating Positions:*

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*Literature, Identity and Social Critique in the Works of Wolfgang Iser*  
(Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2001).

<sup>lxi</sup> Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, p. 52.

<sup>lxii</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), p. 354.

Hereafter cited in the text as A.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Ruth Franklin, 'Rings of Smoke' in *New Republic*, 23.9.2002.

<sup>lxiv</sup> The epigraph to *Die Ringe des Saturn* can be read as a plea not to destroy the traces of remembrance: "Zerstöret das Letzte, die Erinnerung, nicht".

<sup>lxv</sup> That the reception of a writer's work might lead to a reduction in its complexity is alluded to by Cohen-Pfister, when she writes of the 'discrepancy between authorial intent and public reception'. Cohen-Pfister, p. 132. Whether Sebald's texts are in fact too complex to elicit an appropriate response might be a fruitful avenue when considering that even if Sebald does historicize the modes of literary production, he may remain indebted to an elitist conception of art and literature as represented by the likes of Thomas Mann, in so far as the criticism of 'elitism' is judged to be permissible.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Anne Fuchs observes the "Geschichtslosigkeit and total[e] Leere der Gegenwart" and the absence of any future orientation in Sebald's literary vision. Fuchs, p. 168.