

Variations on a Theme of Memory

In her introduction to the published interviews with and profiles on the Bavarian-born expatriate writer W. G. Sebald, Lynne Sharon Schwartz remarks on Sebald's fascination, present in some form or fashion in all of his published writings, with "the swift blossoming of every human endeavor and its long slow death, either though natural or [human]-made disaster, leaving a wealth of remains to be pored over, not to mention vast human suffering."¹ In each of the four novels that he completed before his untimely death in an auto accident in December of 2001—*Schwindel* (1990; published in English as *Vertigo* [1999]), *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992; published in English as *The Emigrants* [1996]), *Die Ringe des Saturn* (1995; published in English as *The Rings of Saturn* [1998]), and *Austerlitz* (2001; published in English as *Austerlitz* [2001])—Sebald's narrators navigate history and memory toward the creation and articulation of an image, an *understanding*, of some specific person or event as a whole. At times the subjects of Sebald's narrator's ruminations are real, and at other times they are fictional; or, to be more accurate, the subject is almost always some conflation of the real and the fictional, ultimately placing the subject somewhere in the liminal space between reality and imagination, objectivity and subjectivity, truth and myth. Yet whether real, imagined, or some hybrid chimera made from their combination, the subject of Sebald's narrators is always more than just the individual—it is also the time and the place, the historical and cultural context occupied by the subject. And in each case, all of these things—the individuals and their contexts—are obscured behind veils of fog and layers of

¹ Lynne Sharon Schwartz, "Introduction," in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 13.

dust which Sebald's narrators must carefully parse, as if uncovering a priceless archeological artifact. Often, this uncovering is done at a remove, across expanses of time, through second- and third-hand accounts of things remembered, in found objects and photographs of indeterminate origin—in short, through memories and recollections that are neither Sebald's nor the narrator's own. This objective remove, however, the distance that separates first the narrator, then Sebald, then the reader from the experiences and memories of the object does nothing to undermine the urgency with which the uncovering is pursued.

Schwartz contends that Sebald's "dreamlike narratives, meandering yet meticulous, echo the lingering state of shock that is our legacy—not only from the wars of recent memory but from the century of colonialism that preceded them, indeed, history's 'long account of calamities.'"² Certainly trauma is ever present at the fringes (and occasionally at the forefront) of Sebald's narrator's investigations, but often the trauma is presented not as the object itself of memory but rather as the vague backdrop against which the memory exists in relief. When entering a well-appointed den, one notices the shelves lined with books, the soft leather chair, the lamps emitting warm light, the art on the walls—everything except the structure of the space itself, the fact that some combination and configuration of walls and floor and roof (ideally) has provided the space within which these objects themselves can exist and have meaning. These objects, the memories, are what we see and upon which we focus our attention, but the room itself, the trauma, is the unremarked but necessary condition for their existence.

The first of Sebald's novels to be translated into English, *The Emigrants*, tells the stories of four individuals living in exile and the ways in which their own individual reckonings with memory shape, and ultimately seal, their respective fates. Although not explicitly stated, it is implied throughout the novel that the four individuals share, to some degree, a common trauma as the incubator and curator of their memories: the horrors perpetrated by the German Nazi regime. Sebald's final novel, *Austerlitz*, is more explicit; here Sebald's narrator recounts, and eventually becomes himself engaged in, Jacques Austerlitz's ongoing search for memories of his childhood and thus his identity, having no recollection of anything that preceded his placement, at the age of

² Ibid, 9.

five, on a *kindertransporte* train from Prague to be raised, in relative safety from persecution and extermination, in Wales.³ In each novel, the focus is on memory; memory as truth, memory as identity, memory as trauma itself.

JOANNE CROZIER'S THOUGHTFUL AND MOVING ESSAY in the present issue of *Confluence* inspires its own reflections on memory. She writes: "The objects that we imbue with meaning—the things that evoke special memories—are anchors that hold us in place as the currents of modern living swirl around our roots, threatening to erode our identities. These material traces of the past tell our stories and define who we are." In Sebald fashion, Crozier's essay contains various images, many of objects, which ground the memories and recollections presented in the essay; we are shown the author's collection of thimbles, old coins, even tattered pages of an old book—objects that elicit memories and in which the memories reside. This essay resonated deeply with me, and not just for its evocation of the style and manner of Sebald. Roughly ten years ago, I began collecting pins—the kind you can affix to a hat or a walking stick—from various places that I would visit. Some of the pins represent cities or countries; others represent specific sites: national parks, scenic highways, museums, random roadside attractions that struck me as particularly interesting. Some of the pins represent places I visited with my family, and some represent places that I visited alone. Each one, no matter the place, or time, or reason for my being there, is a memory to which I am determined to cling. Each pin is a response to the trauma that is the simple passage of time, the temporary duration of experiences of joy, the childhoods that don't last, the dissolution of relationships that should have lasted. They stand in a unique relationship to time—an intentional attempt to arrest, or at least defy, its flow, while at the same time the

³ It is worth noting here the profound parallel between Jacques Austerlitz's experience and Sebald's own. Raised in a small alpine town in Bavaria, and only one year of age at the conclusion of the war, Sebald himself had no recollections of the war, its preludes, or its immediate aftermath. Further, he would often speak of the "conspiracy of silence" which he encountered throughout his childhood and up through his university time in Freiburg, during which no one ever spoke of war. Yet despite knowing almost nothing specific of its horrors, Sebald was fundamentally shaped by this trauma; it is no wonder, then, that his narrator would become so engaged in Jacques Austerlitz's search for his own 'history.'



A few of the Editor's pins.

constituent parts of a larger, unifying story that can only unfold over time. They are (somewhat) neatly housed in a book that I made for just this purpose and which, more often than not, is present with me wherever I am. At any given moment, these little metal memories are patiently awaiting their chance to fulfill the twofold, contradictory purpose of memory—to ease and to exacerbate the pain of trauma.

There is, perhaps, a temptation to trust that, when given tangible form, memories can attain a degree of permanence; this object, although a memento of a particular place and moment in time, by virtue of its continued presence in my possession, in this little book, lends the remembered experience a semblance of the eternal. Likewise, and wholly independently of the existence of these little objects themselves, there is a parallel attainment of the eternal that is achieved simply by virtue of knowing that they exist, as documents, of a (my) past. The *possibility* of remembering, to know that one is ever in possession of these aids to memory, is itself a comfort; it is a small victory against the tides of change and destruction that compel every moment and every experience toward its end. In his sad and beautiful account of his search for his lost home Alexandria within his new home New York, André Aciman explained, of Straus Park, that “[h]ere I would come to remember not so much the beauty of the past as the beauty of remembering.”⁴ While we hope that the memories themselves are beautiful, and warm, and happy, to be able to remember is itself a wonder and a joy. This is perhaps why so much of living is spent in the transcription of the world to memory⁵; this is why we write, or take

⁴ André Aciman, “Shadow Cities,” in *False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 44.

⁵ Perhaps it would be more accurate to characterize this as a *translation* of the world to memory. Try as we may, we are incapable of constructing

photographs, or collect coins or stones or spoons or travel pins—we are ever focused, whether we know it or not, on the endless but ultimately futile task of constructing a permanent record. Yet as we construct this record, which we hope will save us and remind us of all that is happy and good and meaningful, we are simultaneously erecting an edifice that will equally ensnare and punish us.

IN SEBALD'S NOVEL *AUSTERLITZ*, Jacques Austerlitz has spent years driven by his obsessive desire to reclaim the memories that he has lost. He is, as implied by Sebald's narrator's descriptions, unmoored and lost in a world that is foreign and unfamiliar to him. Worse yet is the toll that memory takes on the four displaced individuals in Sebald's *The Emigrants*. As each narrative progresses, the subject seemingly sinks deeper and deeper into the despair of displacement and loss, longing for a place and a past either imagined or gone. Comfort ceases and hope recedes; three of the four commit suicide. In a 1997 interview, Sebald explicitly acknowledged the role that memory can play in this devolution through despair toward a willed death: "I was familiar with that particular symptom [of survivor syndrome] in the abstract, through such cases as Jean Améry, Primo Levi, Paul Celan, Tadeusz Borowski, and various others who failed to escape the shadows which were cast over their lives by the Shoah and ultimately succumbed to the weight of memory."⁶ Memory, which was held onto for its capacity to ease and uplift, is shown here to also be an enormous weight, which unchecked can drag one all the way down. Later in the same interview, when asked specifically about the fact that his emigrants were at an advanced age when they ultimately succumbed to their despair, Sebald elaborated on the "density" of the weight of memory:

It's a question of specific weight, I think. The older you get, in a sense, the more you forget. That is certainly true. Vast tracts of your life sort of vanish in oblivion. But that which survives in your mind acquires a very considerable degree of

an objective record; every entry is an interpretation, a choice to focus on this at the expense of that, a desire to prize this and to bury that.

⁶ Eleanor Wachtel, "Ghost Hunter," in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 37–38.

density, a very high degree of specific weight. And of course once you are weighed down with these kinds of weight, it's not unlikely that they will sink you. Memories of that sort do have a tendency to encumber you emotionally.⁷

André Aciman is more succinct in his claim that the enduring quality of memory is not joy but pain: "In the end, the work of memory is the work of loneliness. ... All we have in the end is our self, our loneliness—not even our memories but how they've lied to us."⁸

SHOULD THE FACT THAT MEMORY can equally bring elation and pain, solace and suffering, be taken as evidence of some kind of objective accuracy? Or is memory telescopic—whether we are seeing the good or the bad, the extreme focus of memory causes whatever we are looking at to appear so much larger and more overwhelming?

In §6.4311 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes: "If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present."⁹ Wittgenstein may not be wrong here, but there is an undeniable irony in the contention that memory, as a means to preserve and lend permanence to elements of the past, is perhaps precisely what condemns us to the suffering that is an attendant part of living temporally. But there is also something profoundly unsatisfying about the kind of eternity presented here. To be unmoored from the past would be to live like the angels Daniel and Cassiel in Wim Wenders' 1987 film *Der Himmel über Berlin*—without pain or loss, but equally without wonder, connection, or meaning. The first lesson that Daniel learns upon forsaking his angelic existence to become human is pain—the first color he sees when he awakes in a West Berlin alley is the deep red of his own blood. But this is what it is to be human, and our memories, in both the joy and the pain that they evoke, remind us equally of our own particular human experiences but also of the greater meanings of humanness in itself.

⁷ Ibid, 53.

⁸ André Aciman, "Beckett's Winter," in *False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 102, 106.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922), 185.