

Carole Angier, *Speak, Silence: In Search of W. G. Sebald*
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PRIVATIZED GRAND NARRATIVES

It is often said of our culture, especially of our literary culture, that it is fragmented, even balkanized. That no figure enjoys both critical acclaim and commercial success; is taken seriously by moralists and aesthetes alike; is formally complex without being perceived as snobbishly difficult; is popularly beloved without being tarnished by association with the necessary evils of marketing campaigns and the prize economy; whose personal conduct and political views have not distracted from or complicated an appreciation of the work itself. If one had to nominate a recent exception to this general rule, however, one could do worse than W. G. Sebald, the author of four books that are regarded in the UK and US as modern classics: *Vertigo* (1990), *The Emigrants* (1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), and *Austerlitz* (2001). What light can the first full English-language biography, Carole Angier's *Speak, Silence*, shed on this anomaly?

Winfried Georg Sebald—or Max as he later preferred to be known—was born in the small Bavarian-Alpine village of Wertach in Allgäu on 18 May 1944. His father, Georg, had grown up in rural poverty and left school at the age of thirteen to learn the locksmith's trade. He spent the Weimar years of hyperinflation doing odd jobs, until he was admitted, in 1929, to the Reichswehr, slowly climbing the ranks despite his lowly social origins. In his 1936 wedding photo, Georg wears the uniform of a junior officer in Hitler's Wehrmacht, with the swastika-bearing *Reichsadler* on his cap. During the War he served as a driver, a technical inspector, and then as head of the transport unit of a Panzer Division. His return to his family in 1947, after three years in a French prisoner-of-war camp, ended young Winfried's idyll in the company of his mother Rosa, elder sister Gertrud and beloved

maternal grandfather Josef Egelhofer. Within a few years Georg had moved the family to an ugly social-housing block in nearby Sonthofen and, after a short stint in the local police, joined, for the third and final time, the reconstituted Bonn Republic version of the German Army.

'Conventional, Catholic, anti-communist—the kind of semi-working-class, petit-bourgeois background typical of those who supported the fascist regime', was how Sebald would go on to describe the milieu of provincial Sonthofen. Angier suggests that Georg's loyalty to the Hitler regime was primarily a matter of careerism. It appears that he never participated in any atrocities—though he may have witnessed the aftermath of the SS massacre at Tulle, in central France—but as an NCO in the Wehrmacht, he was unquestionably complicit. Yet Sebald's expression of his lifelong hatred of Georg primarily in terms of the latter's Nazism, which is often taken as a central biographical datum, was largely an *ex post facto* rationalization of the instinctive antipathy of independent-minded sons for rigid, authoritarian fathers the world over. Georg was far from innocent, but he was not even the worst case among the townspeople of Sonthofen, some of whom had been enthusiastic Nazis. Despite the stifling atmosphere in the village and at home, which became especially acute after the death of his grandfather in 1956, Sebald managed to form a small circle of like-minded friends drawn from the local *Gymnasium* and supplemented by two free-spirited exchange students from France, Marie and Martine. With members of 'the Clique', as they styled themselves, he was able to explore his literary leanings—an early article attacking German theatres for refusing to stage Brecht was published in *Der Wecker*, the school newspaper he edited—and put the first cracks in his parents' generation's 'conspiracy of silence' about the Third Reich.

This pattern repeated itself at the University of Freiburg, where Sebald enrolled in the Philology faculty to study Germanistik, Anglistik and Philosophy in 1963. Repelled by the social conservatism of life at Freiburg, he fell in with a group of older students at the international Studentheim on Maximilianstrasse, which the administration had, against its better judgement, afforded a degree of autonomy. In his professors' outdated syllabi and their emphasis on *werkimmanente Kritik*, a Nazi-era cousin of New Criticism, which held that the meaning of a work of literature should be sought exclusively in its formal properties and not in the social conditions of its production, he saw 'premeditated blindness' aimed at sealing off German literature and literary scholarship from any questions about its own complicity with fascism and its antecedents. Characteristically, the young Sebald also rejected the leading alternative—Lukács's dialectical materialism—in favour of the approach taken by the Frankfurt School, above all, by Adorno, whose polemical style, leftist melancholy, mandarin modernism and attention to seemingly insignificant details would remain touchstones for Sebald

throughout his academic and literary career. Insofar as his rebellion against his German upbringing and his father's fascist past was political, its politics were not to be located in the familiar coordinates of far-left agitation, countercultural communalism or even in the post-nationalist Europhilia some of his readers would later project onto him, but took place privately, as Adorno's did, in *belles-lettres*.

Likewise, Sebald's decision to leave Germany—first for the University of Fribourg in Switzerland in 1965, then for doctoral study at the University of Manchester, with his bride Ute, the following year—may have amounted to a de facto 'emigration' when he took a job in the School of European Studies at the recently founded University of East Anglia, but the moves were driven more by personal and practical concerns than ones of politics or principle. From the first he was ambivalent about living in England: he left Manchester for a year to work at a private school in St Gallen; he took a leave of absence from East Anglia to teach at the Goethe Institute in Munich; and as late as 1985, he was still toying with the idea of returning to Germany for work. Although he spent the entirety of his adult life employed by educational institutions, he was not temperamentally well suited to the rigours of scholarship. His Master's thesis and doctoral dissertation on, respectively, the Wilhelmine playwright Carl Sternheim and the novelist Alfred Döblin—two converts from Judaism—displayed a wilful indifference to the relevant secondary literature and academic protocols of citation, instead including subjective judgements, speculative psycho-sexual diagnoses of his subjects on the basis of their biographies, made-up references, misquotations, spelling errors, and even a footnote from a fake letter attributed to Adorno. ('A careful examiner would have failed it', Sebald's UEA friend and colleague Richard Sheppard would write of the thesis on Sternheim; instead, in recognition of the detectable brilliance beneath its author's disregard for academic norms, Sebald passed with distinction.)

Still, apart from regular threats to the School of European Studies—from funding cuts and declining enrolment rates to Thatcher's 'Stalinization' of the English university system, starting with the dreaded Teaching Quality Assessments—the UEA wound up being an excellent home for Sebald. Many of the subjects of his teaching—Kafka, Hofmannsthal, Canetti, Weiss and Kluge, for example—would make their way into his non-academic books. Despite his course load, an increasing number of committee assignments and a founding role in the UEA's Centre for Literary Translation, supplemental funding from the Arts Council and the EU provided him enough time to write a Habilitationsschrift, two unproduced television scripts (on Kant and Wittgenstein), a book of poetry, two collections' worth of literary essays, and *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*, whose recognition—combined with the cunning agenting of Andrew Wylie—earned him a

six-figure advance from Hamish Hamilton for *Austerlitz* and a transfer to UEA's most prestigious department: its Creative Writing programme.

When Sebald died, probably of a heart attack, while driving with his daughter Anna to Norwich on 14 December 2001, he was fifty-seven and at the height of his fame. The four books on which his reputation rests were warmly received in Germany, but to this day he remains less popular in his native country than in the English-language world, where, thanks largely to the ministrations of Susan Sontag, his reception, starting with *The Emigrants*, the first translated of his books, has bordered on the rapturous. Each bears the impress of Sebald's decades with one foot firmly planted in academia and one foot out the door, which has endeared them to reading publics with a historically unprecedented number of advanced degrees. Generically, they are unclassifiable: they combine fiction and memoir; biography and history; travel writing and nature writing; literary, art and architectural criticism. His friend, the poet and translator Michael Hamburger, who makes an appearance in *The Rings of Saturn*, called them 'essayistic semi-fictions', and the description will probably not be improved upon. Aside from this, Sebald's writing is known for four things: its thematic preoccupation with the after-effects of the Holocaust and the Second World War; the interspersion of photographs, documents and reproductions of paintings and other visual media throughout the texts; the floridity, antiquarianism and melancholy tone of its prose; and, finally, its so-called 'metaphysics of coincidence', the way an apparently associative series of random details and incidents makes it difficult to tell how one sentence follows from the next, only for the whole to reveal itself, in the end, as having operated according to a complex, lattice-like order from the beginning.

In the two decades since his death, these stylistic features have proven to be remarkably influential, especially among British and American writers. A short list of Anglophone novelists who have courted or drawn (whether they have liked it or not) comparison to Sebald would include: Teju Cole, Jen Craig, Rachel Cusk, Geoff Dyer, Ben Lerner, Robert Macfarlane, Daniel Mendelsohn, Rick Moody, Will Self and Iain Sinclair. For many of them, Sebald has provided the imprimatur of a continental European writer on a pre-existing set of local concerns—primarily with autofiction, psychogeography, or ecopoetics, but also, to an unacknowledged degree, with the survival of textual media in a society dominated by the image and, as we will see, with the persistence of the narrative impulse after the declared end of grand narratives. There have been 'dissenters' of course and the genre codes of literary journalism have made it obligatory to mention them, and call them this. Each dissenter has his particular quibble with some aspect of Sebald's work, but the mere fact that the members of this group can be listed by name—they are: Michael Hofmann, Adam Thirlwell, Mark Fisher—is

a testament to the relative eccentricity of the view. Sebald's style is easily parodied—Craig Brown achieved a palpable hit in *Private Eye*—but that is because it is distinctive and coherent. Parody, no less than imitation, is a sincere form of flattery.

The twentieth century gave us the Joycean, the Proustian, the Kafkaesque and the Orwellian, but Sebald is the only novelist with a toehold in the twenty-first century whose style has been tagged with an eponymous adjective. We may debate how *sui generis* the 'Sebaldian' actually is. Geoff Dyer and Javier Marías have both claimed independent discovery of the use of in-text photographs, though Marías got the idea from Erwin Panofsky and in any case all three writers were preceded by Roland Barthes. Claudio Magris's *Danube* (1986) is an obvious precedent for Sebald's merger of memoir, biography, travelogue and philosophical disquisition, though the tradition stretches back at least to Rousseau. The formal tone and complex syntax of Sebald's sentences owe a great deal to Germanophone writers like Adalbert Stifter and Robert Walser, who were introduced to contemporary English readers in part through him, though these features are more pronounced in Michael Hulse's translations of the first three books, with which Sebald—if not his readers—was dissatisfied. As with the great modernist novelists, of whom he is perhaps the last, his is primarily a synthesizer's achievement. To read his books for the first time is to experience with particular force two paradoxical aesthetic effects—the surprisingly inevitable and the unfamiliar familiar—that are among the indicators of genuine literary quality. Here, then, seems to be an instance of merit rewarded, and it is tempting to leave it at that. But quality, as we know, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for public recognition. Success never occurs in a cultural vacuum, and it invariably says more about readers than it does about writers. What accounts for it in Sebald's case?

A literary biographer may be forgiven for taking the importance of and interest in her subject for granted, but biography is not a neutral genre: it is part and parcel of the canonization process. Sebald's has not been well served by Angier's *Speak, Silence*. This comes as something of a surprise, since on paper at least, Angier would seem well positioned to write his life. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, she has produced biographies of Jean Rhys—shortlisted for the Whitbread—and Primo Levi, whose autobiographical writings about his experiences as an anti-fascist partisan and a survivor of Auschwitz are among the most powerful literary testimonies of the horrors of the Holocaust. (As such, he was the subject, along with Jean Améry, of one of Sebald's essays.) Angier was one of the first critics in the UK to recognize Sebald as a significant talent, reviewing *The Emigrants* for the *Telegraph* when it appeared in English in 1996, and visiting him in Norwich to interview him for a profile in the *Jewish Quarterly* that same

year. Along with French and Italian, she is fluent in German, the language of her parents, Viennese Jews who fled the Nazis to England. Yet from its title—which is not simply the paraphrase of Nabokov it at first appears to be, rather a theft from the title of a collection of literary essays by Idris Parry, Sebald's supervisor at Manchester—to the unearned assertion of its final sentence, Angier's biography is riddled with errors in judgement. The portrait of Sebald that emerges from the pages between is not that of a unique individuality, but a romantic caricature of what Sontag called the 'artist as exemplary sufferer', a kind of secular saint driven almost to madness, in this case by the weight of history.

Any claims *Speak, Silence* might make to be a definitive account are marred, in the first place, by problems of authorization and access. A number of people close to Sebald 'preferred' not to speak to Angier, including Simon Prosser, his publisher at Hamish Hamilton; the painter Jan Peter Tripp, Sebald's childhood friend, the subject of one of his essays, and the illustrator of *Unrecounted*, his posthumous collection of poetry; his Maximilianstrasse roommate, college friend and best man Albert Rasche; and, most damagingly, his widow Ute Sebald, who controls his estate and personal documents, and who, along with their daughter Anna, is never referred to by name, except in the Acknowledgements. (Each of these would have had their reasons, but it is worth noting that Angier faced the same difficulty when writing her Primo Levi biography, so there is something of a pattern here. 'Or they might have just not decided to tell me', is a frequent refrain in *Speak, Silence*.) The substantial gaps in the record are filled by first-person narratives of Angier's own sleuthing—tracking down and speaking to sources at the relevant locations, which are perhaps intended as a homage to Sebald's own biographical methods—but can give the chapters the feel of a series of magazine features that have been strung together.

Otherwise, they are filled by prurient speculation. A responsible biographer would balance the information she is able to present to the reader against the information she either does not know or was not granted permission to reveal, especially in the area of what Angier calls Sebald's 'family life', which presumably overlapped significantly with his actual life. Instead, she gives a disproportionate number of pages in *Speak, Silence* to people who were willing to cooperate with her, in particular, to women who were romantically interested in Sebald. For example, based on her personal assessment of his physical attractiveness in photographs at age fifteen and seventeen, his unreciprocated feelings towards the two French exchange students and speculations from a classmate, Angier suggests that Sebald had suffered a 'sexual wound' of some sort; 'perhaps' he was homosexual, or at least 'afraid' that he was. Despite acknowledging that she lacks evidence to substantiate the claim, Angier airs the classmate's 'insight' anyway, on the grounds that

it 'felt deeply true' to her. This is either a case of ingenuousness towards her source or—more likely—a case of confirmation bias.

Angier continues to base inferences on these (partially retracted) claims well into the book, such as when she attributes a paranoid episode Sebald experienced in northern Italy in 1980, which is fictionalized in *Vertigo*, to fears of being persecuted for being gay. Yet aside from a scene in the unpublished novel he wrote when he was twenty-three, in which the narrator receives an unwanted advance from a man on a train, gay men, such as Roger Casement in *The Rings of Saturn*, and homosocial relationships, such as the one between Cosmo Solomon and Ambros Adelwarth in *The Emigrants* or between the young Jacques Austerlitz and Gerald Fitzpatrick in *Austerlitz*, are always presented with tenderness and without embarrassment, so it is not clear what bearing Angier's psychologizing would have, if true, on our understanding of his work. (With regard to the scene in the unpublished novel, Angier, who usually relishes the opportunity to distinguish literary from biographical sources, neglects on this occasion to observe that it bears a strong similarity to one in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Sebald's favourite novel at the time.) In any event, toward the end of his life, he became romantically involved with one of the French exchange students he had rebuffed as a teenager. An extended comparison of their relationship to that of Kafka and Dora Diamant receives nearly as many words as Ute Sebald does.

Angier's tendency to confirmation bias extends to other areas of his life and work. Sebald was originally received as a 'Holocaust writer', a label he rejected. With time, Angier notes, readers have also come to 'agree that it is wrong to see the Jewish and German tragedy of the Holocaust as the sole focus' of Sebald's work. Rather than explaining why Sebald rejected the label, Angier simply proceeds to treat him as one; rather than explaining why there has been a change in the interpretation of his work, she simply ignores it. The reason she gives for doing so is the personal 'limitation' of her standpoint as a 'daughter of Jewish refugees from Nazism'. 'I think it is right to see the Holocaust as central to his work', she writes, not incorrectly. 'But if I make it too central, that is why.' This, however, is not a limitation; it is a choice. In light of it, her methodological credo—'I remind you of the truth'—rings particularly hollow. Truth is not only a matter of not making false claims, it is also a matter of not omitting relevant information that would qualify or complicate one's interpretation. Even if it is unauthorized, readers of something that bills itself as a biography have a right to expect an attempt at balance, contextualization and comprehensiveness that *Speak, Silence* declines from the outset.

The interpretive framework Angier brings to this 'central' aspect of Sebald's work—trauma—may have been borrowed from Sebald's own reading of Améry and Levi, but it is hardly dispositive. Whether they

were victims, perpetrators, resisters or bystanders of varying degrees of culpability, everyone who lived through the Third Reich—and all of their children—could be said to have been traumatized by the experience. For nearly every important Germanophone novelist, poet and intellectual of the post-war period—Jewish and non-Jewish alike—reckoning with Nazism is a major theme. What, then, makes Sebald different? As we have seen, Sebald's father was far from the least culpable, but Angier's analysis of Georg's war record supports the view that his time in the Wehrmacht was a confirmation rather than the cause of Sebald's conflict with him. After all, this conflict had already been going on for years before Sebald was shown Billy Wilder's documentary about Bergen-Belsen in school, which Angier points to as the original moment of his traumatizing awareness of the Nazi death camps. To support her claim that 'Sebald was the German writer who most deeply took on the burden of responsibility for the Holocaust', Angier is forced to resort to increasingly implausible armchair diagnoses, from 'survivor's guilt, though he had nothing to do with it at all' to 'mirror-touch synesthesia' which 'perhaps he didn't have', but if he did, would certainly have made him unusually receptive to other people's suffering. The result of assertions like these is not a deeper understanding of how growing up as a German in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War impacted Sebald's writing, but a *reductio ad absurdum* of the entire project of explaining literature via authorial psychology.

Angier's choice has further downstream consequences for her biography. It leads her to claim that *The Emigrants*, her favourite of Sebald's books, is the 'Sebaldian book *par excellence*'. Critics are divided as to which of Sebald's books in fact deserves this title, but consensus is generally split between *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*. *The Rings of Saturn*, which brings together all of the aforementioned elements of his style in the most complex and aesthetically compelling fashion, has certainly been the most influential among writers, but a compelling case could also be made for *Austerlitz*, which has the advantage of having appeared on nearly every list of the best books of the twenty-first century, often in the top slot. Either way, personal preference is no justification for devoting, as Angier does, five chapters to *The Emigrants* and only one each to *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*—the same number she gives to the 'Il ritorno in patria' section from *Vertigo* and to his unpublished novel. The pacing of *Speak, Silence* suffers from the imbalance, especially as *The Emigrants* chapters are mostly frontloaded, interspersed with the narrative account of Sebald's youth, while the chapters on *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* only appear after his life story has already been told, as though they were afterthoughts.

Centring the specifically 'Jewish and German tragedy' of the Holocaust means that Angier ignores the connections drawn by *The Rings of Saturn*

between European colonialism—mostly the Belgians in the Congo, but also the English in Ireland, South America, China and India—and the slave-labour system of the Nazi concentration camps, even though current scholarship bears out Sebald's prescience on this point. But since this is Angier's stated goal, why not pay at least equal attention to *Austerlitz*, where the subject is treated most directly and at the greatest length, and which she ultimately describes as his 'masterpiece'? The answer, it turns out, has less to do with her personal standpoint than with the limitations of her conception of literary biography: matching fictional persons and incidents to real-life models and sources. *Speak, Silence* is, in fact, at its most interesting when it grapples with the ethics of Sebald's converting non-Jewish models to Jewish characters in *The Emigrants*, or his mining of Susi Bechhöfer's *Kindertransport* memoir, *Rosa's Child*, for *Austerlitz*. Angier's defence of these practices—novelistic prerogative—is the correct one, but it is also anticlimactic and, along with her analysis of his dissertation on Döblin, seriously undermines her claim of Sebald's 'unique empathy with the victims of the Holocaust'. Unfortunately for *Austerlitz*, however, it is 'sparsely documented' and thus 'a proper account' of Sebald's most acclaimed book is 'alas, beyond the scope' of her biography. A proper account would also require 'literary criticism', and Angier does not do literary criticism. Alas.

'Is literary greatness still possible?' Susan Sontag asked at the beginning of her review of the English translation of *Vertigo* in 1999. It was the second time she'd taken to the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* to praise and promote Sebald's work. Given their shared interest in photography, high-moral seriousness, the ethics of bearing witness to the pain of others, and melancholy lives lived under the sign of Saturn, it is difficult to imagine a writer more perfectly tailored to Sontag's concerns. At the time of writing, she was at the height of her powers of consecration, and more than any other factor, this single sentence paved the way for the success of *Austerlitz* and sealed Sebald's fame among readers in the UK and US. It continues to set the tone for his reputation in both countries. The key word is 'still'. For Sontag, Sebald's voice—'autumnal', authoritative, grave, Proustian, 'relentlessly elegiac and lyrical', and even 'noble'—made him a lonely survivor of Late Modernism in the trash culture of Late Capitalism, with its 'undignified self-consciousness or irony', its 'anti-sublime' prejudices, its literature of 'lesser concerns'—and one might add: its aggressive optimism and presentism.

But the characterization of Sebald as not of his time—whether because his art transcended its historical period, or because he was an ostrich with his head buried in the sands of the past—has always been misleading. Here, too, one would hope that a biography would offer a corrective, a qualification, or at least some explanation of how, alone among writers,

Sebald miraculously managed to escape. Angier, however, reinforces the received wisdom. She writes: ‘The sense of another time that pervades his books—through the dated, formal language, the ancient guidebooks, the Renaissance paintings—is no accident, but crucial to their power.’ ‘Realism and modernity’, she goes on to say, are ‘dangerous’ for his ‘particular art’. She praises Sebald for resisting the impulse to ‘introduce modern life’ into his writing, by cutting a reference to a Virgin Atlantic T-Shirt from an early draft of *The Rings of Saturn*—a rather careless observation about a book whose narrator describes people as ‘shopping in order to survive’, watches a BBC documentary on a TV in a run-down motel, eats French fries at an Amsterdam McDonalds, refers to gas stations and shopping malls, drinks a can of Cherry Coke, reports a complaint about Brussels’s agricultural policy, visits an abandoned Cold War defence installation, compares the Dome of the Rock to the newly built Sizewell nuclear reactor, and looks on with dismay as an excavator clears away a forest felled by a hurricane.

Contemporary literary and political events are rarely allowed to impinge upon Angier’s account of his life, though a full picture of the external world is just as important to understanding a writer as a portrayal of his inner life. The Eichmann Trial and the Frankfurt Auschwitz hearings are mentioned, but their broader impact on German culture goes undescribed. May 68 is deployed proleptically in a discussion of the intellectual climate of the University of Freiburg, as a signifier of the ‘flow of history’ toward the ‘new reform spirit’ Sebald and his circle of friends are said to have embodied, but when *les événements* take place, Sebald is on vacation in Yugoslavia and we hear nothing further of them. We are told of Sebald’s love of *Herzog*, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *I’m Not Stiller*, but nothing of the circumstances in which he discovers Weiss, Bernhard or Handke—all vastly more significant influences on his development as a writer. Angier’s discussion of Gruppe 47, which might be said to represent the mainstream of post-war German literature, is buried in a footnote. Her synopsis of the Frankfurt School is only slightly less perfunctory, and Benjamin is overlooked as an important source of biographical details for Jacques Austerlitz. The two historical episodes dealt with at greatest length—the 1970s oil crisis and Thatcherite neoliberalism—are important, as we will see, but along with Britain’s accession to the European Union, Angier treats them only with regard to their effects on teaching conditions at UEA. Of decolonization, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Cold War: nothing. Even within the confines of her interpretation of Sebald primarily as a writer of the Holocaust and the firebombing of German cities, potentially relevant events such as the German Autumn, the 1980s *Historikerstreit*, the development of *Erinnerungskultur*, the reunification of Germany, the genocide in

Rwanda and the NATO bombing campaigns in the former Yugoslavia are passed over in silence.

Nor does Angier attribute any significance to the fact that Sebald's four major books were published between 1990 and 2001; in other words, that his literary career coincides almost perfectly with the 'Long Nineties', the so-called End of History. Far from being the anachronism Sontag and Angier make him out to be, he is one of the period's most representative writers. Neither the signature features of his influential prose style—the 'metaphysics of coincidence' and the melancholy tone—nor the reception of his work in the Anglosphere can be accounted for without reference to it. The 'End of History' is taken, of course, from the title of Francis Fukuyama's *National Interest* essay, published in summer 1989, while Sebald was in Corfu writing 'Il ritorno in patria', and expanded into *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), right around the time Sebald was putting the finishing touches to *The Emigrants*. Among boosters and detractors alike, the phrase has proven to be a remarkably durable label for capturing the distinctive mentality of the period, especially in the West. But just as the End of History did not mean the end of historical events, the fulfilment or collapse—they amount to the same thing—of Enlightenment-era grand narratives of political, moral, economic and scientific progress did not mean the end of attempts to create meta-narratives to make sense of them. Like so much else in the period, these narratives, which had functioned as collective myths to legitimate and orient the ways of life on both sides of the Iron Curtain, were simply privatized. It was now the task of each individual to locate whatever patterns could be found in the chaotic proliferation of information and recorded events, and impose a necessarily artificial coherence on them.

It is in light of this that Sebald's 'metaphysics of coincidence' should be understood. (Angier's phrase is somewhat misleading as it suggests discovery rather than artful fabrication. Too much has been made of Sebald's use of photographs; in the final analysis, they are a sleight-of-hand whose precise purpose is to create the illusion that the 'coincidences' are to be found in the world, rather than in the text.) The use that Sebald makes of burning cities in *Vertigo*, Nabokov-the-entomologist in *The Emigrants*, the silkworm moth in *The Rings of Saturn*, and the star-shaped fortress in *Austerlitz* are only virtuosic performances of a widespread style of thinking, one which continues to this day. It has its middlebrow relatives in bestselling 'commodity histories' like Mark Kurlansky's *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* (1997) and *Salt: A World History* (2002), or the BBC documentaries of Adam Curtis; it has its lowbrow relatives in the plastic-rococo conspiracy theories of Alex Jones and the followers of Q. If it has been particularly influential among some of the writers listed above, this is because it is modular and

scalable; from an infinity of information, one need only choose a few data points and thread their repetitions through a series of different contexts. This does not mean it's easy to imitate: Angier herself tries to do this with car accidents in *Speak, Silence* and fails to pull off the combination of the surprising and the inevitable that is the hallmark of the Sebaldian.

In practice, of course, Fukuyama's view that liberal democracy was 'the final form of human government' meant three things. First, the integration of the German Democratic Republic into the *soziale Marktwirtschaft* of the Federal Republic of Germany. Second, the accession of other Eastern Bloc countries into the European Union, which, rather than the American model, was taken by Fukuyama to be the paradigm case. And third, the unrestrained application to the Russian Federation of the kinds of economic 'shock therapy' that had already been applied, for example, to Mexico and Argentina, and which, in turn, had been pioneered by Paul Volcker during the Carter and Reagan administrations, and by Margaret Thatcher during her eleven years as prime minister of the UK. Echoing Thatcher's famous pronouncement, Angier writes that Sebald's work 'is not about society at all, which is why it contains no dialogue.' The second half of this sentence is true only in the most technical of senses. In Sebald, speech is not interchange presented in quotation marks, as in a typical realist novel, but one of the more common scenarios in his fictions is the narrator listening to people tell long stories in the vein of Conrad, which he conveys with the narrative tagging of Bernhard. The first part of Angier's sentence is simply false. Sebald's books discuss, among other things, labour, punishment, psychiatry, the built environment, transportation, tourism, media, scholarship and war, none of which could be thinkable without the social as such.

It is not that there is 'no society' in Sebald, but rather that Sebald was writing at a time and a place—neoliberal Britain—in which all non-economic social bonds were being subordinated to the interests of capital accumulation. From the wastelands of the 'so-called development zones' around the docks of Manchester where the painter Max Ferber has his studio in *The Emigrants*, and the 'Free Trade Hall' of the crumbling grand hotel near the hospital where he dies of pulmonary emphysema, to the depopulated towns and ruined country estates of Norfolk through which the narrator wanders in *The Rings of Saturn* in the years following the policies of the 'hard-line capitalist Baroness Thatcher', or the 'toilers in the City gold-mines' with whom the narrator and Jacques Austerlitz share space in a dingy hotel bar outside Liverpool Station, Sebald consistently registers the effects of social atomization, resource depletion, financialization and the loss of revenue from brutally maintained colonial trade markets on the infrastructures, ecologies and peoples on both sides of the North Sea. This lugubrious socio-economic landscape stands in stark contrast to the best-of-all-possible-worlds portrait

of the 'New Economy' and 'Pax Americana' painted by Third Way centrists and the Anglo-American culture industry. Insofar as its unsparing representation in fiction counts as dissent, Sontag was far from the only reader to identify with it.

The anomic bachelors who eke out their existences in these *paysages demoralisés*, burdened to the point of hospitalization or suicide by forced emigrations, melancholy memories, stolen youths, private obsessions or ambient senses of doom, are rendered in elegant sentences that spread across the page like wisteria over ruined masonry. Sontag traces their ancestry to German Romanticism, and James Wood describes Sebald's style as 'contemporary pensive gothic', but in both cases we can go further: it is *décadence*, a prose style fit for a second *fin de siècle*. Sebald's narrators are representatives of the species that Fukuyama calls, after Nietzsche, in the much less discussed final section of his book, the 'last man'. Fukuyama worried that the 'widespread peace and prosperity' secured by the triumph of liberal-democratic capitalism would seem profoundly dissatisfying to the people now tasked with upholding it in perpetuity. True, Fukuyama's main concern was that 'man's' instinctive *thymos*—his drive for recognition through subjugation—could be projected out of boredom onto liberal democracy itself, in the form of rightwing backsliding. Although this prognosis might seem to apply better to writers like Houellebecq, Handke and Limonov than to Sebald, Sebald's characters are no less dissatisfied with life under liberal-democratic capitalism; they have either experienced the horrors of German history directly or internalized its lessons too well to flirt with ethno-nationalism. Their dissatisfactions are introjected and express themselves as a perpetual mourning for the possibilities that have been foreclosed by history.

Yet even in the nineties, to say nothing of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Fukuyamian peace and prosperity proved to be more notional than real; the foremost dissatisfaction with liberal-democratic capitalism was that the disappearance of a left alternative also meant the absence of any mechanisms for actually achieving these goals. 'The future is in the past', a 22-year-old Sebald had scrawled on the final page of his journal before embarking on his life as a university teacher in England. This was the sentiment that would animate the books he began to write a quarter-century later, the books whose remarkable success provides the rationale for the publication of an English-language biography. By the time he came to write them, however, the proposition had acquired an unfortunate corollary: the future is no longer in the future. Sebald's characters may dissent from the materialism of the consumers and the day traders; they may notice the imperial continuities between the old liberalism and the new; but they share at least one assumption with them: there is no alternative. When 'confronted

with traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past', the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* feels 'paralyzing horror', rather than motivating indignation. The destruction, as he can plainly see, is ongoing, but he fatalistically watches and waits for the world around him to dissolve 'into water, sand and thin air' just as surely as the settlements of Dunwich had done some seven centuries prior, rather than do anything to stop it. What places Sebald's characters among the last men is that, where they might choose the political, they choose the elegiac instead. For Sebald, too, it proved easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism and that, every bit as much as the traumatic burden of the past, is a source of his melancholy. In this he was—and remains—the Spirit of the Age.