

W.G. Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur*: German Literature and the  
Allied Bombings of German Cities in World War II

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of Nottingham Trent University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2010

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a critical analysis of W.G. Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur (On the Natural History of Destruction)* and its reception in the German media and in scholarship.

Sebald's essay caused a public debate in 1997 over the ethical implications of a cultural memory of the Allied bombings of German cities in the Second World War. Since then, the essay has come to be understood as a foundational moment in the discourse surrounding 'German victimhood' in representations of the bombings and the expulsions of ethnic Germans from the Eastern territories.

The thesis argues that Sebald's essay has been widely mis-read and mis-appropriated in the service of the discourse. Re-inscribing the essay into the aesthetic and philosophical framework of Sebald's wider prose oeuvre, from which it is frequently divorced in scholarship, it argues that the text is exemplary of Sebald's creation of an archive of "natural history" with regard to the representation of past catastrophes. Situating the essay within a 20<sup>th</sup> century tradition of German thinking on history and the enlightenment that informs Sebald's thought, I use this thick contextualisation to argue that Sebald's fascination with the bombings and the ruined cities provides an intersection between his academic and aesthetic practice, offering important insights into his natural historical gaze, archival technique and preoccupation with the catastrophic history of his country of origin.

With this examination of an important but often mis-understood text, the thesis aims to enrich the field of memory studies in relation to post-reunification Germany and correct an oversight in the recent history of cultural memory regarding the Nazi past. It also aims to fill a gap in the scholarship on W.G. Sebald, a writer who has increasingly been understood as one of the most significant in the recent German canon, by reinscribing *Luftkrieg und Literatur* into his body of work.

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## Notes on Translations and Abbreviations

As stated in the guidelines for thesis submission at Nottingham Trent University, all German language quotations in this thesis are accompanied by an English translation. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own. Where published translations are available, these have been used. The original German has been given in the main body of the text, with the translation afterwards in parentheses. The titles of W.G. Sebald's works have been abbreviated as follows:

- LL**      *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999)
- NHD**     *On the Natural History of Destruction*. trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2003)
- RS**      *Die Ringe des Saturn* (Frankfurt am Main: Vito von Eichborn Verlag, 1995)
- RSat**    *The Rings of Saturn* (London: Random House, 2002)
- A**        *Austerlitz* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2001)
- Aust**    *Austerlitz* (London: Penguin, 2001)
- DA**      *Die Ausgewanderten: Vier Lange Erzählungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002)
- SG**      *Schwindel. Gefühle* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1994)
- V**        *Vertigo* (London: Random House, 2002)
- NN**      *Nach der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1995).
- AN**      *After Nature*. trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin, 2002)

## **Acknowledgements**

The knowledge, advice and unfailing belief of my supervisor, Prof. Bill Niven, were invaluable from the very beginning to the very end and I thank him most warmly for his patience, forbearance, time and kindness. This thesis was funded by a studentship granted by the AHRC as part of the AHRC-funded research project 'Representations of Germans as Victims', based at the University of Leeds from 2005 to 2008 and I am grateful to the members of the project for their support and insight throughout my research, in particular Prof. Stuart Taberner, Dr. Annette Seidel-Arpaci and my good friend, Karina Berger. Finally, work on this thesis could never have even begun without the enduring faith shown in me by Mike and Jenny Allaway, to whom I am deeply indebted and eternally grateful.

For Jamie, to whom I owe everything

## **1. Introduction: W.G. Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* and the Rise of 'Germans as Victims' as a Cultural Paradigm.**

Visitors to the city of Dresden in the summer of 2007 could have been forgiven for thinking that they had strayed into a kind of theme park, the theme of which was the bombing of that city in February 1945 and its subsequent ruination and rebuilding over a period of 50 years. Souvenir vendors all over the city were selling trinkets and postcards showing the city 'as it once was and now', and visitors queued up at the otherwise deserted Transport Museum to see a 1930s propaganda film entitled 'Dresden: the Most Beautiful City', billed as a unique chance to see Dresden as it had been. Tour guides led groups of visitors from all over around the sites where principle landmarks had been razed to the ground and pointed out the traces of that destruction that were still visible. The centre of this bombing tourism was the Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady), left in ruins by the GDR until 1990, then painstakingly reconstructed and finally consecrated in 2005, in time for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its destruction. A long line of visitors snaked right across the main square, waiting for their turn to file quickly through and marvel at the shiny new parts of the interior that were set off by the original soot-blackened remains. Outside, a living-statue performer busked for the summer crowds as a *Trümmerfrau* (Rubble Woman), the enduring symbol of the mammoth rebuild that Germany achieved after World War II.

This scene of busy bomb-tourism is symptomatic of the way the memory of how Germans and their landscape suffered during the war has become, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, not just a prominent but a popular and even comfortable component of national memory. This was not always the case and though recent research has demonstrated that



the early FRG and the GDR both commemorated German losses and suffering to political ends, it was certainly the case in the later FRG that the primacy of the memory of German perpetration had a prohibitive influence on these commemorations in public discourse.<sup>1</sup> The shift from this primacy to a memory that incorporates both perpetration and suffering reaches back to debates that pre-date unification, as will be discussed below. However, as many commentators have noted, over the last 10 years there has been a marked and very visible rise in the importance of representations of German suffering in the Allied bombings of cities, the flight and expulsions from the Eastern territories, the rapes committed by the advancing Red Army and of the returning soldiers and prisoners of war. Helmut Schmitz notes that “the topic of German wartime suffering is omnipresent in contemporary Germany”,<sup>2</sup> nowhere more so than in popular culture. Numerous high-profile, high-budget television series on the bombings and expulsions have topped the ratings in recent years: Guido Knopp’s *Die Große Flucht* (The Great Flight), broadcast in the winter of 2001, had an audience of 5 million viewers; ZDF’s two-parter, *Dresden*, telling the story of the air raid using a love story between a British pilot and a German nurse attracted viewing figures of over 30% in March 2006, and the channel followed it up to similar success with another Guido Knopp series, this time entitled *Die Kinder der Flucht* (The Children of the Flight), telling a love story between a Polish boy and a German girl in the winter of 2006. This success buoyed the channel to

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, research such as Robert G. Moeller, 'Germans as Victims? Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of World War II's Legacy', *History and Memory*, 17 (2005), 147-94, Maja Zehfuss, 'Writing War: Against Good Conscience', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33 (2004), 91-121, and Gilad Margalit, "'Der Luftangriff Auf Dresden und Seine Bedeutung Für Die Erinnerungspolitik Der DDR und für die Herauskristallisierung einer Historischen Kriegserrinerung im Westen'", in *Narrative Der Shoah: Repräsentationen Der Vergangenheit in Historiographie, Kunst Und Politik*, ed. by Düwell/Schmidt (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002), pp. 189-207.

<sup>2</sup> Helmut Schmitz, "Introduction" in *A Nation of Victims? Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present*, ed. by Helmut Schmitz (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 1.

invest 5 years of production and 10 million euros in Joseph Vilsmaier's two-parter *Die Gustloff* (The Gustloff), telling the story of the former 'Strength Through Joy' cruise ship, that was sunk by a Russian submarine in 1945 carrying German refugees from the East, killing more than 9000. Broadcast in March 2008, the series attracted almost 9 million viewers, not quite topping figures for ARD's series about the expulsions of the previous year, *Die Flucht* by Maria Fürstwangler, which had audiences of over 11 million.<sup>3</sup>

That the mainstream German television channels have been so willing to pour money into these productions depicting German suffering is indicative of how the topic has become a popular and profitable cultural phenomenon in recent years. That this phenomenon spans not just the 'popular' media of film and television, but also the print media and what might be considered 'serious' literature is evidence of how deeply the topic has embedded itself in the cultural sphere. From 1945, German literature has been the arena where the morality and responsibility of Germany's memory culture has been most keenly debated and where the much vaunted task of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) has been publicly enacted. Ever since the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno's proclamation in 1951 that, after Auschwitz, to write poetry would be barbaric,<sup>4</sup> and in 1954 that the novel was no longer a valid form of representation,<sup>5</sup> German writers have shouldered the burden of incorporating the ethical imperatives facing the perpetrator nation into literature. Though early postwar literature was often based on the experience and suffering of the returning soldier, it was works such as

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> See Petra Kiedaisch ed., *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995), p. 48. The principle texts of the debate are presented in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur I* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 61.

Günter Grass's seminal *Die Blechtrommel* (Tin Drum) of 1959 that were to establish a moral responsibility of German authors to foreground German perpetration and question the validity of the current post-Nazi state. The critical enlightenment of the 1960s, the Auschwitz Trials and the Student Movement of 1968 further cemented the primacy of German guilt in a nationwide generational conflict and literature became the tool for the indictment of the wartime generation and their perpetration of the Holocaust.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the recent trend for serious literature to engage with issues of German wartime suffering and to employ a more empathetic approach to the experiences of the wartime generation has been met with a level of controversy matched by its commercial success. During the 1990s writers such as Hans-Ulrich Treichel, Dieter Forte, Hans-Josef Ortheil, Bernhard Schlink, Martin Walser and Marcel Beyer found success with novels that deviated from the dominant literary paradigm of previous decades that foregrounded the Holocaust and instead demonstrated empathy with the wartime generation. The trend gathered momentum and since 2000 several highly acclaimed and high profile authors have published novels that attempt to construct a more 'inclusive' picture of the Germans in the Third Reich. The most controversial of all came from Günter Grass, the Nobel Prize-winning spearhead of the intellectual left since the late 1950s, and led critics and scholars to declare 'Germans as Victims' as the dominant trope in cultural memory. Published in February 2002, *Im Krebsgang* (Crabwalk) soared up the bestseller charts and by March was in its seventh edition,

having sold more than 300 000 copies,<sup>6</sup> sparking huge media interest in its subject, the sinking of the *Gustloff*, and an entire market of spin-off publications.<sup>7</sup>

By the middle of this decade, the phenomenon was perceived to have reached something of a frenzy. The seasoned German cultural theorist Aleida Assmann was not alone, writing in 2006, in feeling that surely it had reached a peak in 2003.<sup>8</sup> However, the prominence of German suffering in culture shows no real signs of diminishing; rather, the depictions are no longer causing the same level of controversy that was seen in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Indeed, as Stuart Taberner and Karina Berger note, scholars have of late tended to overstate “the extent of real disagreement” on the matter and German culture now “acknowledges both the complexity and fundamental unknowability of the past”. As a result “the bombing, mass rape and expulsion endured by millions of Germans during the closing phases of the war are now very much part of public discourse”.<sup>9</sup> The magnitude of this shift in the perspective of the German historical and cultural consciousness can scarcely be overestimated. After decades of debate in the FRG and after 1990 on the importance of the historical priority of German guilt, the success of this shift in a relatively short time is astonishing and, as Bill Niven states, with the boundaries of the victim and perpetrator collectives being shifted and overlapping, “what

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<sup>6</sup> As cited in *Der Spiegel*, 13, 25.03.02, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Including offerings from Guido Knopp and reprints of books by survivors that were marketed alongside Grass’s novel. For a full account, see Stuart Taberner, “Normalisation and The New Consensus on the Nazi Past: Günter Grass’s *Im Krebsgang* and The Problem of German Wartime Suffering”, *Oxford German Studies* (31:2002), pp. 161-186.

<sup>8</sup> Aleida Assmann, 'On the (in)Compatibility of Guilt and Suffering in German Memory', in *German Life and Letters* (59:2, 2006), pp. 187-200, here p. 188. Other commentators named 2003 “the year that 1945 returned”. See Laurel Cohen-Pfister, ‘The Suffering of the Perpetrators: Unleashing Collective Memory in German Literature of the Twenty-First Century’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (2:2005), pp. 123-135, here p. 125.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Taberner and Karina Berger, “Introduction” in Berger and Taberner eds., *Germans as Victims in the Literary Fiction of the Berlin Republic* (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), pp. 1-15, here pp. 3-4.

this amounts to is a complete reinterpretation of the Second World War”.<sup>10</sup> Despite appearances, however, this is not a sudden phenomenon, but one that reaches back to developments in the cultural climate of the FRG in the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> After 1990, it developed via a series of cultural events and public debates, or “memory contests”,<sup>12</sup> each one marking a shift in the dominant historical perspective. This thesis is an investigation into the most heated and long-lasting ‘contest’ in that development, the debate over W.G. Sebald’s *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Airwar and Literature) lectures of 1997, which came to be understood as the foundational moment of the ‘Germans as Victims’ phenomenon.

### **The Rise of ‘Germans as Victims’**

From the moment of reunification, the question of how to deal with the memory of National Socialism has been central to the new nation’s search for a common identity. Through much of the 1990s this was played out via a series of contests and events that sought to place the perpetration of the Holocaust at the forefront of collective memory. This included, most notably, debates such as the furore over the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s controversial book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* and the touring exhibition *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht* (War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht), which aimed to dispel the myth of the ‘clean’ Wehrmacht and showed photographs of soldiers engaged in Holocaust crimes. In the

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<sup>10</sup> Bill Niven, “Introduction” in *Germans as Victims*, ed. by Bill Niven (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1-26, here p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> The genesis of the phenomenon is discussed in chapter 6.

<sup>12</sup> This is the term coined by Anne Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove to describe the cultural battles in contemporary Germany over the ‘ownership’ of memory of the Nazi past. See Fuchs and Cosgrove, “Introduction” in *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film and Discourse since 1990* ed. by Fuchs, Cosgrove and Grote (Rochester: Camden House, 2006), pp. 1-25. Taberner and Berger dispute that the discourse on ‘Germans as Victims’ is still characterized by such contests. See Taberner and Berger, p. 3.

years spanning the turn of the millennium, however, a dialectic shift began to set memory of perpetration in opposition to increasingly vocal reminders of memories of German suffering. Though it had its roots in earlier debates, this shift occurred definitely with two cultural spats in 1998: the Walser-Bubis debate and the reaction to W.G Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* lectures given in late 1997. As I will argue below, these otherwise unconnected events came to mark the foundation for an increasingly dominant discourse on the desirability or otherwise of a national commemoration of German suffering in the war and its aftermath, with the overtly political intentions of the former coming to indirectly influence the course of the latter.

In November 1997, the German writer and academic W.G. Sebald was invited to deliver his *Poetikvorlesungen* (poetry lectures) in Zürich. The title of the lectures was *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (*Airwar and Literature*) and over several sessions Sebald presented a mix of literary criticism, cultural theory and passages of prose with the central thesis that postwar German literature had shied away from representing the real extent of destruction, violence and degradation that resulted from the Allied bombings of German cities during World War II. The lectures began by engaging in a form of literary archeology, in which Sebald, convinced of the widespread and devastating effect of the bombings, is astounded to find little trace of the violence and destruction experienced in the cities. Instead, he argued, German writers had colluded in an unspoken taboo on the subject that was, in his opinion, fuelled by the imperative to forget the past, rebuild and start afresh as a nation. Though his search did uncover some literary representations of the ruined cities, his findings only suggested to him that the majority of writers who did attempt to represent the devastation only succeeded in abstracting the reality of the destruction and the squalor of life in the ruins in favour of a style that sought to deliver

meaning to the experience and hope for new beginnings. Sebald then used passages from his previous prose works, passages from the few works that he found to be successful in their treatment of the bombings, and some new material of his own to suggest a viable form of literary rendering of the event, a form which he termed “the natural history of destruction”.

Sebald was a well-respected and successful writer who had been living in England for all of his career. His prose work was critically acclaimed for its sensitive treatment, in particular, of the victims of the Holocaust, but he was hardly a bestseller in Germany. For several months his lectures went unnoticed by the German press, until the *Spiegel*'s literature correspondent, Volker Hage, wrote a piece in January 1998 lauding Sebald for lifting the lid on a taboo and asking if this was the start of German literature's real engagement with the Nazi past. There followed months of contributions by all of the country's literary correspondents in the press, as well as historians and fellow authors, either praising Sebald for breaking the taboo or expressing concern for the potentially revisionist nature of allowing Germans to write about their own suffering in the bombed cities. Sebald himself never formally contributed to the debate, but in 1999 he published the lectures in book form,<sup>13</sup> adding a postscript dealing with some of the reaction. Hage, meanwhile, published the collected responses<sup>14</sup> and set about trying to answer definitively whether Sebald's thesis was accurate. In 2003 he published *Zeugen der Zerstörung: Die Literaten und der Luftkrieg* (Witnesses of the Destruction: Writers and

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<sup>13</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999). Published in English as *On the Natural History of Destruction* (London: Penguin, 2003), trans. by Anthea Bell.

<sup>14</sup> See Volker Hage, Rainer Moritz, and Hubert Winkels, eds., *Deutsche Literatur 1998: Jahresüberblick* (Stuttgart: Reklam, 1999).

the Airwar),<sup>15</sup> an extended essay detailing all the examples he could find of the Airwar in literature, and *Hamburg 1943: Literarische Zeugnisse zum Feuersturm* (Hamburg 1943: Literary Testimonies of the Firestorm),<sup>16</sup> an anthology of extracts from literary accounts of the bombing of Hamburg. He was also central to the republishing of Gert Ledig's forgotten novel of 1956 about the bombings, *die Vergeltung* (Payback) in 1998 and supervised a series on the bombings in the *Spiegel* in the same year. In 2002, the same year as Grass published *Im Krebsgang*, the historian Jörg Friedrich published a 600-page account of the airwar, *Der Brand* (The Fire), which in minute detail and using an almost literary, narrative style, sought to provide the ultimate documentation of the bombings. Despite its huge commercial success,<sup>17</sup> the book caused controversy among historians, the media and critics for its perceived equation of German victims in the bombings and the victims of the Holocaust. Critics were outraged at the use of terms like "Einsatzgruppen" (Task Force) for bomber squadrons and "Gaskammer" (gas chamber) to describe the cellars in which many suffocated. Friedrich was undoubtedly conscious of these linguistic parallels, having gained recognition for his work on the Holocaust, meaning that here was an explicit suggestion that Germans were part of the same victim collective as the Jews, and the Allies should be considered as members of the perpetrator collective, along with the Germans. For many, this was the undesirable outcome of Sebald's alleged lifting the lid back in 1997. The dust-jacket of the English edition explicitly quotes Sebald to suggest that Friedrich is responding to him (though he never

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<sup>15</sup> Volker Hage, *Zeugen Der Zerstörung: Die Literaten Und Der Luftkrieg. Essays Und Gespräche* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Volker Hage, ed., *Hamburg 1943: Literarische Zeugnisse zum Feuersturm* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> The hardback edition alone sold over 200 000 copies. Quoted from the paperback edition, Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand* (Berlin: List, 2004). Published in English translation as *The Fire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), trans. By Allison Brown.



cites him directly) and features a review quote to that effect: “What W.G. Sebald lamented about the lack of open discourse on the air war appears to have been blown apart with the publication of *The Fire*”. Though Sebald had died in 2001 and was therefore never able to pass comment on *Der Brand*, with its publication the discourse that started in 1998 took on a cyclical nature that saw Sebald as the founder of the historical perspective now enacted by Friedrich and Grass in *Im Krebsgang*. Since *Der Brand*, as already noted, the idea of German wartime suffering has now established itself in the national consciousness and each cultural rendering of the bombings or expulsions garners less controversy than the one before. So much so, that in today’s climate it seems almost unlikely that an obscure lecture series by a respected but rather opaque author came to spark one of the fiercest debates in postwar German culture.

### **The Aims of the Present Thesis**

20 years on from the fall of the Berlin Wall and 10 years since the publication of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, and with the paradigm of German suffering now firmly established, this thesis aims to give the first in-depth and extended analysis of Sebald’s thesis in the text, the nature and validity of his argument and the role of his text in the discourse on Germans as victims. Although, as I have argued above, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* has come to be understood as a foundational moment for this discourse, surprisingly little scholarship has engaged with the text itself in the context of the debate surrounding it, with Sebald’s intentions and motivations often being subsumed in the ethical debate, both in scholarship and in the media, over the validity of representing German suffering. The thesis therefore aims to unsettle the established place of Sebald and his essay in the story of the rise of Germans as victims in the Berlin Republic by

asking the following research questions: What motivates Sebald's concern for the memory of the airwar and how does it relate to his other work? How valid are Sebald's real claims and do the arguments put forward to contest him actually disprove his thesis? And, to what extent has the debate and scholarship on 'Germans as Victims' accurately assessed Sebald's message in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*?

In answer to these questions, the thesis argues that in much of the media response to *Luftkrieg und Literatur* and critical scholarship on 'Germans as victims' there is an ellipsis, a lack of engagement with the text and Sebald's argument and philosophy. By reinscribing Sebald's text into his wider prose oeuvre (from which it is frequently considered separately), I aim to illuminate his theory of a taboo and argue that it in fact runs counter to the usual 'Germans as victims' paradigm. A close and contextual reading of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* illuminates gaps between its intentions and its reception, between its content and its perceived message, which in turn illuminate features of the now established memory climate in German culture in respect to the Nazi past. The aim of the thesis is therefore to provide a new reading of Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* by contextualising it within his oeuvre as a whole. This thick contextualisation provides the springboard for a more nuanced reading of the essay, which in turn can be used as a yardstick for analysing pre-Sebald literature and a critical deconstruction of the reception of Sebald's essay.

In the wake of what can be considered the most significant paradigm shift in the memory of the Nazi past in Germany for years, theorists and scholars have understandably concentrated on the ethical and cultural meaning of this new understanding of the recent past and its validity in the present. With such pressing and complex questions as these at the forefront of the field, other questions have not been

asked about how and why this phenomenon has come into being and thus the perceived facts of its genesis, such as the role played by *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, have been written into recent cultural history more or less unquestioningly.

For decades, German culture and Germanistik have been entrenched in debates surrounding *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or coming to terms with the past, the term now commonly deployed to denote the struggle to fully understand, integrate and move on from the traumatic and catastrophic legacy of the National Socialist era. Literally translated, the term implies a struggle for dominance, for mastery over the past and in real terms this is often how it has manifested, as a battle between groups who disagree on the form this integration of the past into the present consciousness of the nation should take. Traditionally this has been a fight between those who strongly believe that the Holocaust and the memory of perpetration should occupy a privileged position in any German identity (generally the intellectual left) and the (often conservative right) view that Germany is a nation like any other and should be allowed to normalise in line with other European nations with regard to its history, by considering the Holocaust just one event in the full history of the war, and of the nation, and being allowed to make it a part of history rather than a part of the present state of mind. The debates that have characterised the rise of the ‘Germans as victims’ paradigm are undoubtedly the most recent manifestation of this battle to claim mastery over the role of the past in the present and those who have studied or commented on it unsurprisingly tend to apply the battle-worn terms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* to each instance. As such, the reception of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is characterised by the anxieties and tensions associated with any potentially revisionist perspective on German history and Sebald’s motivations for bringing up the bombings of the Allied cities and the German experience of living in the

ruins are considered solely within this framework. In the responses to Sebald's thesis, a direct correlation was made between the memory of German guilt and the silence surrounding German suffering. Klaus Harpprecht, for instance, concisely summed up the views of many with his warning that "das Schweigen verbarg vielleicht eine Schande, die kostbarer ist als alle Literatur" (the silence concealed a shame that is more valuable than all literature).<sup>18</sup> This is a causal correlation that, while certainly brought up by Sebald, is nevertheless, this thesis argues, far from being at the centre of his argument. The implied question informing much of the reaction to the lectures is why would Sebald, a writer famed for his sensitivity to the Holocaust, be talking about 'German suffering' other than to espouse a potentially revisionist agenda?

This thesis sets out from a different point of departure. Instead of considering Sebald's essay from *within* the Vergangenheitsbewältigung discourse, I intend to analyse it from an *outside*, de-politicised position. For this, the contextual framework for *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is Sebald's own oeuvre, a framework very rarely applied to the essay. I argue that the key to an accurate reading of the essay is an examination of Sebald's motivations for bringing the subject of the bombed cities into his *Poetikvorlesungen* in the first place. Before we denounce Sebald as a revisionist, on this issue at least, we must question what it is about the bombings that fascinates him so much. To do this, we must look at his entire body of work, which I argue is unified by a particular gaze into history, one that searches for the traces of Sebald's own understanding of natural history, a concept he explores over and over, influenced by the traditions of German thinking on history and the enlightenment (particularly Walter

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<sup>18</sup> Klaus Harpprecht, "Stille Schicksallose. Warum die Nachkriegsliteratur von vielem geschwiegen hat", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 20.1.1998.

Benjamin and Adorno and Horkheimer) and his rich knowledge of European literature. Chapter 2 is therefore an attempt to provide this essential context for an understanding of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* by defining the natural history that his works seek to uncover, and the aesthetic technique he deploys to make the traces of this buried history visible to us in the present.

Reading *Luftkrieg und Literatur* through the prism of this literary context, the central argument of the thesis is that the bombs, the fires, the ruins and the resulting primitive existence of the Germans are the perfect distillation of the natural history Sebald strives to glimpse in his narratives. Chapter 3 therefore offers an in-depth analysis of the essay, arguing that in it, as well as in other representations of the bombings in his works, Sebald recognises a moment of natural history that perfectly expresses the violence and catastrophe at the heart of European, and specifically German, modernity.

Turning to the element of the essay that provoked such furious reaction, chapter 4 explores the diagnosis of a taboo on the literary representations of the bombings in postwar Germany in the light of this reading. It argues that the taboo thesis has been simplified by many respondents and that it refers not to *all* representations but to a very specific *form* of representation, one that would lay bare the degradation and meaninglessness of the event. The chapter analyses Sebalds' criticisms of those works that do attempt to convey the experience of the bombings to argue that he accuses those authors of colluding in the nationwide attempt to turn a history of defeat into one of victory over the catastrophic implosion of a civilization whose values gave rise to Auschwitz. Contrary to the assumption that Sebald calls for a re-discovery of forgotten memories of German suffering, I argue that in fact *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is a lament for the irrevocably lost opportunity to glimpse the results of the dialectic at the heart of

enlightened progress, which he believes was spurned by literature – the only means suitable for the task – in favour of abstracting the catastrophe as a positive foundational myth for the new state, built on the same values as the last.

One of the most overlooked elements of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is its attempt to set out a viable literary form in which the natural historical truth of the bombed cities could be told; the focus instead tends to be on the *Luftkrieg* at the expense of the *Literatur*. Chapter 5 explores this proposed form, the “Natural History of Destruction” from the English title, by examining the passages of description from the essay as well as the texts Sebald marks out for (selective and qualified) praise for their representations of the catastrophe. The chapter also engages with some of the responses that refute the validity of Sebald’s argument on the basis of the existence of these texts and others that mention the bombing war, many of which Sebald does not mention. I argue that these quantitative arguments do nothing to disprove the literary thesis at the heart of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, since they have little in common with the literary form Sebald demands. Finally, I offer an analysis of Gert Ledig’s forgotten novel *Vergeltung* (*Payback*), a text often cited as the proof that Sebald had not done his homework, arguing that it is possibly the closest in form to Sebald’s desired representation, but that its complete rejection by the postwar German readership only serves to support Sebald’s theory.

On the basis that this reading of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is counter to many of the responses to it both in the press and academic writing, it is pertinent to turn to this reception and ask how it was that Sebald was so widely and willingly mis-read. Chapter 6 analyses the so-called ‘Sebald debate’ in the media, arguing that it was largely self-perpetuating and divorced from its original source, the lectures themselves. I propose that the particular attraction of Sebald as a spokesman for the emerging discourse, as well as

the timing of the original lecture at a moment of heightened tension with regard to the future of memory in Germany were the foundations for a widespread mis-appropriation of the essay that has cemented itself in cultural history and subsumed *Luftkrieg und Literatur* under its weight. Chapter 7 argues that this sublimation of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* was so powerful that the scholarly response was also guilty to a large extent of conflating the content of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* with its reception, mistaking Sebald's voice for the voice of those who misappropriated it, an effect that turns discourse analysis into the proliferation of the discourse itself.

With this examination of an important but often mis-understood text, the thesis aims to enrich the field of memory studies in relation to post-reunification Germany and correct an oversight in the recent history of cultural memory regarding the Nazi past. It also aims to fill a gap in the scholarship on W.G. Sebald, a writer who has increasingly been understood as one of the most significant in the recent German canon, by reinscribing *Luftkrieg und Literatur* into his body of work.

## 2. The Natural Historical Archive: Situating *Luftkrieg und Literatur* within Sebald's Oeuvre

In the catalogue of the British Library, as in most libraries, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is categorised separately from Sebald's other creative works as "non-fiction, literary criticism", while his more famous works such as *Die Ringe des Saturn* and *Die Ausgewanderten* are categorised under "fiction, travel"<sup>1</sup>. The difficulties of situating Sebald's work within a genre are widely acknowledged, yet the separation here is symptomatic of a critical consensus that viewed *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as something of a break from his prose work or as a form of side project. As a *Germanist* and academic Sebald had, of course, produced many works of more traditional literary criticism but the *Luftkrieg* text had thrown off the shackles of academic protocol, eschewing the need for formal references and claims to objectivity. The author's voice, heard more clearly than in Sebald's fiction, indulged in a polemical tone that led some to label the text (or, initially, the lectures on which they were based) as a rant on the state of the memory culture in postwar Germany.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis will counter this tendency by arguing for a reading of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* that considers it as a bridge between Sebald's fictional prose and his works of literary criticism as an academic, allowing us not only to trace the links between the two and witness the germination of many of his fiction's most compelling themes, but eventually to see his oeuvre as a whole. Indeed, not only can we come to a more nuanced

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<sup>1</sup> <http://catalogue.bl.uk/> Accessed 11.01.09. The categorisation of the text is similarly separated in other catalogues, such as the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach: <http://www.dla-marbach.de/> Accessed 11.01.09.

<sup>2</sup> Chapters 6 and 7 will fully explore the reception of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* in the press, public arena and scholarship.



understanding of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* by reading it alongside, or even as part of, Sebald's prose work, but that work is itself illuminated by a closer reading of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. It is a little-cited feature of the text that, as Sebald remarks in his foreword, the original lectures on which the text is based (and which were the spark of much of the debate) fused the ideas of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* with examples from Sebald's *own* prose and arose from long-standing concerns with the disaster, which had left many traces in his prose work thus far:

Daß diese Katastrophe dennoch Spuren in meinem Gedächtnis hinterlassen hat, das versuchte ich dann anhand längerer Passagen aus meinen eigenen literarischen Arbeiten zu zeigen, was in Zürich insofern gerechtfertigt war, als es sich dort eigentlich um Poetikvorlesungen hätte handeln sollen. In der hier präsentierten Version freilich wären extensive Selbstzitate fehl am Platz gewesen (*LL*, 5-6).

In my first Zurich lectures I tried to show, through passages of some length taken from my own literary works, that this catastrophe had none the less left its mark on my mind. On that occasion such an approach could be justified, since the ostensible subject of my lectures was poetics. In the version presented here, however, extensive self-quotation would be inappropriate. (*NHD*, viii)

Sebald first approached the arguments made in the text in an academic essay<sup>3</sup>, the ideas in which influenced passages about the bombings in *Vertigo*, *The Rings of Saturn* and *The Emigrants* which were all written prior to the Zürich lectures. His treatment of the

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<sup>3</sup> "W.G. Sebald, 'Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte. Über die literarische Beschreibung totaler Zerstörung', *Orbis litterarum*, 37 (1982), 345-66

subject here, therefore, was never intended to be considered in isolation of that work, but as a formative part of it.<sup>4</sup>

The following 3 chapters of the thesis will attempt to situate the text in Sebald's oeuvre by demonstrating that it is a component part of his project of literary remembrance. Some critics consider Sebald's final work, *Austerlitz* (2001) to represent a departure from his earlier works, a notion that would place *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as a junction between these two narrative trajectories.<sup>5</sup> However, in this chapter I will argue that Sebald's entire work, encompassing his academic writings and prose works, are unified by a particular historical gaze and archival practise of aesthetics, which when considered as a whole, form the basis for an exploration of the fascination the bombings and the bombed landscape hold for Sebald. This will allow me to demonstrate, in chapter 3, that *Luftkrieg und Literatur* represents the intersection of the unifying elements of Sebald's writing: the preoccupation with the catastrophic origins of the country of his birth and his overarching project to create a natural historical archive. This chapter will therefore define these unifying elements to provide a framework within which to read *Luftkrieg und Literatur*.

I begin by considering the often problematic question of form and genre in relation to Sebald's work and argue that the form of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is inkeeping with his wider literary practice and does not exclude it from his oeuvre on technical grounds. The rest of the chapter seeks to map the features of Sebald's historical writing that reaches something of a zenith in his fascination with the fires and charred cities. Drawing

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<sup>4</sup> As critics have noted, one can assume that it was during this period that Sebald was preparing and writing *Austerlitz*. I will fully explore the pre-existing fascination with the bombings and ruined cities in chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Peter Morgan, who considers *Austerlitz* as marking a "new narrative direction": Peter Morgan, "The Sign of Saturn: Melancholy, Homelessness and Apocalypse in W.G. Sebald's Prose Narratives", in *German Life and Letters*, Jan-09), pp. 76-92, here p. 76. Also Thomas Wirtz, 'Schwarze Zuckerwatte: Anmerkungen Zu W.G. Sebald', *Merkur*, 55 (2001), 530-534.

on Eric L. Santner's fascinating study of Sebald, Benjamin and Rilke, I examine Sebald's work as the search for traces of natural history, or what Santner terms "creaturely life". After defining the purpose and nature of this natural historical archaeology, I then examine the particular melancholic gaze Sebald employs in order to uncover these traces, drawing on Benjamin's understanding of the Baroque and allegory, and which informs a preoccupation in Sebald's writing with ruins, decay and decline; tropes that will find particular relevance in relation to the ruined cities. Benjamin's historical philosophy also elucidates an exploration of the importance for Sebald of seeing the past in the present moment, which I explore as the creation of the "natural history of the present", and which warns against the dangers of not engaging with the past in what Benjamin might term "moments of danger". These elements of Sebald's historical gaze combine in an aesthetic technique that is termed spectral materialism, which I define as a melancholic focus on the remnants of the past in ash, dust and ghostly landscapes. The final part of the chapter traces the influence of Sebald's German origins in his insistence that Auschwitz occupies a central point of rupture in European modernity, and that the German experience of the war is bound into the catastrophe that was unleashed by National Socialism. The understanding of this catastrophe as the culmination of the dialectic of enlightenment, as proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer, is prevalent throughout his work as he seems to see the fires of Auschwitz burning throughout history and still. The influence of this catastrophic origin on the possibility of a German identity after the Holocaust or of any valid German experience of the war will come into sharp focus in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*.

## Form and Genre

Before even considering questions of theme or content, it seems pertinent to question whether the form and genre of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* essentially excludes it from a consideration of what we might term Sebald's prose or fiction oeuvre. Ostensibly we are dealing with the essay version of a lecture series that posits a theory on a particular point of literary history in German, which would certainly seem to position the text firmly in a different category to highly crafted and literary works such as *Schwindel. Gefühle* or *Austerlitz*. Taken as an academic essay, indeed in the published version a collection of apparently separate essays<sup>6</sup>, the volume seems obviously distinct from the fictional works. This distinction is even easier to make when bearing in mind that Sebald was in a way two separate writers with two phases to his career: he published more or less conventionally as an academic until his first foray into creative writing with the extended prose poem *Nach der Natur* of 1995 (*After Nature*, 2002). Nevertheless, as with so much when reading Sebald, this distinction cannot be made clearly and there is a blurring of boundaries between these two phases. Though he refrained from commenting on the work of his peers after the turn to creative publishing, Sebald's work as a scholar, researcher and critic firmly underpin his literary strategy, just as his academic writing often speaks with the same voice as much of his prose, especially when concerned with the past in German literature.<sup>7</sup> Sebald did not cease to be a scholar or critic after

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<sup>6</sup> The German edition of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* features an essay on the writer Alfred Andersch, and the later English edition feature the Andersch essay, as well essays on Jean Améry and Peter Weiss. Later in the thesis I will argue that these essays are carefully chosen to complement the concepts that are explored in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*.

<sup>7</sup> One thinks, for instance of his work on Austrian playwrights in *Die Beschreibung Des Unglücks: Zur Österreichischen Literatur Von Stifter Bis Handke* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1994) or the pieces collected in the English volume *Camp Santo* trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2005).

publishing his literary work and in fact the two areas of his work continued to inform each other until his death in 2001.

The fact that these works would therefore appear to co-exist in one body of work causes critics of Sebald problems when it comes to the classification of his writings in terms of genre. With it so often unclear to what extent the events narrated are documentary or fictional, whether the voice is Sebald's own or a fictional narrator version of Sebald and whether the narrative is autobiographical or constructed, numerous categories have been applied to these works. In an interview with *the Observer*, Sebald went some way to resolving the thorny issue of genre in relation to his books. In fact, he says, they are neither fiction, nor travelogue:

I would say that they (my books) are artefacts. They're consciously constructed as artefacts. At that level the author is shaping the material in a way that goes far beyond documentary.<sup>8</sup>

Sebald's practise of "shaping the material" is a feature of his prose that has given literary scholars the world over a veritable mine of material to excavate. The intricate interweaving of biographies, historical fact, creative description, entries from journals and letters, autobiography and criticism of art and literature is part of what makes his work so densely complex and, for many, so richly fascinating.

Many critics have investigated Sebald's practices of intertextuality and citation, pointing out that to a large degree Sebald's writing is constructed out of extended textual citations and allusions, sometimes marked but often unmarked, with the narrator assuming the voice of the source author. In *Die Ringe des Saturn (The Rings of Saturn)*,

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<sup>8</sup> *The Observer*, 7<sup>th</sup> June 1998.

for example, the narrator appropriates language from a story by Adalbert Stifter to describe his drug-induced visions while in hospital<sup>9</sup>. His narratives are to a large extent structured around his readings and explorations of authors and figures as diverse as Franz Kafka, Thomas Browne, Algernon Swinburne, Henri Beyle and Rembrandt. Helmut Schmitz, in relation to the narrative strategy in *Austerlitz*, has likened this dense intertextuality to Claude Lévi-Strauss' concept of *bricolage*, which refers to the text as consciously produced construct, created from other materials with which the writer enters into a dialogue, a practise which unsettles the myth of the god-like writer and inherently entails a critique of representation, undercutting both notions of authenticity and the stability of the cultural images that surround us<sup>10</sup>. This unsettling of representation rings true in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* also, which is just as highly constructed an example of *bricolage* as the more famous prose texts. Its content and form (perceived principally as literary criticism) is one of the reasons it stands not apart from, but as part of that literary project. Cultural artefacts and the lives of those who created them are Sebald's building blocks, and as well as spinning these webs of subtle, unmarked references, Sebald's narrator will often engage in explicit dialogue with his source material. Descriptions and analyses of real literature and visual art are used to enrich and illustrate Sebald's fictional texts resulting in an idiosyncratic form of ekphrasis, the process by which one work of art is rhetorically illuminated by its description or evocation of another. More traditional ekphrasis that uses works of visual art does abound in Sebald, providing ample and repeated inspiration. One thinks, for example, of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*,

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<sup>9</sup> Mark McCulloch, *Understanding W.G. Sebald* (Columbia, South Carolina: Uni South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> Helmut Schmitz, *On Their Own Terms: The Legacy of National Socialism in Post-1990 German Fiction* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2004), p. 296.

which is described in the prose poem *Nach der Natur (After Nature)* and which Max Aurach visits in *Die Ausgewanderten (The Emigrants)*, or of the extended analysis of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* in *Die Ringe des Saturn (The Rings of Saturn)*, or the trip to the National Gallery to view Pisanello's painting of St George toward the end of *Schwindel. Gefühle (Vertigo)*. One might also refer to Sebald's relationship with the painter Jan Peter Tripp whose works he analysed in several essays with whom he exchanged poems and lithographs, since collected in the volume *Unerzählt (Unrecounted)*.<sup>11</sup> In Sebald, the practise of ekphrasis extends beyond reference to visual art and takes in all cultural forms, not least literature. In *Luftkrieg und Literatur* the *bricolage* of sources and ekphrastic inclusion of extended quotes from texts by the likes of Kluge and Fichte are components of Sebald's exhumation of the catastrophe.

Thus it is entirely within the formal and generic conventions of Sebald's writing to use a fusion of literary criticism, documentary archive and creative writing such as that found in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. The way in which this functions can be understood in a systematic way. In a very creative essay on Sebald's literary technique Lisa Diedrich sets out her definition of what she terms his "practices of witnessing", a narrative technique which is constructed as a gathering of evidence from multiple sources. She structures her definition on the basis of the *quincunx*, a geometrical form described in *Die Ringe des Saturn (The Rings of Saturn)* as the structure Thomas Browne identifies everywhere in nature,<sup>12</sup> and which she suggests provides an organizational framework through which to read Sebald "that suggests all history is fundamentally a burial":

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<sup>11</sup> W.G. Sebald and Jan Peter Tripp, *Unerzählt* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003) and in English as *Unrecounted* (London: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Die Ringe Des Saturn* (Frankfurt am Main: Vito von Eichborn Verlag, 1995), p. 31. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

The four outer parts can be understood as four particular practices of witnessing: two having to do with the vantage point of the witness - from above an event and from among or within it – and two having to do with the form of evidence, in words and in images. The fifth part is at the center, and like the cruciform reliquary, it contains ghostly traces of the dead, and signifies that which is buried in and by history. Like Browne we must investigate the quincunx structure, and we must also be distracted from it in order to see and account for ‘the shadow of annihilation’ at the very heart of civilization.<sup>13</sup>

Diedrich illustrates her model with four scenes from Sebald’s fiction, each representing a strand of the quincunx, demonstrating how it uses a multiplicity of perspectives and sources, and how at the centre of it all are the traces of death and destruction that history has buried. The published version of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* also adheres to this structure: Sebald begins from an “above the event” perspective, with statistical evidence and official records of the bombings, numbers of homes destroyed and civilians killed, as well as an example of the bomber’s experience; he then describes an air-raid from a “within” perspective in horrific detail; The evidential third and fourth components are also present since the text is, in effect, a presentation of evidence found in words (specifically those found in literature) and images - photos, postcards, posters - that all bear witness to the truth at the centre of the quincunx, that is, that history is a burial and civilization is a tomb built around the appalling deaths at its centre.<sup>14</sup> In *Luftkrieg und*

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<sup>13</sup> Lisa Diedrich, 'Gathering Evidence of Ghosts: W.G. Sebald's Practices of Witnessing', in *Searching for Sebald: Photography after W.G. Sebald*, ed. by Lise Patt (Los Angeles: ICI Press, 2007), pp. 256-77, here p. 258.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.



*Literatur*, as in his whole prose oeuvre, Sebald's aim is to disinter the traces of those corpses in culture and memory.

In terms of its form we can begin to see that it is legitimate to consider *Luftkrieg und Literatur* an integral and formative component of Sebald's complex literary work. This form is a means to an end, and it is by investigating that end (to uncover moments of natural history) that we can illuminate Sebald's longstanding fascination with the Allied bombings of German cities in the text and elsewhere. Therefore the remainder of this chapter will establish a literary context in which to consider that fascination.

### **Natural History**

Sebald's writing is an unending search for the traces of natural history in the modern world and his techniques are a means of exposing them so that we might catch a glimpse of them in the present. *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is a supreme instance of this search and a reflection on its impossibility; to situate it within Sebald's oeuvre, therefore, an understanding of Sebald's concept of natural history and his efforts to excavate it from the sediments of historical convention in his writing is first required.

The nexus between man and nature, between civilization and the world on which civilization imposes itself, is the source of what Eva Hoffman called the "catastrophic imagination" in Sebald, an imagination which concerns itself with "the continuities between human nature and nature, and the inexorable interweaving, within both, of desire and destruction, pattern and chaos, proliferation and decay".<sup>15</sup> Sebald's forays into the past are the search for those moments where this nexus is exposed and he finds those moments at times of violence, rupture and ruin, as he himself explained on numerous

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<sup>15</sup> Eva Hoffman, 'Curiosity and Catastrophe', *New York Times Book Review*, 22nd September, 2002, p. 10.

occasions: “Es ist tatsächlich so, dass im Augenblick des Einbruchs der Katastrophe die Zivilisationsgeschichte zerschlagen wird und zurückgeworfen wird auf Naturgeschichte” (It is in fact the case that at the moment of the outbreak of catastrophe, the history of civilization is destroyed and thrown back into natural history).<sup>16</sup> These natural historical moments act as fissures in the symbolic order of meaning that usually hides man’s exposure and his vulnerability in the world and are thus to be sought out. As Diedrich puts it, “what does it take to distract us from the ‘isomorphic line of the quincunx’ – its beautiful structure – in order to see what it contains? What does the box – a structure of civilization itself – prevent us from seeing?”<sup>17</sup> At the moment of catastrophe – of rupture, violence, decay or decline – we can be afforded a glimpse beyond the structures, symbols and concepts that block our view of the world.

Eric L. Santner has described Sebald’s natural historical gaze as one that uncovers instances of proximity to what he terms “creaturely life”, indeed he believes that “Sebald’s entire oeuvre could be seen as the construction of *an archive of creaturely life*.”<sup>18</sup> Santner’s concept of creaturely life is inspired by Rilke’s idea of “die Kreatur”, a way of life separate from human life and characterised by an inhabitation of a borderless surround that he names “das Offene”. Rilke praises plant and animal life for its capacity to inhabit this space but, in contrast, except fleetingly as a child, man is condemned to live in ignorance of the Open, unable to touch it. This is because human life is reflective, meditated through consciousness and therefore man’s relation to things is crossed with

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<sup>16</sup> Andrea Köhler, 'Interview with W.G. Sebald', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 22nd November 1992, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Diedrich, p. 258.

<sup>18</sup> Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. xiii. Santner’s emphasis. Though he demonstrates the search for creaturely life at work in Sebald very convincingly, Santner makes scant mention of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*; however, as the chapters in this thesis argue, that search reaches something of a zenith in Sebald’s concern with the bombed cities. The creaturely aspects of the cities and Santner’s neglect of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* will be fully discussed in chapter 3.

borders, articulated within a matrix of representations that position him over and against the world and which he is condemned to endlessly repeat.<sup>19</sup> However, fissures in this matrix do occur that expose man to the Open, the realm of the animal and of nature, and it is at these moments, the instances of proximity between the animal and the human, that creaturely life is called into being. Peculiarly, this proximity occurs at the very point of radical difference between the human and the animal, as the fissure is found only at those points where a piece of the human world presents itself as a surplus that both demands and resists symbolization, that is both inside and outside of the symbolic order, in the guise of the historical remnant:

What I am calling creaturely life is called into being at such natural historical fissures or caesuras in the space of meaning. These are the sites where the struggle for new meaning...is at its most intense. And it is precisely at such fissures – sites that can persist as uncanny loci of alterity within the order of meaning – that we will find W.G. Sebald at work.<sup>20</sup>

Sebald's gaze onto the historical remnant – be it a ruin, diary, or skull – is derived from Walter Benjamin's ideas on the baroque and allegory as set out in his *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* (*Origin of German Tragic Drama*). Here, we find ourselves in the midst of natural history when we encounter the radical otherness of nature in the enigmatic ruin. This is the point of departure of the allegorical imagination: the materiality of nature is, paradoxically, most palpable where we encounter it as a ruin beyond our capability to endow it with meaning, to integrate it into our symbolic

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

universe.<sup>21</sup> For Benjamin, *Naturgeschichte* (natural history) refers not the fact that nature also has a history, but to the fact that artefacts tend to acquire an aspect of natural being at the point where they lose their place in a viable form of life. Natural history occurs because of the possibility that life can persist beyond the death of the symbolic form that gave it meaning, and that symbolic forms can persist beyond the death of what gave them human vitality. Sebald's endless evocations of ruins, deserted and crumbling abodes, bones and skulls or declining towns are all done to illuminate the "undeadness" that endures between real and symbolic death.<sup>22</sup> As for Benjamin's baroque poets, for Sebald human history has meaning "solely in the stations of its decline."<sup>23</sup> Like Benjamin's baroque allegorists, he sees the world as an interwoven net, so that the tiny historical fragment can represent the entirety of history as destruction and catastrophe. As Schmitz observes, this is the hallmark of *Austerlitz* and indeed of all of Sebald's work: "Sebald understands that everything is connected to everything else in time and space. This is his contribution to a 'natural history of destruction.'"<sup>24</sup>

Sebalds' entire work is an archive of these historical remnants and they are far too numerous to cite here in their entirety. *Die Ringe des Saturn* (*The Rings of Saturn*) sees Sebald's "baroque gaze" especially keenly attuned to the rhythms of natural history, seeking out the glimpses of creaturely life. The narrator takes a journey of discovery, one that is not only geographical but mental and temporal. Like a type of historical archaeologist he travels through the decaying landscape of Western evolution identifying sites of interest at which he can dig the relics of European modernity, clearing the layers

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977).

<sup>24</sup> Schmitz, p. 307.

of historical sediment that have obscured them as he goes. His eye is drawn compulsively to the decaying, the defunct and the declining, usually as bearing witness to a disaster of some kind. The one time grandeur of Somerleyton Hall, for instance, has long since given way to a faded shadow of its former prosperity:

Auf den heutigen Besucher macht Somerleyton nicht mehr den Eindruck eines morgenländischen Märchenpalasts. Die gläsernen Wandelgänge und das Palmenhaus, dessen hoher Dom einst die Nächte illuminierte, sind schon 1913 nach einer Gasexplosion ausgebrannt und anschließend abgerissen worden, die Bediensteten, die alles instand hielten, die Butler, Kutscher, Chauffeure, Gärtner, Köchinnen, Nähmädchen und Kammerfrauen seit langem entlassen. Etwas ungenutzt und verstaubt wirken jetzt die Zimmerfluchten. Die Samtvorhänge und die weinroten Lichtblenden sind verschossen, die Polstermöbel durchsessen, die Steigenhäuser und Korridore, durch die man geführt wird, vollgestellt mit zwecklosem, aus der Zirkulation geratenem Kram [...] Und wie schön dünkte das Herrenhaus mich jetzt, da es unmerklich dem Rand der Auflösung sich näherte und dem stillen Ruin (*RS*, 48, 50).

Somerleyton strikes the visitor of today no longer as an oriental palace in a fairy tale. The glass-covered walks and the palm house, whose lofty dome used once to light up the nights, were burnt out in 1913 after a gas explosion and subsequently demolished. The servants who kept all in good order, the butlers, coachmen, chauffeurs, gardeners, cooks, sempstresses and chambermaids, have long since gone. The suites of rooms now make a somewhat disused, dispirited impression. The velvet curtains and crimson blinds are faded, the settees and armchairs sag, the stairways and corridors which the guided tour takes one

through are full of bygone paraphernalia [...] And how fine a place the house seemed to me now that it was imperceptibly nearing the brink of dissolution and silent oblivion. (*RSat*, 35-36)

The place that the house once occupied in the symbolic order as a “Märchenpalast” (fairytale palace) is now meaningless, impossible to recall. Now, it takes on a new “undeadness” as “stillen Ruin” (a silent ruin), as a bearer of the traces of all those who were given purpose there but now inhabited not by them but by its very emptiness and disuse.

Sebald’s wandering narrator is sensitive to the presence of remnants even where they are no longer visible as loci of the proximity of man to nature. The most evocative example is that of the town of Dunwich, once a powerful trading port, which year by year was slowly reclaimed by the sea as the cliff on which it is built crumbles. Throughout its history the town was subjected to “katastrophalen Einbrüchen der See in das Land” (*RS*, 191; “catastrophic incursions of the sea into the land” *RSat*, 158) until “Dunwich mit seinen Türmen und vielen Tausend Seelen ist aufgelöst in Wasser, Sand und Kies und dünne Luft.” (*RS*, 192; “Dunwich, with its towers and many thousand souls, has dissolved into water, sand and thin air” *RSat*, 159) . Barely anything now remains, only a smattering of crumbled ruins from which the former town can not be discerned. The symbolically meaningful features of the town one by one crumbled away:

Die Pfarrkirchen zu den Heiligen James, Leonard, Martin, Bartholomew, Michael, Patrick, Mary, John, Peter, Nicholas und Felix sind, eine um die andere, über stets weiter zurückweichende Klippe hinuntergestürzt und nach und nach in der Tiefe versunken mitsamt dem Erdreich und dem Gestein, auf

dem die Stadt einst erbaut worden war. Übriggeblieben sind seltsamerweise nur die gemauerten Brunnenschächte, die, von allem, was sie einst umgeben hatte, befreit, jahrhundertlang, wie verschiedene Chronisten berichten, in den leeren Luftraum emporragten wie die Scholte einer unterirdischen Schmiede (*RS*, 187-188)

The parish churches of St James, St Leonard, St Martin, St Bartholomew, St Michael, St Patrick, St Mary, St John, St Peter, St Nicholas and St Felix, one after the other, toppled down the steadily receding cliff-face and sank into the depths, along with the earth and stone of which the town had been built. All that survived, strange to say, were the walled well shafts, which for centuries, freed of that which had once enclosed them, rose aloft like the chimney stacks of some subterranean smithy as various chroniclers report, until in due course these symbols of the vanished town also fell down. (*RSat*, 155-156)

The ruin left behind bears none of the symbolic import of the buildings from which it is created, but instead becomes something neither old nor new, a locus of the “uncanny alterity” between man and nature, somewhere he can feel “den gewaltigen Sog der Leere” (*RS*, 192; “the immense power of emptiness” *RSat*, 159). Dunwich, for Sebald’s narrator, is exemplary of the inexorable process of decline and decay which he witnesses everywhere in human history. It represents “eine der Grundbewegungen des menschlichen Lebens auf der Erde” (*RS*, 191; one of the fundamental movements of human life on Earth. My translation). In a typically Sebaldian connection, Dunwich is also a destination that the Victorian melancholy poets favoured, perhaps, he suggests, drawn by the powerful emptiness of the ruins. For Benjamin, natural history was brought

about by the adopting of a melancholy effect, one which, as Santner notes, he believed “emerges from the depths of the creaturely realm” and is “the most genuinely creaturely of the contemplative impulses.”<sup>25</sup> The saturnine gaze of melancholy, as in Dürer’s *Melancholia I*, is literally pointed toward the earth with back bent. It is a position in which meaning is hollowed out, emptied of radical signification. Schmitz explains that the melancholic gaze of the allegorist subverts the false appearance of wholeness with its intense focus on objects and the object-world, which restores the particularity of those objects, breaking through the symbolic order to reveal the natural historical.<sup>26</sup>

Sebald undoubtedly values the melancholic posture and melancholy is perhaps the word most associated with his literary style. Melancholic figures, such as Algernon Swinburne in *Die Ringe des Saturn* and indeed Austerlitz himself are often the subject of his narrator’s fascinations. His numerous adoptions of the voice of Thomas Browne in *Die Ringe des Saturn* allow the narrator to glimpse history through saturnine eyes, so that while watching a sunset in the present, in one particular place, he is put in mind of Browne’s observation that night is drawn like a black veil across the earth, and since every creature must lie down after the sun has set, if one were to follow the setting sun one would see nothing but prone bodies, row upon row, “wie von der Sense Saturns umgelegt” (*RS*, 97; “as if levelled by the scythe of Saturn” *RS*, 79). Browne’s gaze becomes the narrator’s own, until in that one place, he can nonetheless feel “das langsame Sichhineindrehen der Welt in die Dunkelheit” (*RS*, 97; “the earth’s slow turning into the dark” *RSat*, 78). The narrator, like all those other melancholics before him and from whom he draws inspiration, is prone to the world, bent in a melancholy

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<sup>25</sup> Benjamin, p. 146.

<sup>26</sup> Schmitz, p. 307.



cringe that enables him to sense the inevitability of decay and death. In the prose poem *Nach der Natur*, 'Sebald' writes that he was born under the sign of Saturn on the day of a fire brigade procession: the cold planet was ruling the constellation that day and above the mountains the storm was already brewing that would kill one of the canopy bearers.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the obvious gloom of this condition, however, it is nonetheless one that Sebald deems desirable, especially in relation to history and representation. In an essay on Austrian literature he defends a melancholic posture as a form of resistance. The contemplation of the misfortune, he argues, has nothing at all to do with a wish to die, rather, the description of misfortune includes within itself the possibility of its own overcoming.<sup>28</sup> The importance of a saturnine gaze in literature will be a feature of Sebald's criticism of writers in relation to the bombings, as I will argue later.

Nonetheless, the prospect of resistance and of the gaze upon natural history having a redemptive power is unexpected in relation to Sebald. Unlike Benjamin, Sebald expresses doubt over the possibility of history's redemption, as if after the Holocaust the possibility of salvaging history has been foreclosed.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Moment of Danger**

Paradoxically, the melancholic gaze upon history was sustained for Benjamin by the hope that it might engender political acts, bringing about an act of redemption by wresting history away from the danger of a distorting tradition that always threatened to overpower it. From 1924, Marxism became a key element in Benjamin's conception of

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<sup>27</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Nach Der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1995), p. 76. In English as *After Nature* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 86.

<sup>28</sup> W.G. Sebald, *die Beschreibung des Unglücks: Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifte bis Handke* (Frankfurt a.M.:Fisher, 1994), p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> Schmitz, p. 308.

history, but in a form that Benjamin made entirely his own. The element of Marxism that inspires Benjamin is that of class struggle, rather than abstract philosophical materialism. His interest in the past, in a departure from evolutionary Marxism, is not in the development of productive forces, but in the life and death struggle between oppressors and oppressed. History appears to him as a succession of victories by the powerful: Power is historical triumph. The oppressed “have retroactive force and will call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers”<sup>30</sup>. This is a stand against vulgar Marxism, which justifies the victories of the ruling classes by the need to develop productive forces<sup>31</sup>. Benjamin’s critique of the ideology of progress is the driver of this departure from Marxism. Contrary to evolutionary Marxism, he does not believe that revolution is the natural outcome of economic and technical progress; rather it is the interruption of a process of historical evolution. Benjamin thus speaks up for a revolutionary pessimism, concerned not with the demise of the elites but with the threat of progress. He believed that Marxism’s faith in the march of historical progress had blinded it to the other compulsions that might account for historical regressions, and Fascism was one such phenomenon<sup>32</sup>.

In his final work, the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* of 1940, the paradoxical combination of materialism and theology finds its zenith in a conception of history which “emphatically and repeatedly rejects the notion of history as progress”<sup>33</sup>. This rejection must urgently be realised, if the oppressed are to stand any chance of

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<sup>30</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, in *Illuminations*, pp. 245-255, here, p. 246.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Lowy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'on the Concept of History'* (London/NY: Verso, 2005), p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Howard Caygill, Alex Coles, and Andrzezej Klimowski, eds., *Introducing Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000), p. 57.

<sup>33</sup> Richard J. Lane, *Reading Walter Benjamin: Writing through the Catastrophe* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005)

defeating fascism. A doctrine in which historical progress is about the development of peaceful societies towards freedom sees fascism as an exception to the rule. A history of the oppressed, in contrast, knows that such violence is the norm and can situate it as the latest stage in the triumphal procession of the victors. Only then can we “clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism”<sup>34</sup>.

For this state of emergency to be brought about and the emergency brake to be pulled on progressive evolution, history must be written not as a series of victories, but as a series of defeats “from below” so that it may be reclaimed for the victims. Benjamin assigns a redemptive, theological quality to remembrance which is capable of making incomplete the complete suffering of the victims of the past in the service of the victims of the present<sup>35</sup>. This messianic power with which we are endowed can allow the present to illuminate the past and the past to become a force in the present with its redemption of history<sup>36</sup>. The historian who can “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the point of danger” so that the past and the future can converge explosively in the present, in *Jetztzeit*<sup>37</sup>, will “fan the spark of hope in the past”<sup>38</sup>. The danger is twofold: of transforming both the history of the past *and* the current historical object into the tools of the oppressors<sup>39</sup>. That moment of danger for the oppressed, such as the one in which Benjamin was writing, is the moment when the authentic image of the past emerges and in which the lazy vision of history as uninterrupted progress dissolves. Time stands still and is therefore redeemed and in this way does the Messiah – ourselves - appear.

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<sup>34</sup> Benjamin, p. 249.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>36</sup> Löwy, p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> See Caygill, p. 76.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, p. 247.

<sup>39</sup> Löwy, p. 56.

Benjamin remains political, as Santner argues, even and especially where his gaze turns to ruins and the waste products of capitalism: “For Benjamin the saturnine gaze on the detritus of the capitalist universe is sustained by a vision of political acts that would *interrupt* the course of history...whereas for Sebald it remains unclear if there is any space left for such a vision.”<sup>40</sup> This is a question that acquires particular relevance with regard to Sebald’s apparent demand for an intervention in history in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Schmitz believes that, despite the efforts to penetrate the darkness with his melancholic gaze, there is no redemption for Austerlitz, because after the Holocaust the salvaging power of allegory remains closed. Sebald can make conscious the signs of destruction, but he can do nothing to undo the irretrievability and irredeemability of what has been lost.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, as *Luftkrieg und Literatur* undoubtedly demonstrates, Sebald shares with Benjamin the compulsion to make the past known in the present and the knowledge that there is a danger to the present if this is not done. The principle difference is that where Benjamin demands a relation to the material world capable of generating “profane illuminations”, Sebald instead generates “apocalyptic darkenings, moments where the last traces of light are, as it were, sucked back into black holes of despair and pain.”<sup>42</sup>

Sebald writes quite clearly from a sense of occupying a moment of danger born of an awareness that the histories he uncovers are not finished, but are in fact present and still being written. In an interview with Michael Zeeman, Sebald conceded that he perceived a “bleak vision of our collective history”. He went on:

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<sup>40</sup> Santner, pp. 61-62.

<sup>41</sup> Schmitz, p. 308-9.

<sup>42</sup> Santner, p. 61.

As a whole, it appears, if you look at it from a very long way away as a phenomenon of evolution, the way we have developed is one great aberration, some kind of calculating error in the evolutionary matrix, somehow. And of course, increasingly, we know this and the great fires of the Second World War were only the first of the kinds of fires that are lit now. This is almost like an amoral perspective, when you think of the burning cities and the burning bodies of the 1940s, and then somehow link it up, as I quite often do, with the images of the burning forests of Borneo or of the Amazon. It would be false piety to look back upon 1940 to 1945 and say, "what horrible times these were!" We're still living in the middle of them, I feel.<sup>43</sup>

The natural history of the past, then, is also the natural history of our present. The present must be haunted by the past if we are to understand anything about ourselves. In Austerlitz, Sebald warns us that our concern with history is a concern with pre-formed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> Natural history is sensitive to the ghostly persistence of past suffering that has been subsumed into the setting of human history.

### **Spectral Materialism**

The remnants and traces of natural history that are so foregrounded in Sebald are collected so as to achieve this haunting. According to Diedrich, Sebald "confronts the ghostly aspects of history, the absences that are covered over but still felt and transmitted

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<sup>43</sup> W.G Sebald, and Gordon Turner, "'Introduction and Transcript of an Interview Given by Max Sebald (Interviewer: Michael Zeeman)'" in *W.G Sebald: History-Memory-Trauma*, ed. by Scott Denham (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 21-33, here p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2001), pp. 100-101.

in the historical unconscious.”<sup>45</sup> Santner coins the term “spectral materialism” for this technique, which “serves to register and archive a certain ‘real’ whose status is, paradoxically, virtual.”<sup>46</sup> The spectrality of the remnants Sebald recovers from history refers not only to their intangible status in the past, but, as I have already mentioned, to their undeadness, their being outside of the symbolic order but still present.

In chapter 3, I will argue that this undeadness is one of the strange attractions of the ruined and charred cities after the allied bombings for Sebald. The ash-smothered, blackened and only partially recognisable traces of highly developed modernity are the perfect territory for Sebald’s archival task. This archiving of ghostly remnants pervades all of Sebald’s writing, in fact. As Diedrich puts it, “in all of Sebalds’ texts, including his literary criticism, ghosts matter”:

Ghosts become material to be investigated and traced. His evidence (both pictorial and narrative) is ghostly, and his methodology attempts to materialize such ghostly evidence, at least fleetingly, by collecting and scavenging, by commingling and juxtaposing historical events, words and images.<sup>47</sup>

Time after time the remnants Sebald uncovers serve as much to reveal the ghostly, intangible otherness of the past as they do to make it imaginable. At the same time, and paradoxically, these ghostly traces haunt the present in such a way as to make the past contemporary. As Santner says, then, they make the past both real and virtual.

There are what Santner calls a “series of privileged substances” that perform this function for Sebald, but their effect is comparable. Again, the ubiquity of such instances

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<sup>45</sup> Diedrich, p. 257.

<sup>46</sup> Santner, p. 52.

<sup>47</sup> Diedrich, p. 257.

in Sebald's work makes it impossible to cite them all, but we can select a few objects that typify this paradoxical evocation of the past. The third story to be told in *The Emigrants* features the narrator's great-uncle, Ambros Adelwarth, a man he knows little about except for what he can glean from stories told by relatives, by researching his past and by piecing together the remnants of his life with photos and his diary. The narrator learns enough to sketch out the facts of his life, and yet not enough to solve the mysteries of his fate, having ended his life in a sanatorium enduring shock therapy. This figure of the past is at once given flesh by the stories told about him, and yet remains ephemeral. At the end of his account the narrator reads from a diary kept by Adelwarth given to him by his aunt. The transcription is accompanied by several images that confirm the dense and illegible handwriting on the pages, as well as the physical existence of this artefact, this trace of Adelwarth in the present. The diary serves simultaneously to maintain the presence of this spectral figure in the here and now, but the impossibility of reading it, with its dense and faded scrawl, confirms the ghostly nature of this presence.<sup>48</sup>

There are many remnants uncovered by Sebald's spectral materialism, but the most evocative and frequently discovered – and most relevant to the archive of the charred cities – are dust and ash, substances that Santner deems “the very emblems of natural history”:<sup>49</sup>

In Sebald it is dust, along with ash, that serve as the most poignant embodiment of decay, death and transience, perhaps even his emblem of materiality [...]

Sebald's entire project is, we might say, an effort to tease out the testimony of

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<sup>48</sup> See also Diedrich, p. 269.

<sup>49</sup> Santner, p. 106.

dust and ash, to see in material deposits the very ‘matter’ of historical depositions.<sup>50</sup>

Sebald himself confirmed this special status of ash and dust in an interview:

I’m very taken with the whole business of ashes and dust. You’ll find them again and again in my writing; they’re always there in some form or another [...] It’s the most humble substance there is! The very last product of combustion, with no resistance in it... The borderline between being and nothingness.<sup>51</sup>

The most extended and probably powerful of these testimonies of dust and ash is the story of Max Aurach in *The Emigrants*. Aurach<sup>52</sup> is the epitome of the melancholic figure in Sebald, steeped in the dust and sediment of time. The narrator finds him working in his studio, hunched and with tools strewn about him in a vision reminiscent, as Santner notes, of Melancholy in Dürer’s woodcut. His artistic method seems to involve the production of dust as its main objective:

[...] wo Aurach in dem grauen Schein, der durch das hohe, mit dem Staub von Jahrzehnten überzogene Nordfenster einfällt, seine Staffelei aufgestellt hat. Da er die Farben in großen Mengen aufträgt und sie im Fortgang der Arbeit immer wieder von der Leinwand herunterkratzt, ist der Bodenbelag bedeckt von einer im Zentrum mehrere Zoll dicken, nach außen allmählich flacher werdenden, mit

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp 100 and 102.

<sup>51</sup> Sara Kafatou, 'An Interview with W.G. Sebald', *Harvard Review*, 15 (1998), 31-35, here p. 32.

<sup>52</sup> In the English version of the text the name of the character is changed to Ferber at the request of the real artist on whom he is based, Frank Auerbach.



Kohlestaub untermischten, weitgehend bereits verhärteten und verkrusteten Masse, die stellenweise einem Lavaausfluß gleicht und von der Aurach behauptet, daß sie das wahre Ergebnis darstelle seiner fortwährenden Bemühung und den offenkundigsten Beweis für sein Scheitern.

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

Aurach tells the narrator that over time he has come to love the dust, which is “ihm viel näher als das Licht, die Luft und das Wasser” (*DA*, 238; “closer to him...than light, air or water” *E*, 161). For Aurach in his artistic work “ginge es [...] vorab um die Vermehrung des Staubs” (*DA*, 238; “it was mainly about the steady production of dust”) and the resulting portraits give the impression that the subject “hervorgegangen [sei] aus einer langen Ahnenreihe grauer, eingeäschertes, in dem zerschundenen Papier nach wie vor herumgeisternder Gesichter” (*DA*, 239-40; “had evolved from a long lineage of grey, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper”. *E*, pp. 161-162). In *Luftkrieg und Literatur* Sebald will be concerned with uncovering just such ashen, ghostly traces on the “harried paper” of postwar literature

and will lament the all too efficient clearing away of this dust and ash in the nation of his childhood.

### **Violence and Progress**

Helmut Schmitz writes that “all of Sebald’s work is a sensitive exploration of the remnants of the prolonged history of inhumanity that characterises European modernity and which has the Holocaust as its point of culmination”.<sup>53</sup> With this concept of the Holocaust as the defining historical catastrophe of modernity we approach the influence on Sebald’s historical attitude of his origins in the country from which this ultimate “moment of danger” was unleashed. In common with many intellectuals of his generation, as Peter Morgan argues, Sebald is unable to conceive of his country of origin in terms other than those of this catastrophe,<sup>54</sup> and is compelled repeatedly to do so. Sebald’s attitude to Germany’s past as a source of moral de-legitimacy for that nation is heavily influenced by the dominant philosophy to emerge in response to the Holocaust for Sebald’s generation, that of the Frankfurt School and in particular Adorno and Horkheimer. Following their negative philosophy, what Sebald will never allow us to forget is that at the heart of history lies violence and catastrophe, and it is in Germany that this message is most powerfully relevant and required. Furthermore, the materiality he presents us with does not merely signify the “natural” corruptibility of all things earthly; rather, this corruptibility is an index of their participation in the violent rhythms of human history.

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<sup>53</sup> Schmitz, p. 291.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Morgan, “The Sign of Saturn: Melancholy, Homelessness and Apocalypse in W.G. Sebald's Prose Narratives”, in *German Life and Letters*, Jan-09), pp. 76-92.

Sebald's eye for this violence and his mistrust of capitalist, economic and technological enterprise have much in common with Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

If Benjamin was ringing the alarm to warn his contemporaries of the coming catastrophe, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* attempted to consider world history in its aftermath. In reaction to their confrontation with the conquests of National Socialism and their experience of modern America, critical theory's earlier hopes for revolution gave way to despair.

Until the outbreak of war and the flight to America, Adorno and Horkheimer's critical theory had been based on a Marxist conception of class struggle and had pursued the study of social domination with three interrelated levels of analysis: the economic system; the psychic disposition of social groups; and the theory of culture<sup>55</sup>. However, in 1944 their belief in the potential for revolutionary change was left impotent in the face of a catastrophe that seemed to bear witness to the destructive tendency inherent in enlightened society. Leaving behind the focus on the socioeconomic and psychic development of history, their inquiry became raised onto a meta-level discussion of world history as a whole<sup>56</sup>. The Marxist engagement with class conflict gives way to a concept of man vs. nature as part of a theory of universal domination<sup>57</sup>. Frozen into a form of traumatized pessimism, they had come to see mankind as a whole, with the aid of its gigantic technological apparatus, heading towards an inferno. In the resulting work

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<sup>55</sup> Paul Connerton, *The Tragedy of Enlightenment: An Essay of the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 62.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64

<sup>57</sup> Zoltán Tar, *The Frankfurt School: The Critical Theories of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno* (NY/London, 1977), p. 16.

they set out to explain no less than “why humanity, instead of entering into a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism”<sup>58</sup>.

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* is constructed on two conjoined theses: myth is already enlightenment; enlightenment reverts to myth. Simon Jarvis warns readers of the text to avoid the pitfall of hearing only the second thesis, since this would give the impression that the authors believe enlightenment to be a bad thing, which would be a false one: Adorno and Horkheimer do not want to reverse enlightenment. Rather, he explains, the point is that positivistic and rationalistic conceptions of enlightenment are not enlightened enough: they present us with an idea of reason which is actually mythical, not rational, because it suppresses its own relationship to myth<sup>59</sup>. In Adorno and Horkheimer’s writing, Enlightenment does not refer to a historical period running from Descartes to Kant. Rather, they use it to refer to a series of interrelated intellectual and practical operations which are presented as demythologizing, secularizing or disenchanting some mythical, religious or magical representation of the world. It is a process of ever-increasing scepticism about the possibility of ‘transcendent’ meaning, that is, meaning outside of thought itself. Thought therefore turns itself into a context of “pure immanence”,<sup>60</sup> pure inside-ness in which nothing may remain outside. Paradoxically, this is the process by which enlightenment reverts to mythology. In its endeavour to remain objective, thought confines itself to the pure facts: “anything that is not number is reduced to fiction.”<sup>61</sup> This becomes the severest limitation on thought and liquidates all knowledge that truly concerns the object. Thought becomes unable to

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<sup>58</sup> Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, 2002), p. xiv.

<sup>59</sup> Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 22.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

understand that upon which it depends and believes itself to be entirely self-sufficient. The account of enlightenment is therefore, according to Jarvis, an attempt to decipher the prehistory of our own instrumental rationality, that is, a rationality that carries on the same regardless of its object.<sup>62</sup>

Enlightenment and rationality are intertwined. Hauke Brunkhorst reads Adorno and Horkheimer's meaning of rationality not as a conceptual scheme or notion, but as an integral part of social reality: "This means, as in Foucault, that rationality is always related to technology, domination and power."<sup>63</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer aim to make visible both how domination persists even in what are taken to be neutral or simply methodological forms of modern rationality and how what is often taken for sheer archaic domination is in fact itself a form of rationality.<sup>64</sup>

As part of sceptical demythologization, enlightenment must demystify nature. It comes therefore to regard nature as a manipulable material and has sought to dominate it. The aim of this is to free man from the dangers of natural existence and to protect them at ever higher levels of enlightenment from the fear of reversion to an archaic condition of subjection to the sway of natural forces<sup>65</sup>. Any natural residues left in man must be eliminated and the subjective must be projected onto nature. However, the effort to escape subjection to external nature inevitably leads to the suppression of internal nature, thus impoverishing human capabilities. Adorno and Horkheimer find the model for this in Homer's fable of Odysseus, who defeats the inevitability of succumbing to the sirens by gaining mastery of his own nature and that of his crew: he ties himself to the mast and

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<sup>62</sup> Jarvis, p. 26.

<sup>63</sup> Hauke Brunkhorst, "The Enlightenment of Rationality: Remarks on Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*" in Delanty, ed., *Theodor W. Adorno (Vol. III)* (London, 2004), pp. 121-131, here p. 122.

<sup>64</sup> Jarvis, p. 24.

<sup>65</sup> Connerton, p. 60

stops their ears up with wax. In doing so, Odysseus overcomes nature but only at the cost of violence to his inner nature and the establishment of social domination. As Connerton surmises, Man's domination over himself, which grounds his selfhood, is inevitably a paradoxical achievement: it involves the mutilation of the subject in whose service it is undertaken. This self-denial for the sake of self-assertion is the nucleus of all civilising rationality<sup>66</sup>. Social and class domination have therefore existed before capitalism. There was no time before domination: myth is already enlightenment.

Although this is a pessimistic conclusion, Jarvis argues that it is corrective rather than nostalgic. The fact that rationality is entangled with domination partly conceals domination; yet only this entanglement, despite its deceptiveness, makes the idea of freedom from domination even imaginable. They suggest not that there was a time before domination, but that rationality's entanglement with it has changed qualitatively, culminating in fascism. Their demonstration, as Jarvis reads it, aims to make imaginable the idea that this entanglement need not be a necessary condition of any experience, by showing that the manner of the entanglement has changed. Sebald's literary oeuvre is sensitive to the traces of man's effort to dominate nature, to subjugate all that is outside of thought and seeks to counter our blindness to them.

Sebald's investigations into the life of Thomas Browne show him evidence of the heart of violence that operated under the guise of scientific progress, eloquently symbolised by the museum, or "Gruselkabinett" (chamber of horrors), he visits in the basement of a hospital, in which are displayed

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 60

Früh- und Mißgeburten, Wasserköpfe, hypertrophe Organe und ähnliches mehr in Formalingläsern zu medizinischen Demonstrationzwecken aufbewahrt und gelegentlich der Öffentlichkeit zur Schau gestellt waren. (RS, 20)

Prematurely born, deformed or hydrocephalic fetuses, hypertrophied organs, and other items of a similar nature were preserved in jars of formaldehyde, for medical purposes, and occasionally exhibited to the public. (RSat, 10)

This prompts him to question the voyeuristic and archaic violence that was masquerading in early medical progress, as depicted in Rembrandt's painting of a corpse dissection, *The Anatomy Lesson*. The narrator's analysis of this painting is a concentrated reflection on the violation of the body by progress and on the way that instrumental rationality blinds us to this violation. The subject of the dissection is a thief and Sebald detects that the motivations behind his mutilation are rooted in the penal impulse to dismember him:

Zweifellos handelte es sich bei dem vor einem zahlenden Publikum aus den gehobenen Ständen gegebenen Schauspiel einesteils um eine Demonstration des unerschrockenen Forschungsdrangs der neuen Wissenschaft, andernteils, aber, obzwar man das sicher weit von sich gewiesen hätte, um das archaische Ritual der Zergliederung eines Menschen, um die nach wie vor zum Register der zu verhängenden Strafen gehörende Peinigung des Fleisches des Delinquenten bis über den Tod hinaus. (RS, 22-23)

The spectacle, presented before a paying public drawn from the upper classes, was no doubt a demonstration of the undaunted investigative zeal in the new sciences; but it also represented (though this surely would have been refuted)

the archaic ritual of dismembering a corpse, of harrowing the flesh of the delinquent even beyond death, a procedure then still part of the ordained punishment. (*RSat*, 12)

Here is an example of Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectical thesis: myth is already enlightenment; enlightenment reverts to myth. The ceremonial nature of the dissection is enforced by the wearing of formal dress and the taking of a celebratory dinner afterwards. The narrator finds it strange that the dissection should begin with the hand, the site of the original crime, and attributes this to a further "Akt der Vergeltung" (*RS*, 26; "punitive implication" *RSat*, 16), and is further struck by the fact that it is painted out of proportion and the wrong way round. This is not a mistake, he believes, but Rembrandt's deliberate rendering of the hand as an exact representation from the anatomical atlas. It draws our attention to the fact that the audience are staring straight past the body and looking at the atlas. They are all blind to the violence being done to the body in the name of scientific knowledge. Rembrandt's is the only gaze that is "mit ihm, dem Opfer und nicht mit der Gilde" ("with him, the victim and not with the guild") free of "den starren cartesichen Blick" (*RS*, 27; "free of Cartesian rigidity" *RSat*, 17). It is unsurprising that Sebald's narrator goes so far as to comment that Descartes, the author of "der Hauptkapital der Unterwerfung" ("the history of subjection") and an amateur anatomist, could have drafted the atlas. (*RS*, 26/ *RSat*, 13). Descartes is the father of enlightened thought that would have us dominate nature, even our own, in the service of enlightened knowledge. He taught us

Daß man absehen muß von dem unbegreiflichen Fleisch und hin auf die in uns bereits angelegte Maschine, auf das, was man vollkommen verstehen, restlos für



die Arbeit nutzbar machen und, bei allfälliger Störung, entweder wieder instand setzen oder wegwerfen kann. (*RS*, 26).

That one should disregard the flesh, which is beyond our comprehension, and attend to the machine within, to what can be fully understood. (*RSat*, 13)

As if to leave us in no doubt that we too, reading in the present day, are enjoined in this looking past the sacrifice of the flesh, Sebald intersects his analysis with a double spread image of the painting that engulfs us mid-sentence, making us part of the voyeuristic audience.

The narrator's wanderings find many other sites that point to the violence of technological progress. Each landmark seems to bear witness to the process of oppression on which any perceived prosperity depends. Wealth, knowledge and culture are repeatedly shown to have been achieved at the expense of slave labour, colonial domination, capitalist enterprise and the maintenance of class divisions. The futility of these enterprises is apparent to him, since the march of technology bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Thus, the one-time grandeur of Somerleyton House falls foul to a fire caused by a gas explosion (*RS*, 48/*RSat*, 35). The enormous economic and physical effort involved in building the mightiest naval fleets was expended purely to produce "zur Vernichtung bestimmten Fahrzeuge" (*RS*, 96; vessels that were almost all predestined for destruction" *RSat*, 78). The dialectic is summarised beautifully by the narrator thus:

Die Anfertigung eines Angelhakens, die Manufaktur einer Porzellantasse und die Produktion eines Fernsehprogramms beruhen letzten Endes auf dem

gleichen Vorgang der Verbrennung. Die von uns ersonnenen Maschinen haben wie unsere Körper und wie unsere Sehnsucht ein langsam zerglühendes Herz. (RS, 202-203)

The making of a fish-hook, manufacture of a china cup or production of a television programme, all depend on the same process of combustion. Like our bodies and our desires, the machines we have devised are possessed of a heart which is slowly reduced to embers. (*RSat*, 170)

Sebald also shows himself to be sensitive to the cost of progress to nature and man's battle to dominate it, a battle which, he finds, we are doomed to lose. He seems to see, where others do not, the setbacks we have suffered in the "unaufhaltsame Verdrängung der Finsternis" (RS, 77; "relentless conquest of darkness" *RSat*, 59) . Sebald's narrator senses that history has concealed these traces from us. "Wenn wir uns aus solcher Höhe betrachten", he notes, "wie wenig wir wissen über uns selbst, über unseren Zweck und unser Ende" (RS, 114; "If we view ourselves from a great height, it is frightening to realise how little we know about our species, our purpose and our end" *RSat*, 92). Historical representation, he recognised, requires a "Fälschung der Perspektive" (RS, 152; "a falsification of perspective" *RSat*, 125). This is what Sebald's writing offers us: a falsification of our usual perspective on history that might allow us to understand it outside of its usual, more abstract course.

Sebald's preoccupations with the violent, catastrophic and spectral aspects of the past find a confluence in his troubled fascination with Germany and his origins there. It is therefore within this context, within the search of Sebald's entire work's search for a

natural history that we must consider his interest in the bombings and the ruined cities. In the following chapter, I will demonstrate how *Luftkrieg und Literatur* can not only be fit into the parameters of that oeuvre as described above, but is even exemplary of it.

### 3. The Ruins of Modernity: Sebald's Fascination with the Bombed Cities

When considered within the context of the aesthetic and thematic concerns outlined in the last chapter that unify Sebald's work, the critical separation of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* from that body of work does a disservice to the essay and to the oeuvre. In this chapter I will argue that Sebald's long-standing fascination with the Allied bombings and their consequences represent a zenith-point in his natural-historical archive. The man-made, technologically manipulated conflagrations of the bombings resulting in the reduction of the modern metropolis to a primitive, ruined wasteland occupied by creaturely beings afford Sebald his most concentrated glimpse of natural history. That this glimpse occurs in immediate postwar Germany, the environment into which Sebald was born, serves to anchor his fascination in a compulsion to explore his catastrophic origins.

#### History as Inferno

Among Sebald's explorations of the catastrophes that have befallen civilised mankind, as Graham Jackman notes, fires feature perhaps most commonly as the source of the disaster.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, for Sebald the rise of civilisation is necessarily accompanied by smoke and flames:

Die Verkohlung der höheren Pflanzenarten, die unaufhörliche Verbrennung  
aller brennbaren Substanz ist der Antrieb für unsere Verbreitung über die Erde.

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Jackman, 'Gebranntes Kind? W.G. Sebald's Metaphysik Der Geschichte', *German Life and Letters*, 57 (2004), 457-71., here p. 465. Jackman's article is the only piece of research, as far as I am aware, that explicitly sets out to contextualise *Luftkrieg und Literatur* within the framework of Sebald's other works. His reading concentrates on the influence of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on the work and I am indebted to his article for alerting me to those links.

Vom ersten Windlicht bis zu den Reverberen des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts und vom Schein der Reverberen bis zum fahlen Glanz der Bogenlampen über den Belgischen Autobahnen ist alles Verbrennung, und Verbrennung ist das innerste Prinzip eines jeden von uns hergestellten Gegenstandes. [...] Die ganze Menschheitszivilisation war von Anfang an nichts also ein von Stunde zu Stunde intensiver werdendes Glosen, von dem niemand weiß, bis auf welchen Grad es zunehmen und wann es allmählich ersterben wird. (RS, 202-203)

Our spread over the earth was fuelled by reducing the higher species of vegetation to charcoal, by incessantly burning whatever would burn. From the smouldering taper to the elegant lanterns whose light reverberated around eighteenth-century courtyards and from the mild radiance of these lanterns to the unearthly glow of the sodium lamps that light the Belgian motorways, it has all been combustion. [...] From the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no one can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away. (RSat, 170)

As the very essence of the dialectic of enlightenment, fire is the pre-condition of progress and at the same time, frequently the form in which nature reasserts its dominance over mankind, interrupting its progress and thrusting it back into natural history. Thus we find frequent (again, too frequent to document here comprehensively) evocations of disasters caused by fire in Sebald's work. In *Schwindel. Gefühle* the narrator tells us how as a child his teacher draws up a list of the twelve great calamities to befall his home town of W. The stories distil the consequences of civilized urbanity, telling of lives lost to the

quick spread of plague or to the outbreak of war. These are interspersed in her list with five instances of large-scale fire, and around her list she draws a burning house (*RS*, 262/*RSat*, 240), as though fire were the emblem and unifying feature of all these disasters. In *Austerlitz* the narrator recalls that during a visit to Switzerland a fire broke out in Lucerne station shortly after he had been there admiring the achievement of the architects in creating its magnificent dome, thereupon destroyed in the blaze. Upon hearing about the disaster, he finds that he is troubled by the thought “daß ich der Schuldige oder zumindest einer der Mitschuldigen sei an dem Luzerner Brand” (*A*, 16; “that he had been to blame, or at least one of those to blame, for the Lucerne fire” *Aust*, 11-12). The only conclusion we can infer from this completely illogical feeling of responsibility is that we are all, in fact, to blame for the combustion that accompanies all our achievements and which we must accept as the price.

In *Austerlitz*, the building of fortifications continued despite their obvious ineffectiveness and uselessness, displaying an “inherent fatal logic”.<sup>2</sup> In exactly the same way, Sebald considers the bombing raids in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, at least in part, as an example of “a process that, once set in motion, cannot be arrested due to its inherent rationale which has become disconnected from human reason...The history of (military) technology becomes the prime indicator of the irrational at the heart of instrumental reason”.<sup>3</sup>

Sebald reminds us that the genesis of the British campaign was in the need to demonstrate power due their marginal position in the war: “[es gab] nur einen einzigen Weg...Hitler in die Konfrontation zu zwingen” (*LL*, 23; “there was only one way to force

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<sup>2</sup> Schmitz, p. 300.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 300-301.

Hitler back to confrontation” *NHD*, 16). It is precisely this logic that leads Sebald to conclude that in war there are no victims in the strictest sense, the casualties “nicht etwa Opfer sind, die gebracht werden auf der Straße zu einem wie immer gearteten Ziel, sondern sie sind, im genauen Wortsinn, diese Straße und dieses Ziel selbst” (*LL*, 27; “are not sacrifices made as a means to an end of any kind, but in the most precise sense are the means and the end in themselves” *NHD*, 20).

The campaign was therefore subject to the application of an instrumental reason that gathered its own momentum. The “Eigendynamik” (*LL*, 25; “momentum of its own” *NHD*, 18) that the enterprise acquired was fuelled by the progressive technological fervour and economic investment that took precedence over any regard to the human cost of the raids on either side. As Rick Crownshaw eloquently states, “both civilians and members of the armed forces became fungible in an ineluctable enterprise dedicated to the industrial production of corpses”.<sup>4</sup> The project of area bombing was driven by its own internal logic which had little to do with any actual strategic advantage and everything to do with the technological and economic investment that it accumulated:

Das einmal hergestellte Material, die Maschinen und ihre wertvolle Fracht, einfach ungenutzt auf den ostenglischen Flugfeldern liegen zu lassen, dagegen sträubte sich der gesunde Wirtschaftsinstinkt. (*LL*, 25).

Once the material was manufactured, simply letting the aircraft and their valuable freight stand idle on the airfields of eastern England ran counter to any healthy economic instinct. (*NHD*, 18)

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<sup>4</sup> Rick Crownshaw, “German Suffering or ‘Narrative Fetishism’?: W.G. Sebald’s ‘Air War and Literature: Zurich Lectures’” in Lise Patt, ed., *Searching for Sebald: Photography after W.G. Sebald* (Los Angeles, 2007), pp. 558-583, here p. 570.

Regardless of the worth or cost of the enterprise, “unter dem Druck des akkumulierten Potentials” (*LL*, 71; “under the pressure of the accumulated potential” *NHD*, 65), as dictated by instrumental rationality, it simply had to happen.

Subtly employing his characteristically black humour, Sebald draws attention to the absurdity of this enterprise and the technological enthusiasm behind it:

Wie desperat die Lage insgesamt gewesen ist, läßt sich ablesen an den bizarren Plänen, die zu Beginn der vierziger Jahre ernsthaft verfolgt wurden. So erwog man beispielsweise, eiserne Pfahlspitzen über den Feldern abzuwerfen, um das Einbringen der Ernte zu verhindern, und ein exilierter Glaziologe namens Max Perutz war beschäftigt mit Experimenten zu dem Projekt Habbakuk, aus dem ein riesiger unversenkbarer Flugzeugträger aus Pykrete, einer Art von künstlich verstärktem Eis, hervorgehen sollte. (*LL*, 24).

The bizarre projects being seriously pursued in the early 1940s show how desperate the situation was as a whole. For instance, a plan was under consideration for dropping iron stake tips over arable land to sabotage the harvest, and Max Perutz, a glaciologist in exile, was busy carrying out experiments for Project Habbakuk, with the idea of producing a gigantic aircraft carrier made of a kind of artificially reinforced ice called pykrete. (*NHD*, 16)

That this was only one stage, however, in the inexorable onward march of a technological progress with ever more violent consequences, Sebald leaves us in no doubt:



Kaum weniger phantastisch waren zum damaligen Zeitpunkt die Versuche, ein Abwehrnetz aus unsichtbaren Strahlen zu schaffen, oder die komplizierte, von Rudolph Peierls und Otto Frisch an der Universität Birmingham angestellten Berechnungen, denen zufolge der Bau einer Atombombe in den Bereich des Möglichen gerückt wurde. (*LL*, 24)

Scarcely less fantastic were the attempts of the time to construct a defence network of invisible rays, or the complicated calculations being carried out at Birmingham University by Rudolph Peierls and Otto Frisch which brought the building of an atomic bomb into the realm of feasibility. (*NHD*, 16)

The bombings lay bare for Sebald the destructive qualities of enlightenment rationality and the fires they produce are therefore relevant to us all as modern citizens of the world. However, the feeling of being somehow connected to the fire in Lucerne may also be related to the pervasive feeling Sebald (or the narrator-Sebald<sup>5</sup>) expresses of being linked to the fires and the ruins of the bombed cities on a personal level. In *Nach der Natur*, Sebald's first foray into creative writing, Sebald traces his origins quite literally to the air raids on Nuremberg, witnessed by his mother from neighbouring Fürth on the day she discovers she is expecting him in 1943 (*NN*, 73-74/*AN*, 84). In a prelude to the accusations he will later explicitly make against that generation, he writes that though she witnessed the surely awesome sight of the city in flames, she cannot recall

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<sup>5</sup> All of Sebald's fictional works are narrated in the first person by a narrator whose life appears to have followed a very similar trajectory to Sebald's own, but who is never named as Sebald himself, and the critic must therefore guard against ascribing all of the narrator's sentiments to the author. However, since so many of the themes and concepts developed in these works, especially with regard to the allied bombings, are also present in Sebald's academic works we can make an educated guess that they are at least semi-autobiographical in nature.

what it looked like or how she felt about it (*NN*, 73-74/*AN*, 84). At the same time, his father is said to have travelled to Dresden, the city now so emblematically identified with the bombings:

Am 27. Abreise des Vaters nach Dresden,  
von dessen Schönheit seinem Gedächtnis,  
wie er auf meine Fragen bemerkt,  
nichts in Erinnerung geblieben ist. (*SG*, 73)

on the 27<sup>th</sup> Father's departure for Dresden,  
of whose beauty his memory, as he  
remarks when I question him,  
retains no trace. (*V*, 83)

In these few lines are a crystallisation of the arguments that will be made in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. The reference to Dresden at this time carries with it the unmistakable pathos of a city about to be razed to the ground, afforded by the narrator's and reader's position of hindsight. The unspoken disaster is present in its absence, and most tellingly in his father's apparent amnesia regarding Dresden's famed beauty, destined to be lost to the flames. The suggestion of the son questioning the father will put the reader in mind of the generational conflicts so familiar to Sebald's generation regarding the role of their fathers in the support of the Nazi state, yet here, the elision is of a memory of the fires in Dresden rather than the fires of Auschwitz. The forgetting of the one, Sebald seems to suggest, entails the forgetting of the other.

The frequent incursions of fire in Sebald's long history of European modernity could almost be imagined as all somehow building up to or being related to the fires of the Second World War, as if all of history were an inferno, an incessant spiral of fires and disasters at whose centre are the conflagrations of that war spewing forth from the furnaces of Auschwitz. Jackman suggests that one might argue that "the great fires which consumed the German cities are the secret centre of Sebald's work",<sup>6</sup> and indeed it is possible to read the implied links to those fires in the evocation of others. In the final sequence of *Schwindel. Gefühle*, for instance, the narrator travels slowly through Germany by train, making his way back to London after a visit to his hometown, W. The German landscape appears to him from the windows of the train as an alien land in its ordered and too-neat fields and houses:

Seitwärts zogen die Felder vorbei und die Äcker, auf denen die blaßgrüne Wintersaat vorschrittmäßig aufgegangen war; Waldparzellen, Kiesgruben, Fußballplätze, Werksanlagen und die entsprechend den Bebauungsplänen Jahr für Jahr weiter sich ausdehnenden Kolonien der Reihen- und Einfamilienhäuser hinter ihren Jägerzäunen und Ligusterhecken. Eigenartig berührte mich beim Hinausschauen auf einmal, daß fast nirgends ein Mensch zu erblicken war, wenn auch über diese nassen Landstraßen genügend in dichte Sprühwolken gehüllte Fahrzeuge brausten. Sogar in den Straßenzügen der Städte waren weitaus mehr Automobile als Menschen zu sehen. Tatsächlich schien es, als habe unsere Art bereits einer anderen Platz gemacht oder als lebten wir doch zumindest in einer Form der Gefangenschaft. (*SG*, 277).

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<sup>6</sup> Jackman, p. 465.

Stretches of grassland swept past on either side and ploughed fields in which the pale green winter wheat had emerged according to schedule; neatly delineated fir-tree plantations, gravel-pits, football pitches, industrial estates, and the ever-expanding colonies of family homes behind their rustic fences and privet hedges. As I looked out, it made me uneasy that not a soul was to be seen anywhere, though enough vehicles were speeding along the wet roads veiled in dense mists of spray. Even in the streets of towns there were far more cars than people. It was as if mankind had already made way for another species or had fallen under a kind of curfew. (V, 253-254)

The over-ordered environment of a Germany that has rebuilt itself from ashes to resemble a model town, or colony of ants evokes a feeling of uncanny alterity, as if these buildings and cars were not the dwellings and technology of human inhabitants but the inhabitants themselves, as if the fervour of the effort to rebuild a modern civilised nation had in fact created a prison (“Gefangenschaft”). This is the picture of rebuilt Germany that Sebald will object to so strongly in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* and following this he makes an oblique reference to the catastrophes from which these conurbations originate when he notes that the platforms of the station when he reaches Heidelberg are so crowded, that they appear to the narrator as though the people were “auf der Flucht aus der untergehenden oder bereits untergegangenen Stadt” (SG, 278; “fleeing from a city doomed or already laid waste”. V, 254). Shortly after this, the narrator arrives back in London, perceiving the city around him as a maze of underground chasms and catacombs, and he finds himself dreaming that he is walking along a treacherous mountain-road, with endless ranges of barren, jagged mountains that render it impossible

to traverse and with vertiginous drops to the side. It is a silent, post-apocalyptic landscape in which nature is a dead, grey surface of stone, and into this void come the words the narrator has just read from Samuel Pepys' diary:

Ich sah es wachsen mehr und mehr. Es war nicht hell, es war ein grausig blutig böses Lohen, vom Wind getrieben durch die ganze Stadt. Zu Hunderten die toten Tauben auf dem Pflaster, das Federkleid versengt. Ein Haufen Plünderer in Lincoln's Inn. Die Kirchen, Häuser, Holz und Mauersteine, alles brennt zugleich. Am Gottesacker die immergrünen Bäume fangen Feuer. Ein rasend kurzer Fackelbrand, ein Krachen, Funkenstieben und Erlöschen. Des Bischofs Braybrookes Grab ist aufgetan. Ist dies die letzte Stunde? Ein dumpfer, ungeheurer Schlag. Wie Wellen in der Luft. Das Pulverhaus fliegt auf. Wir fliehen auf das Wasser. Um uns der Widerschein, und vor dem tiefen Himmelsdunkel in einem Bogen hügelan die ausgezackte Feuerwand bald eine Meile breit. Und andern Tags ein stiller Aschenregen - westwärts, bis über Windsor Park hinaus. (SG, 287)

We saw the fire grow. It was not bright, it was a gruesome, evil bloody flame, sweeping before the wind, though all the city. Pigeons lay destroyed upon the pavements, in hundreds, their feathers singed and burned. A crowd of looters roams through the Lincoln's Inn. The churches, houses, the woodwork and the building stones, ablaze at once. The churchyard yews ignited, each one a lighted torch, a shower of sparks now tumbling to the ground. And Bishop Braybrooke's grave is opened up, his body disinterred. Is this the end of time? A muffled, fearful thudding sound, moving, like waves, throughout the air. The powder house exploded. We flee onto the water. The glare around us everywhere, and yonder, before the darkened skies, in one great arc the jagged

wall of fire. And, the day after, a silent rain of ashes, westward, as far as Windsor Park. (V, 262-263)

This eschatological fantasy mirrors the experience the narrator has just described on his journey through Germany, so that in the description of the burning London we are put in mind of the “untergegangenen” cities of Germany. The barren, post-natural expanses of the mountain road recall at once the lifeless concrete remains of the cities, and the lifeless, post-natural world of the re-built German landscape we have just witnessed. And yet the traces of the destruction that are so pervasively suggested are not explicit; again, they are present only in their absence. Prefacing the central argument of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, in response to the lack of any available narrative of the natural historical details of the German fires, the narrator uses Pepys’ words, hearing the description of the fire of London first as an echo in the stony surroundings, then taking on Pepys’ voice as his own.

The subject matter of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, then, was not new in Sebald’s work when he took to the lectern in 1997. Indeed, it appears not only in such oblique references as this, but explicitly in references to air raid crews, rubble heaps and to the fires themselves. Furthermore, the interest in the bombings is enmeshed in Sebald’s consideration with the *memory* of the bombings and the lack of expression of these memories, as the passages from *Schwindel. Gefühle* and *Nach der Natur* above suggest and which will become one of the central points of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. It is possible to trace the genesis of this theory from Sebald’s earlier academic work, through his fictional writing to the confluence of the two in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. In 1982 Sebald

published a journal article<sup>7</sup> in which much of the literary criticism featured in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* was first developed, and in which the significance of the collective catastrophe is more concretely expressed than in parts of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. By the time Sebald came to write *Die Ringe des Saturn*, published in 1995, this significance is undiminished and the thoughts preoccupying Sebald about the lack of adequate literary expression of the bombings find their way into his prose. The narrator ‘Sebald’ strikes up a conversation with William Hazel, the gardener of the faded Somerleyton House. On learning that the narrator is German, the gardener is moved to tell him that he has always been preoccupied with the memory of the bombing raids that were launched from the sixty-seven airfields in the region:

...und tatsächlich stellte ich mir das Deutsche Reich damals vor als ein mittelalterliches, ungeheuer rätselhaftes Land. Immer wieder studierte ich auf meiner Karte die verschiedenen Regionen [...] und buchstabierte die Namen der Städte, deren Zerstörung soeben bekanntgegeben worden war: Braunschweig and Würzburg, Wilhelmshaven, Schweinfurt, Stuttgart, Pforzheim, Düren und Dutzende andere mehr. Das ganze Land habe ich auf diese Art auswendig gelernt, ja man könnte sagen, es hat sich mir eingebrannt. (RS, 53)

I pictured the German Reich as a medieval and vastly enigmatic land. Time and again I studied the various regions on the map...and spelled out the names of the cities, the destruction of which had just been announced: Braunschweig and Würzburg, Wilhelmshaven, Schweinfurt, Stuttgart, Pforzheim, Düren, and

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<sup>7</sup> W.G. Sebald, 'Zwischen Geschichte Und Naturgeschichte -Versuch Über die literarische Beschreibung totaler Zerstörung mit Anmerkungen Zu Kasack, Nossack und Kluge', *Orbis Litterarum*, 37 (1982), 345-66. Reproduced in the English-language anthology of fragments and essays *Campo Santo*. trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2005) as "Between History and Natural History: On the Literary Description of Total Destruction", pp. 68-101.

dozens more. In that way I got to know the whole country by heart; you might even say it was burnt into me. (*RSat*, 39)

This Englishman, untouched by the bombing raids in any sense except the imaginary, feels compelled to find out as much as he can about the raids, even learning German to read the accounts of what the Germans themselves had said about it. In contrast to his own feeling of being somehow “burnt” by the destruction, however, his search proves fruitless:

Niemand scheint damals etwas aufgeschrieben oder erinnert zu haben. Und auch wenn man die Leute persönlich befragte, war es, als sei in ihren Köpfen alles ausradiert worden. Ich aber kann heute noch kein Auge zutun, ohne die Formationen der Lancaster- und Halifax-Bomber, der Liberators und sogenannten fliegenden Festungen über die graue Nordsee hinweg nach Deutschland hineinfliegen und im Morgengrauen weit auseinandergezogen wieder heimkehren zu sehen. (*RS*, 54)

No one at the time seemed to have written about their experiences or afterwards recorded their memories. Even if you asked people directly, it was as if everything has been erased from their minds. As for myself, though, whenever I close my eyes, to this day, I see the formation of bombers, Lancasters and Halifaxes, Liberators and Flying Fortresses, going out towards Germany over the grey North Sea, and then straggling home in the dawn. (*RSat*, 39-40)

The erasure of the experience from the minds of its witnesses recalls the amnesia of ‘Sebald’s’ parents in *Nach der Natur*, and the contrast between this and the Englishman’s



haunting by the mere knowledge of the raids, let alone the witnessing of its results, testifies to Sebald's incredulity that anyone, let alone the Germans, living in postwar, post-Auschwitz Europe could have failed to have inscribed an awareness of these events into their being. Hazel's notion of feeling that the knowledge of the destroyed cities, represented only by the ciphers of the alien-sounding names, is "burnt" into him recalls Sebald's own claim in *Nach der Natur* that he was born under the pall of smoke, and in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* he confirms that he feels this unlived experience somehow defines part of his identity (*LL*, 77-8/*NHD*, 71).<sup>8</sup> William Hazel, we could argue, is therefore an extension of Sebald himself, seeking knowledge about the raids that fascinate him from a necessarily *outsider* perspective, but finding only oblique ciphers, maps written in another language, instead of any access to the true extent of the devastation.

The ubiquity and significance of the bombings in Sebald's wider work would therefore seem to support Jackman's assessment that every disaster evoked in this oeuvre "stands in a hidden relationship to the burning German cities".<sup>9</sup> In the following I will explore what makes the fires and landscapes of the bombed cities so significant for Sebald's oeuvre, arguing that they represent the perfect excavation site for Sebald's literary project of natural historical archaeology, replete with the spectral remnants that so fascinate him and occasioning a moment in which "creaturely life" comes into being.

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<sup>8</sup> The apparent influence of this unlived experience on Sebald has led some critics to analyse *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as a form of unconscious re-enacting, an act of postmemory, in Marianne Hirsch's terms. While there is undoubtedly some validity to this, I would argue that it is reductive to simplify the text by reading it only in these terms, and misinterprets Sebald's position to an extent. I will engage with these arguments in chapter 7 of this thesis. See J.J. Long, 'History, Narrative and Photography in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*', *Modern Language Review*, 98 (2003), 117-37 for an examination of post-memory in Sebald more generally and Anne Fuchs, 'A *Heimat* in Ruins and the Ruins as *Heimat*: W.G. Sebald's *Luftkrieg Und Literatur*', in *German Memory Contests; the Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse since 1990*, ed. by Mary Cosgrove, Georg Grote and Anne Fuchs (Rochester: Camden House, 2006), pp. 287-303 for the specific application of the post-memory theory to *Luftkrieg und Literatur*.

<sup>9</sup> Jackman, p. 466.

## The Bombings as Natural History

In his uniquely argued study of Sebald's work, of which I have made use to define Sebald's concept of natural history in chapter 2, Eric L. Santner suggests that Sebald's entire oeuvre can be considered as "the construction of an archive of creaturely life",<sup>10</sup> understood as the dimension of human existence called into being at moments of what Benjamin terms "natural history".<sup>11</sup> These moments are characterised by fissures in the symbolic structures of human existence, "uncanny loci of alterity within the order of meaning" that momentarily thrust man back into "the open".<sup>12</sup> In his 200-page exploration of Sebald's creaturely archive, Santner pays a scant page of attention to *Luftkrieg und Literatur*.<sup>13</sup> While I would hesitate to criticise Santner's undoubtedly learned research and superior knowledge of Sebald's work, he appears on this count to have succumbed to the tendency I have mentioned to consider *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as separate or inferior to the prose works.<sup>14</sup> I believe that this omission represents a missing piece in Santner's analysis and will argue here that in fact the bombings are the ultimate moment of natural history in Sebald's work, affording the most concentrated vision of creaturely life in his imaginary.

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<sup>10</sup> Santner, p. xiii.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., and p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this mention of the text is only to cite Sebald's quoting of Benjamin's 'Angel of History' at the end, and in fact does not engage with the essay's argument or subject matter at all. Santner, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that Santner is not very familiar with *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as a published text. At one point, for instance, he mentions in a footnote that Sebald derived the phrase "natural history of destruction", used as the title of his last published work, from Solly Zuckerman, but attributes this observation to the *Orbis Litterarum* article, rather than to *Luftkrieg und Literatur* itself, in which Zuckerman features prominently. See Santner, p. 63n23 and *LL*, 38/*NHD*, 32).

Sebald himself gave very clear insights into how, for him, the explosions of the bombs blew open cataclysmic “fissures in the space of meaning”<sup>15</sup>. In the Köhler interview as early as 1992 he explained:

Es ist meines Erachtens tatsächlich so, dass der Augenblick der Katastrophe der Augenblick ist, in dem Gesellschaftsgeschichte und Zivilisationsgeschichte sich auflösen und der weitere Zusammenhang, nämlich die naturgeschichtlichen Abläufe, absehbar wird [...] was man sehr deutlich sehen kann an einer historische Phase wie derjenigen zwischen 43 und 45, als der gesellschaftliche Zusammenhang in einer bombardierten Stadt wie Hamburg beispielsweise auf einige Zeit nahezu aus den Angeln gehoben wird.<sup>16</sup>

In my view, certainly, the moment of catastrophe is the moment when the history of society and of civilisation dissolve and the underlying connections, namely the natural-historical processes, become visible [...] which you can see clearly in a historical phase such as that between 43 and 45, when the social fabric of a bombed city such as Hamburg, for instance, was virtually torn apart.

Here, the monumental fires of Hamburg in 1943 represent the archetypal catastrophe that brings forth a moment of natural history. Already in the 1982 essay Sebald had asserted

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<sup>15</sup> Santner, p. xv.

<sup>16</sup> Köhler, “Interview with W.G. Sebald”.

that “collective catastrophe marks the point where history threatens to revert to natural history”<sup>17</sup> and in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* the idea finds its most pointed outlet:

Läßt materialistische Erkenntnistheorie oder irgendeine Erkenntnistheorie überhaupt sich aufrechterhalten angesichts solcher Zerstörung, oder ist nicht diese vielmehr das unwiderlegbare Exempel dafür, daß die gewissermaßen unter unserer Hand sich entwickelnden und dann anscheinend unvermittelt ausbrechenden Katastrophen in eine Art Experiment den Punkt vorwegnehmen, an dem wir aus unserer, wie wir so lange meinten, autonomen Geschichte zurücksinken in die Geschichte der Natur? (*LL*, 72-73)

Can materialistic epistemology or any other such theory be maintained in the face of such destruction? Is the destruction not, rather, irrefutable proof, that the catastrophes which develop, so to speak, in our hands and seem to break out suddenly are a kind of experiment, anticipating the point at which we shall drop out of what we have thought for so long to be our autonomous history and back into the history of nature? (*NHD*, 67)

The total destruction of an entire city, perhaps the most dense manifestation of civilisation, in such violent circumstances represents not just a fissure in the order of meaning, but undermines the very structure of civilisation. In the terms of Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for Sebald, the firestorms and the ruined existence into which the Germans were subsequently plunged represent no less than the implosion of enlightened values and the result of the dialectic at its heart. The Germans have paid the price for their blind faith in positivistic progress and have lost the battle for

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<sup>17</sup> Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 85.

the domination of nature, thrust back into what Adorno and Horkheimer might term an archaic, pre-enlightened state and Santner, following Rilke, names “the open”, a state of total exposure and vulnerability.

Where in Sebald’s other works, such as *Die Ringe des Saturn*, the narrator’s saturnine gaze must seek out the sites of natural history and the remnants of the past that produce the moments of uncanny alterity, having even to re-imagine them where they no longer exist (think of Dunwich), in the charred remains of the bombed cities there is a hypertrophy of spectral materialism on offer. Ash-smothered belongings, isolated from their rightful place, abstracted from their recognisable position in the world, present themselves to Sebald as the “surplus that both demands and resists symbolisation” described by Santner.<sup>18</sup> Sights such as “Ofenrohre, die zwischen Mauerresten hervorragen” (*LL*, 47; “stovepipes emerging from the remains of walls” *NHD*, 37), rooms rendered as outside spaces with “reizende kleine Bäume in Schlafzimmern und Küchen” (*LL*, 46; “pretty little trees springing up in bedrooms and kitchens” *NHD*, 39), or half-melted tramcars (*LL*, 34/*NHD*, 27) are the signs of natural history. Santner, following Benjamin, explains that natural history “points to a fundamental feature of human life, namely that the symbolic forms in and through which life is structured can be hollowed out, lose their vitality, break up into a series of hieroglyphs, that in some way continue to address us though we can no longer process their meaning.”<sup>19</sup> Anything that is trapped thus between real death and symbolic death is natural historical in that it is “undead”<sup>20</sup> and in a site such as Hamburg after Operation Gomorrah, what Sebald perceives is an instantly produced city of the “undead”.

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<sup>18</sup> Santner, p. xv.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

That this is the case is not surprising when we recall, as explained in chapter 2, that the ruin is the most emblematic of the relics sought out by the saturnine gaze to observe this undeadness. Indeed, Santner notes that “the destruction of human dwellings and monuments as a result of natural processes and human violence is, of course, at the very heart of the vision of natural history that dominates Sebald’s writings.”<sup>21</sup> Thus we can assume that part of the seemingly irresistible pull of these cities in the 1940s for Sebald’s historical gaze is the spectacle of a landscape of ruins still inhabited by humans, and in fact Sebald seems to identify with the city as a concept more closely in its ruined state than in its intact one:

.. daß mir, als ich mit meinen Eltern und Geschwistern 1952 von meinem Geburtsort Wertach in das 19 Kilometer entfernte Sonthofen umgezogen bin, nichts so vielversprechend schien wie die Tatsache, daß dort die Häuserzeilen hier und da von Ruinengrundstücken unterbrochen waren, denn kaum etwas [...] war für mich, seit ich einmal in München gewesen war, so eindeutig mit dem Wort Stadt verbunden wie Schutthalden, Brandmauern und Fensterlöcher, durch die man die leere Luft sehen konnte. (*LL*, 80).

When I moved with my parents and siblings from my birthplace of Wertach to Sonthofen, 19 kilometres away, nothing seemed as fascinating as the presence of areas of wasteland here and there among the rows of houses, for ever since I had been to Munich...few things were so clearly linked in my mind with the word ‘city’ as mounds of rubble, cracked walls, and empty windows through which you saw the empty air. (*NHD*, 74)

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

For Anne Fuchs, the postwar German ruin offers Sebald the only remaining legitimate trope through which to identify with his homeland. As a product of the violence unleashed in Germany's name by the National Socialist regime, the ruin now is forced to make room for all that should have been excluded from the *Heimat* in the form of unmastered nature. The ruin "thus unsettles the very foundation of National Socialist discourse: in the perforated space of the ruin, the foreign takes root."<sup>22</sup> With all notions of a legitimate homeland destroyed by the legacy of National Socialism, "the postwar ruin with its transitory qualities" is all that remains valid.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond Sebald's own personal relationship to the ruined nation, however, the postwar German ruin is distinct from others that evoke natural history and it is the *instantaneity* with which this fissure in the symbolic order is created that is significant. Here, the ruin as historical remnant, rather than declining over time, are created by a force of destruction so powerful that they are instant ruins, instantly removed from their symbolic context. In stark contrast to the gradual, enigmatically beautiful, natural process described by the narrator of *Die Ringe des Saturn* as the sea gradually reclaims the land on which the town of Dunwich stood to create the spectacle of its ruined churches (*RS*, 187/*RSat*, 155), Sebald describes the violent process that mutilates these landmarks of civilization:

Drei Stunden lang brannte es so. Auf seinem Höhepunkt hob der Sturm Giebel  
und Häuserdächer ab, wirbelte Balken und ganze Plakatwände durch die Luft,

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<sup>22</sup> Anne Fuchs, 'A *Heimat* in Ruins and the Ruins as *Heimat*: W.G. Sebald's *Luftkrieg Und Literatur*', in *German Memory Contests; the Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse since 1990*, ed. by Mary Cosgrove, Georg Grote and Anne Fuchs (Rochester: Camden House, 2006), pp. 287-303, here p. 299.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

drehte Bäume aus ihrem Grund und trieb Menschen als lebendige Fackeln vor  
sich her. (*LL*, 34)

The fire burned like this for three hours At its height the storm lifted gables and  
roofs from buildings, flung rafters and entire advertising hoardings through the  
air, tore trees from the ground and drive human beings before it like living  
torches. (*NHD*, 27)

Unlike the ruins of manmade structures that are slowly reclaimed, piece by piece by  
nature, these manmade ruins have their component parts strewn around them as rubble.  
Not partial remnants of the past, they represent the past undone and destroyed. Instead of  
haunting the present with the forgotten traces of a no-longer accessible past, these ruins  
express a no-longer accessible present. These are the ultimate ruins, the physical  
manifestation of 'Jetztzeit' in which the present and past are telescoped into one  
terrifying moment of danger. Having been thrust back into natural history, Sebald notes  
the speed with which nature reclaims these ruins into the landscape, so that they quickly  
look as if they have been like that for ages, even for always (*LL*, 47/*NHD*, 40) and  
wonders how long it would have taken, had no one intervened, for woodland to have  
covered over the ruins across the nation, leaving no trace of the former cities (*LL*,  
47/*NHD*, 40). The natural processes of decay and decline have been undermined and  
artificially applied in hyper-quick time by man against himself in a powerful evocation of  
the violence at the heart of human history.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Mindful of some of the criticisms of the essay in terms of its potentially revisionist position, we might at  
this point of the analysis begin to feel concerned that the specificity of the historical context of the  
bombings, that is, as a strategy to defeat Nazi Germany in the 'total war' it unleashed on Europe, may be  
lost in a broad narrative of European modernity as just one in a long history of violent incursions. These



Furthermore, the premise of the dialectic of enlightenment, that man's progress enacts violence on his own body, is literally manifested here: the firestorms are a force so powerful in their capacity to create instant ruins that the human body itself becomes an instant remnant, solidified as an organic ruin by fire; fire being the force, as explained above, that serves in Sebald's imagination as both the pre-condition of human achievement and the most frequent realisation of its inherent transience. Just like the ruins that express the quality of being recognisable and strange, both virtual and real, here the human body becomes dislocated from structures of meaning, reified as an abstract remnant that is the essence of "undead". Quoting from Friedrich Reck's diary of the time, Sebald isolates a moment that in which this is arrestingly clear. A group of refugees try to force their way onto a train:

Dabei fällt ein Pappkoffer "auf den Perron, zerschellt und entleert seinen Inhalt. Spielzeug, ein Nagelnecessaire, angesengte Wäsche. Zum Schluß ein gebratener, zur Mumie geschrumpfter Kinderleichnam, den das halbirte Weib mit sich geschleppt hat als Überbleibsel einer vor wenigen Tagen noch intakten Vergangenheit." (LL, 36)

As they do so a cardboard suitcase 'falls on the platform, bursts open and spills its contents. Toys, a manicure case, singed underwear. And last of all, the roasted corpse of a child, shrunk like a mummy, which its half-deranged mother

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are valid concerns that I will address fully later in this chapter, but suffice to say for now that the centrality of the Holocaust to Sebald's concept of European modernity does not waver and is in fact pivotal to his lament for the Germans' failure to recognise themselves as the architects of their own downfall as a civilisation.

has been carrying about with her, the relic of a past that was still intact a few days ago.' (*NHD*, 29)

Were the corpse to be lying in a coffin it would retain its place in the recognisable world even in death, but since that recognisable world has been instantaneously wiped out, it becomes just one remnant among others – the grotesquely superfluous manicure case and pathetically useless toys – a physical reminder of a child to which its form bears no resemblance and which will be frozen thus as an “undead” mummy. These bodies made into ruins litter this landscape and force the living to interact with them in ways that confound any sense of order. Thus we are told that “überall lagen grauenvoll entstellte Leiber... andere waren braun oder purpurfarben gebraten und zusammengeschnurrt auf ein Drittel ihrer natürlichen Größe” (*LL*, 35; “horribly disfigured corpses lay everywhere... others had been roasted brown or purple and reduced to a third of their normal size.” *NHD*, 28). Many were “so verkohlt und zu Asche geworden, daß man die Überreste mehrköpfiger Familien in einem einzigen Waschkorb davontragen konnte” (*LL*, 36; “so badly charred and reduced to ashes by the heat that the remains of families consisting of several people could be carried away in a single laundry basket” *NHD*, 28-29.), the linguistic efficiency of the German ‘Überreste’ and ‘mehrköpfiger’ only enhancing the reduced status of these objects from human being to thing. Juxtaposed with this materialist description Sebald inserts a photograph of what the reader can just about make out as bodies strewn around amongst rubble (*LL*, 29/*NHD*, 35). Since we know that Sebald is highly deliberate in his formatting of the photos in his work, and does not shy from including a double-page spread of an image where necessary, we can conclude that this image has been consciously made quite small. The murkily dense

contrast of the photograph makes it dark and the reader is forced to lean in and squint at it in order to make out that this rubble also contains human rubble. The most recognisable form in the image is a bucket – it could be a water pail or coal scuttle – into which, we are led to infer, someone will be shovelling this organic rubble. The combined effect is to underline the materiality of the bodies as part of the ruined physical setting, embued as they now are with the “opacity and recalcitrance” of the ruin.<sup>25</sup> In some cases, we learn, bodies were preserved in grotesque contortions as they were engulfed by the melting asphalt, in an uncanny merging of man and man-made environment (We might again recall the ‘prison’-like landscape of Germany described in *Schwindel. Gefühle*, in which man has been subsumed by his artificial environment (*SG*, 277/V, 253-254). Solly Zuckerman, the scientific adviser charged with assessing the impact of the bombardments for the British government (and who would later be a colleague of Sebald’s at the University of East Anglia), was so arrested by the sights of the ruined Cologne that he could no longer complete the report he had planned, to be entitled “On the Natural History of Destruction” (*LL*, 38/*NHD*, 32). Questioned by Sebald many years later as to what the report might have contained, he finds that his memory is reduced to an image of precisely this merging of concrete and organic rubble:

Er hatte nur noch das Bild des schwarzen, inmitten der Steinwüste aufragenden Doms in Kopf und das eines abgetrennten Fingers, den er auf einer Schutthalde gefunden hatte. (*LL*, 39)

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<sup>25</sup> Santner, p. xv.

All that remained in his mind was the image of the blackened cathedral rising from the stony desert around it, and the memory of a severed finger that he had found on a heap of rubble. (*NHD*, 32)

In an image that epitomises the Sebaldian aesthetic, the uncanny remnant that is the severed finger is a more haunting trace of the violence than the colossal symbol of the cathedral. These are undoubtedly the traces that reveal the natural history of destruction and which Sebald finds lacking in the literary representation of the event.

### **The Creaturely Life of the Survivors**

Santner writes that one of the preoccupations shared by Rilke and Sebald is “the specific nature of openness to world under the dual impact of historical violence and the structural dislocations generated by a modern capitalist society”,<sup>26</sup> and the image of a population exposed in the fullest sense to this impact is evoked strongly in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Sebald’s account of life among the ruins is the story of this reversion to, or exposure to the world beyond the “matrix of meaningful relations”.<sup>27</sup> His depiction of the dead and of the survivors exposes a population at the mercy of forces out of its control. It returns the Germans to a position as object, rather than subject of history and recognises that this should be the dispelling of the notion that man can irrevocably and without consequence impose himself on nature and history.

Again, in the earlier 1982 essay Sebald already perceived of this ruinous state as a reversion that arrests civilised time: “In the midst of ruined civilisation, what life is left

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<sup>26</sup> Santner, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

assembles to begin again in a different time”.<sup>28</sup> In *Luftkrieg und Literatur* he develops this by evoking an archaic population, living in the modern equivalent of the primitive cave, the ruined building, cooking on outdoor fires and for whom life has become a mere existence governed by the struggle to survive in the natural world they no longer master. They are hunter-gatherers, thrust back to an unrecognisable state outside of civilisation:

Wir befinden uns in der Nekropole eines fremden, unbegreiflichen Volks,  
herausgerissen aus seiner zivilen Existenz und Geschichte, zurückgeworfen auf  
die Entwicklungsstufe unbehauster Sammler. (*LL*, 43)

This is the necropolis of a foreign, mysterious people, torn from its civil  
existence and its history, thrown back to the evolutionary stage of nomadic  
gatherers. (*NHD*, 36)

The particularly nomadic quality of these survivors is a feature that Sebald repeatedly dwells upon. The homelessness – both literal and in the sense of ‘Heimatlosigkeit’, a lack of any valid sense of ‘Heimat’ – is an experience of collective “Entwurzelung” (uprooting, *LL*, 41/*NHD*, 34) that turns the population of individuals into a primitive mass. The behaviour they exhibit en masse follows instinct rather than reason, as Sebald remarks in the earlier essay: “The extreme restlessness and mobility to which Gollancz testifies were the reactions of a species seeing itself cut off from its way of escape.”<sup>29</sup> Like caged animals, the Germans react defensively to the threat of a world that is out of their control; a reaction that will be later mastered in the form of repression.

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<sup>28</sup> Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

In this newly regressed world in which the dialectic of enlightenment has been realised, the conventional markers of that enlightenment have become worthless, even absurd:

Dagerman beschreibt Schulzimmer, in denen die zerbrochenen Fensterscheiben mit Schiefertafeln vernagelt sind und wo es so finster ist, daß die Kinder ihre Vorlage nicht lesen können. (*LL*, 44)

Dagerman describes schoolrooms in which the broken window panes were replaced by school slates, and where it was so dark that the children could not read the textbooks in front of them, (*NHD*, 37-38)

Here the dialectic is expressed in a physical metaphor of the reversal of enlightenment: one of the most fundamental tools of learning, the writing slate, serves not to enlighten but ironically to plunge the children into darkness. Sebald devotes three pages to the destruction of the Berlin zoo, which is an especially powerful example of the breakdown of civilised society, since as he puts it:

Der Zoo, der ja seine Entstehung überall in Europa dem Demonstrationsbedürfnis fürstlicher und imperialer Macht verdankte, zugleich so etwas wie ein Abbild des Paradiesgartens sein sollte. (*LL*, 98-99)

Zoos, which all over Europe owe their existence to a desire to demonstrate princely or imperial power, are at the same time supposed to be a kind of imitation of the Garden of Eden. (*NHD*, 93)

The zoo, then, is a potent symbol of man's ongoing drive to dominate nature that places him in the role of God creating his own perfectly crafted and entirely manipulable version of the natural world. This manmade Eden now lies in ruins, its animals suffocated or charred in their cages. Those that survive make for a carnevalesque scene in which exotic animals roam the streets and people are terrorised by the rumours "daß entflozene Löwen um die Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche gerast seien" (*LL*, 98; "that lions on the loose were prowling around the nearby Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church" *NHD*, 92). The city-dwellers are now more like jungle tribes, hunted by big cats and themselves resorting to killing and eating wild beasts:

»Die Krokodilschwänze, in großen Behältern gekocht, schmeckten wie fettes Hühnerfleisch« und später, so fährt er fort, »waren dann Bärenschinken und Bärenwurst für uns eine Delikatesse.« (*LL*, 99)

'the crocodile tails, cooked in large pans, tasted like fat chicken', and later he continues, 'we regarded bear hams and bear sausages as delicacies.' (*NHD*, 93)

The image of jungle animals roaming the streets of Germany or suffocating in their zoo cages recalls a more general tendency in Sebald's work to call our attention to animals in a state of disorientation, having been removed (by man, usually) from their natural environment. We might think, for instance, of 'Nocturama' in *Austerlitz*, where the narrator observes a racoon washing a piece of apple over and over again, "als hoffe er [...] entkommen zu können aus der falschen Welt, in die er gewissermaßen ohne sein eigenes Zutun geraten war" (*A*, 6-7; "as if in the hope that this might help it to escape the unreal world in which it had arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own." *Aust*, 3);

or, at Somerleyton House, of the “einsame chinesische Wachtel [...] offenbar in einem Zustand der Demenz – in einem fort am rechten Seitengitter ihres Käfigs auf und ab lief“ (*RS*, 50; “solitary Chinese quail, evidently in a state of dementia, running to and fro along the edge of the cage.” *RSat*, 36). And we might think of the stuffed polar bear in the entrance hall at Somerleyton House: “wie ein gramgebeugtes Gespenst schaut er aus in seinem gelblichen, von den Motten zerfressenen Fell“ (*RS*, 49; “with its yellowish and moth-eaten fur, it resembles a ghost bowed by sorrows.” *RSat*, 36). Santner believes that “one of the most common emblems of creaturely life in Sebald is our likeness to animals” in this state of dislocation.<sup>30</sup> Sebald draws us into “the dimension of creaturely life by emphasizing a zone of ‘uncanny proximity’ between animal and human life, one that takes shape at the point where both are in some fashion abandoned to a state of exception.”<sup>31</sup> The ruined cities are just such a state of exception and the details Sebald chooses to describe it are selected to show a regressed people, for whom the distinctions between animal and human have become blurred. Many are living underground in the human equivalent of dens or warrens and their “weißen Gesichter... schauen genau aus wie die von Fischen, wenn sie zum Luftschnappen nach oben kommen” (*LL*, 45; “white faces...were just like the faces of fish coming up to the surface to snatch a bit of air.” *NHD*, 38). They are an “Insektenkolonie” (*LL*, 48; “insect colony” *NHD*, 42) who are sharing their living space with other a burgeoning population of fat and healthy flies and rats (*LL*, 41/*NHD*, 34) in a grotesque symbiosis. This is the most noteworthy “Veränderung in der natürlichen Ordnung der Stadt” (*LL*, 41; “the most striking change in the natural order of the cities” *NHD*, 34); in the post-civilised world of the bombed

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<sup>30</sup> Santner, p. 143.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.



city, the “uncanny proximity” between the people and the animals, who are both their prey and their predators or parasites, provokes a profound state of anxiety in the population who are at first paralysed into listlessness. Eventually, however, “the revulsion at this new life, at the ‘horror teeming under the stone of culture’”<sup>32</sup> will drive the Germans on to uncover the old paths of enlightened progress that will allow them to rebuild and re-conquer; the very paths that led to the destruction in the first place, as Sebald feels only too keenly.

### **Treading Old Paths**

The features of Sebald’s writing that I have outlined so far in this chapter ground his fascination with the bombings and the ruined cities in his wider natural historical project and as such are bound into the long history of civilisation and modernity that characterise his oeuvre. However, while this provides us with the aesthetic and philosophical context in which to consider *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, it is crucial not to forget the historical specificity of this particular catastrophe, since it is on this that Sebald’s attention focuses here so keenly and with such ferocity of opinion.

I have already argued that, for Sebald, the violence unleashed by the aberration that was National Socialism represents the fundamental rupture in European history and therefore that the bombings are just one component of this great catastrophe, this giant inferno, that was unleashed by Fascism, the ultimate manifestation of progress’s dark heart. Any failure in the knowledge of the inferno being passed on results only in that dark heart remaining hidden, at the expense of further violence. It is important always to remember that in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Sebald is still speaking in the name of the

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<sup>32</sup> Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 85.

victims of the Holocaust. Indeed, as Peter Morgan demonstrates, Sebald belongs to a particular tradition of German intellectuals from his generation for whom Auschwitz is at once the necessarily defining and de-legitimising prism through which any sense of German identity must be considered.<sup>33</sup> There is, perhaps, even an argument for the notion that Sebald in fact sought to renounce his German identity entirely, spending his life in self-imposed exile and often expressing his dissatisfaction with his homeland. However, this does not correlate with the choice to write in his mother-tongue, instead of his undoubtedly capable English. It seems more probable, that Sebald writes as part of the perpetrator collective and self-reflexively bears the burden of writing about the Nazi past from a German perspective.

Self-consciously part of the perpetrator collective, then, Sebald's passionate accusation against postwar Germany in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is that it strives with all of its might to turn the catastrophe into a triumph with the creation of a positive myth of survival and rebuilding that can be used as a meaningful foundation for a continued sense of 'Germanness'; since there can be no German identity that is not overshadowed by the pall of smoke from the great fires of the furnaces, the creation of this positive meaning is effectively a denial of Auschwitz. With the version of memory that they have chosen, the Germans have foreclosed any possibility of what Benjamin termed messianic redemption of history at precisely the moment when it might have been possible. The implosion of enlightened society in the ruins offered them an opportunity to "pull the brake". By making themselves the heroes of a speedily rebuilt state, they continued a history of victories (over history and over nature), when in fact it is one of defeats.

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<sup>33</sup> Morgan, p. 77.

When considering Sebald's 'natural history' thesis, it is easy to spot the seeds of some of the criticisms that have been made of his treatment of the allied bombings, in particular the accusation that he is skirting the boundaries of revisionism, an accusation I will discuss in more detail in chapter 4. The question inevitably arises as to whether Sebald effectively exculpates the Germans by dint of the fact that everything that happened in the war was part of the natural course of history, just the latest in a long line of catastrophes born of the modern belief in progress and civilisation. If the Germans are made to be the object rather than the subject of their recent history, are they therefore absolved of its responsibility? This is a very valid concern and one that has been raised by several critics: Andreas Huyssen, for one, has written that Sebald risks making a natural event of the bombings.<sup>34</sup> However, as I have argued above, the 'natural' element of Sebald's natural history does not refer to the causality of the catastrophe, but rather the glimpse of the world that the catastrophe *produces*; natural history is not the cause, but the *effect of violence*; while the cause remains firmly rooted in the acts of the Nazi state. It is necessary for the Germans to be made the object of their history, because as its subject they have continued only to weave it into abstractions that can be usefully 'absorbed' into a meaningful narrative.

Sebald's position here is outside of what we traditionally regard as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In an essay on Jean Améry, Sebald praises Améry's radical position that "excludes any compromise with history". Améry, he writes, describes German literature's efforts at 'coming to terms with the past' as an appeasement of the German mind.<sup>35</sup> For Améry "the issue is not to resolve but to reveal the conflict".<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See Andreas Huyssen, *Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, 2003)

<sup>35</sup> Schmitz, p. 314.

Sebald's task in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is to do precisely that; he demands that history be disturbed, made incomplete and fragmented, rather than neatly packaged into a form that the Germans can 'process'. If the memory of the catastrophe unleashed by Nazism can be 'absorbed' into any positive or affirming meaningful narrative, history will simply continue on its progressive path. In this regard Sebald shared Améry's "outrage of supposing that history could proceed on its way afterwards almost undisturbed, as if nothing had happened".<sup>37</sup> The efficiency with which the Germans managed to re-establish their recognisable world using the familiar structures of the (now discredited) old one, as Sebald laments in the 1982 essay, "proves Brecht's dictum that human beings learn as much from catastrophes as laboratory rabbits learn about biology."<sup>38</sup>

In *Austerlitz*, Sebald writes that our concern with history "sei eine Beschäftigung mit immer schon vorgefertigten, in das Innere unserer Köpfe gravierten Bildern, auf die wir andauernd starren, während die Wahrheit irgendwoanders, in einem von keinem Menschen noch entdeckten Abseits liegt" (A, 105; "is a concern with pre-formed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered" *Aust*, 101). This is his indictment of the German memory of the war experience; by using the pre-formed images taken from a tradition of history to represent it, they have turned away from the truth. Not only that, but in doing so they have allowed the teleological march of history to continue uninterrupted into the present, thus clearing the way for further oppression.

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<sup>36</sup> Sebald, "Against the Irreversible: On Jean Améry", in *On the Natural History of Destruction* (London, 2003), pp. 149-171, here p. 162.

<sup>37</sup> Sebald, "Against the Irreversible", p. 158.

<sup>38</sup> Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 95.

Ultimately, the cultural vocabulary of fascism is the cultural vocabulary of Germany today.

*Luftkrieg und Literatur* depicts a population who in the aftermath of the bombings engaged themselves wholly with the preservation of their now discredited civilisation. So dogged is the effort to reinstate the symbolic order as it was familiar and undo the exposure to natural history, that the Germans make themselves “geschichtsblind” (*LL*, 6 “blind to history” *NHD*, ix) in the drive to retain “den sogenannten gesunden Menschenverstand” (*LL*, 49; “what is thought of as healthy human reason” *NHD*, 42), for which they go to lengths that cross into the absurd. They have decided “weiterzumachen als wäre nichts gewesen” (*LL*, 47-48; “to carry on as if nothing had happened” *NHD*, 41), in acts that are, in the circumstances, “absurd” and “skandalös” (*LL*, 48; “absurd” and “scandalous” *NHD*, 42). These include the effort to keep surviving windows clean, or tidy the front garden of a destroyed house; the tidying up of body parts in a bombed cinema before the next showing; taking coffee and cake on the balcony of a solitary surviving terraced house (*LL*, 48/*NHD*, 41-42).<sup>39</sup> The maintenance of what Sebald wryly calls the “höheren kulturelle Ritualen” (“the more elevated cultural rituals”) is of the utmost importance and is evidenced by the holding of orchestral concerts in ruined buildings that would attract large crowds of proud music lovers (*LL*, 50/*NHD*, 42). By upholding the old ‘civilised’ values, the Germans can be proud that they have not succumbed to the apocalyptic reality of their (self-imposed) situation. Indeed, this crushing example of Benjamin’s ‘history of defeats’ can be turned

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<sup>39</sup> This particular image stirs Sebald’s ‘creaturely’ awareness in its uncanny juxtaposition of the everyday and the exceptional, moving him to note that seeing it must have been akin to “das Verspeisen eines Artgenossen durch die als Menschen verkleideten und mit Eßbesteck bewehrten Tiere Grandvilles” (*LL*, 48-49; “the sight of Grandville’s animals, in human dress and armed with cutlery, consuming a fellow creature” *NHD*, 42).

into a victory. By turning their attentions inwards, the Germans can make a virtue of their suffering:

Und doch muß auch die Frage erlaubt sein, ob ihnen die Brust nicht schwoll vor  
perversem Stolz darüber, daß niemand in der Menschheitsgeschichte der Welt  
noch so aufgespielt and niemand so viel durchgestanden hatte wie die  
Deutschen. (*LL*, 50)

Yet we may also wonder whether their breasts did not swell with perverse pride  
to think that no one in human history had ever played such overwhelming tunes  
or endured such suffering as the Germans. (*NHD*, 44)

Sebald's tone here betrays his incredulity that the drastic incursions that merely days  
before had rendered the modern world unrecognisable to its inhabitants have apparently  
failed to unsettle the Germans' relationship to their traditions, culture or values. Not only  
that, but this rather sarcastic remark suggests that, with their complete ignorance of the  
far greater sufferings of others caused in their name, their blindness to their own situation  
blinds them to the greater catastrophe also. The Germans have therefore learnt nothing  
from their own downfall:

...zu sehr war man beschäftigt mit dem Abhalten von Feierstunden auf der  
kaum noch erkalteten Lava, zu sehr auch damit, sich selber von jedem Anruch  
zu befreien. (*LL*, 52)

The lava barely cold under their feet, they were too preoccupied with the  
reaffirmation of their higher ideals, too anxious to free themselves of any taint.  
(*NHD*, 45)

This anxiety finds its ultimate manifestation in the almost manic rebuilding effort that gave rise to the *Wirtschaftswunder* and the new West German state, so successfully ‘reintegrated’ as it was into ‘normal’ capitalist progress. The images and narratives that Sebald finds in pamphlets, posters and postcards tell a story of inspirational rising up from the ashes:

Nicht als das grauenvolle Ende einer kollektiven Aberration erscheint also diese totale Zerstörung, sondern, sozusagen, als die erste Stufe des erfolgreichen Wiederaufbaus. (*LL*, 14)

They make it look as if the image of total destruction was not the horrifying end of a collective aberration, but something more like the first stage of a brave new world. (*NHD*, 6)

The Germans make themselves simultaneously heroes and victims of their downfall. One 1950s brochure hails the courage of the workers, since

“die Stunde verlangt aufrechte Männer, sauber in Haltung und Zielsetzung. Fast alle stehen dann auch in Zukunft jahrelang an der vordersten Front des Wiederaufbaus” (*LL*, 14)

“The hour called for upright men of impeccable conduct and aims, almost all of whom would be in the front line of reconstruction for years to come” (*NHD*, 5)

The continuation of a military attitude into the postwar effort is clear in this example, as well as the narrative of the re-building as a moral quest, a battle against the dark forces

that threatened Germany in the form of the ruins and regression. What alarms Sebald is the way in which this creation of a sense of purpose and moral justification out of the ruins carries with it a lack of any dislocation from the discredited German model of civilisation. Rather than humbled or degraded by their total defeat, the Germans are spurred on. Thus it is with disgust that Sebald quotes the recollections of Robert Thomas Pell, who was astonished by

die mit Selbstmitleid, kriecherischer Selbstrechtfertigung, gekränkten  
Unschuldsgefühlen und Trotz seltsam gemischten Willensbekundungen der  
Deutschen, ihr Land »größer und mächtiger wiederaufzubauen, als es in der  
Vergangenheit war«” (*LL*, 14).

Germans stating their intention of rebuilding their country to be ‚greater and  
stringer than ever before’ - in a tone in which self-pity, grovelling self-  
justification, a sense of injured innocence and definance were curiously  
intermingled. (*NHD*, 6)

Indeed, the new BRD considers it a virtue that they have managed to rise from  
the degradation without showing “ein Anzeichen innerer Schwäche” (*LL*, 19; “any sign  
of weakness” *NHD*, 12).

The continuation of old values into the new state means that it has been built  
with “eingemauerten Leichen” (“corpses built into the foundations”), on the strength of  
“in der totalitären Gesellschaft erlernte fraglose Arbeitsethos” (*LL*, 20; “the  
unquestioning work ethic learned in a totalitarian society” *NHD*, 12-13). The new state,  
like the old Reich, is founded on the doctrine of economic progress that conceals an



archaic violence at its heart. The FRG is depicted in microcosm by the new self-service supermarkets of Sebald's childhood, built on the site of a ruined *Schloß*, in which as a child, Sebald had always been frightened of coming across a corpse while playing. Symbolically, the sites of these ruins were levelled to make way for the "ebenerdigen, fensterlosen, scheußlichen Bau" (*LL*, 82; "ugly, windowless single-storey building" *NHD*, 76), and the "Wildnis" ("wilderness") of the ruined garden is covered by the tarmac of the car park. This shiny, convenient symbol of capitalist progress betrays its bloodier heart, however, with an enormous advertising hoarding showing a giant platter of meats "in blutigen bis rosaroten Farben" (*LL*, 83; "in colours from blood-red to rose-pink" *NHD*, 77).

With characteristic melancholy pessimism, Sebald confirms his own suspicions

Daß wir aus dem von uns angerichteten Unglück nichts zu lernen vermögen, sondern, unbelehrbar, immer nur fortmachen auf Trampelpfaden, die auf legere Weise an die alten Wegverbindungen anknüpfen. (*LL*,73)

That we are incorrigible and will continue along the beaten old tracks that bear some slight relation to the old road network. (*NHD*, 68)

Undoubtedly to his mind, we are treading the old paths still. Chillingly, to conclude his essay Sebald includes an account of a letter he received in response to his original Zürich lectures, in which a certain Dr H. propounds the theory that the Allies waged the war in the air with the aim of cutting the Germans off from their origins and inheritance by destroying their cities, thus paving the way for the subsequent

Americanisation of the country. This strategy was devised by Jews living abroad, exploiting the special knowledge of the human psyche, foreign cultures and foreign mentalities that they are known to have acquired on their wanderings (*LL*, 105). Sebald warns us not to dismiss this theory of a Jewish conspiracy as the musings of a crank. It is, perhaps, symptomatic of the fact that we stand, after reunification, at what Benjamin might term a moment of danger:

Vielleicht ist es nicht verkehrt, an diese Zusammenhänge gerade jetzt zu erinnern, da das zweimal bereits gescheiterte großeuropäische Projekt in eine neue Phase eintritt und der Einflußbereich der D-Mark – die Geschichte hat eine Art, sich zu wiederholen – ziemlich genau so weit sich ausdehnt wie im Jahr 1941 das von der Wehrmacht besetzte Gebiet. (*LL*, 20-21)

Perhaps we ought to remind ourselves of that context now, when the project of creating a greater Europe, a project that has already failed twice, is entering a new phase, and the sphere of influence of the Deutschmark- history has a way of repeating itself – seems to extend almost precisely to the confines of the area occupied by the Wehrmacht in the year 1941. (*NHD*, 13)

With this in mind, it is appropriate that Sebald invokes Benjamin's *Engel der Geschichte* (*LL*, 72-72). The allegory of the angel of history is taken from Thesis ix of Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. This thesis effectively sums up the whole document in a focal point:

His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of its feet. The angel would like to stay, waken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>40</sup>

While we see the teleological progress of time, the angel of history sees the inseparability of past and present, as the past violently intrudes upon the present. For the angel, history is not governed by empty, homogenous time, but rather by time filled with the presence of the now or *Jetztzeit*.<sup>41</sup> The angel's shocked look is a marker of how little we ourselves see: we cannot conceive of a convoluted time in which past and present exist simultaneously. The angel would like to stand still in this moment to tend to the victims of the violent past, but he is irresistibly propelled forwards by the storm of progress towards an endless repetition of the past and ever more destructive catastrophes. This is a direct confrontation with Hegel's philosophy of history, the immense rationalistic theodicy which legitimated every ruin as a necessary stage in the triumphal march of reason and an unavoidable moment of humanity's progress towards the consciousness of freedom.<sup>42</sup> For Benjamin, revolution is the opportunity for humanity to pull the emergency brake on this storm of progress. What the angel sees is a fleeting glimpse of the redemption of history, a "history of disruption and a disruptive history"<sup>43</sup>,

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<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, p. 249.

<sup>41</sup> See Sigrid Weigel

<sup>42</sup> See Löwy, p. 78

<sup>43</sup> Crownshaw, p. 577.

but it does not last because the storm is too strong. Only the Messiah (or in secular terms, the restoration of a classless society) will be able to stop it.

For Sebald, the ruins of the German cities are just like those piled up at the feet of the angel. Now, in this present moment of danger, Sebald, like the angel, can see the convolution of the past and the present in a disruptive account of history. However, like the angel's, his glimpse is all too fleeting, because the storm has been allowed to keep blowing as strongly as ever before and he too is being blown forwards against his will, prevented from seeing that past. In a speech for the opening of the Stuttgarter Literaturhaus in 2001, Sebald expressed this feeling to the assembled crowds:

Why, when I take the S-Bahn into Stuttgart's city centre, do I think, every time we reach the Feuersee, that the fires are still blazing above us and that since the terrors of the last war years, even though we have rebuilt our surroundings so wonderfully well, we have been living in a kind of underground zone?<sup>44</sup>

Literature has done nothing in postwar Germany to prevent history from being dragged into that underground zone, and this is the criticism of Germany's authors that I will explore in the next chapter.

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<sup>44</sup> Translated by Anthea Bell and published in *New Yorker*, December 20<sup>th</sup> 2004.

#### 4. Literature and Taboo: The Charge Against Postwar Authors

In his volume *Zeugen der Zerstörung (Witnesses of the Destruction)*, written in response to *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Volker Hage aims to address what he describes as the most provocative and interesting feature of the debate surrounding Sebald's essay, namely that of the concept of a taboo on representations of the bombings.<sup>1</sup> Though he admits that he was, at first, quite convinced by Sebald's arguments, his book-long bibliography of works that feature traces of the bombings, either explicitly or implicitly in a fear of future wars, must, he feels, be a refutation of Sebald's theory, "daß der Luftkrieg in der deutschen Literatur nicht stattgefunden habe" (that the airwar never occurred in German literature) and prove that, "tatsächlich hat der Luftkrieg überall seine Spuren hinterlassen" (in fact the airwar had left its mark all over the place).<sup>2</sup> This assessment of Sebald's taboo theory contains within it the foundation for much of the misunderstanding associated with the text which in turn gave rise to much of the controversy.<sup>3</sup> That is, that there was a wholesale taboo on any representation of the bombings *at all* which somehow prohibited writers from mentioning it in their works. Since the idea in this simplified format is so easy to refute – as Hage's text proved – it is natural to then ask why Sebald, clearly a very learned scholar of German literature and one who had gained a reputation for a highly 'politically correct' approach to the Nazi past, should so publicly and insistently make this observation at all. Made during a period of intense anxiety and tension regarding the future of any national memory of the Nazi past (as I will argue in chapter 6), this apparently unfounded claim was in many cases suspected of

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<sup>1</sup> Volker Hage, *Zeugen Der Zerstörung: Die Literaten und Der Luftkrieg. Essays und Gespräche* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 118 and p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> The extent of this controversy and its basis on a mis-reading of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* will be discussed fully in the chapter 6.

having dubious motives linked to a desire to see the Germans as having somehow been victimised by political correctness, much in the style of the conservative historians of the Historikerstreit. Why else would Sebald wilfully ignore the abundant examples of the bombings in literature other than to espouse a revisionist agenda?

In this chapter I will argue that this criticism is based on a fundamental simplification of Sebald's taboo thesis, which is carefully and consciously constructed to refer to a specific *form* of representation of the bombings, namely one that would expose the fires and ruins as the complete destruction of the ordered world and the German nation. The function of this taboo is to allow the Germans to maintain their concept of an old world that has no referent in the ruined new one, so that they may "tread the old paths" back to civilisation, as discussed above. The adherence to this taboo by writers of postwar Germany contributed to transformation of the catastrophic implosion of a civilisation whose values gave rise to Auschwitz into a victory of survival, and the literary criticism in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is a lament for an irrevocably lost moment of potential in literature, which for Sebald, is the only form of remembrance that might have adequately provided "the natural history of destruction."

### **"Ein schandbares Geheimnis": Sebald's Taboo Thesis**

In his interview with Sebald featured in *Zeugen der Zerstörung*, Hage invited the author to respond to a statement made by the newspaper editor Klaus Harpprecht regarding the taboo thesis<sup>4</sup> that had been widely used as a soundbite in the press: "Das Schweigen verbarg vielleicht eine Scham, die kostbarer ist als alle Literatur" (the silence conceals a

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<sup>4</sup> As I will discuss fully in chapter 6, Harpprecht's response to *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, in common with the majority of commentators in the press, was based almost solely on the initial article written by Hage rather than any engagement with the content of Sebald's lectures.

shame that is more valuable than all of literature).<sup>5</sup> The implication of this statement is that if there were a taboo on any representation of the bombings, then it is one that is necessary because it is founded on the deep shame felt by the German population about their perpetration of the Holocaust, and therefore any threat to the integrity of this taboo is a threat to the primacy of that shame and the awareness that the memory of German guilt must always take precedence over the memory of any suffering Germans may have endured. By extrapolation, Sebald's attempt to destabilise a taboo of this kind is an attempt to relativise the centrality of the Holocaust in German memory.

In response to Harpprecht's statement, Sebald suggests a subtle but definitive semantic shift that dramatically alters the perception of his thesis:

Bezeichnend ist in diesem Zusammenhang das Wort 'Scham'. Ich glaube nicht, daß die Deutschen jemals etwas Derartiges empfunden haben. Ich bin auf dieses Schamgefühl nie gestoßen. Der Begriff 'Schande' wäre da schon viel präziser.<sup>6</sup>

In this context the word 'shame' is symptomatic. I don't believe that the Germans felt anything of the sort at the time. I have never come across any evidence for this feeling of shame. The term 'ignominy' would be more precise.

The German 'Scham', like the English 'shame', carries with it connotations of an awareness of wrongdoing or loss of status and accompanying contrition or at least distress. In this context, it would suggest an awareness on the part of the Germans of having been on the wrong side, if not necessarily an awareness of moral responsibility, and in this sense the taboo on 'German suffering' would be the accompanying contrition,

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<sup>5</sup> Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung*, p. 276.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

or eating of humble pie. Harpprecht's passionate insistence that this shame is so "valuable" it must not be threatened goes even further, implying that the Germans censored themselves out of shame for the Holocaust.

Sebald believes that this is a generous assessment of the postwar German state of mind. The German 'Schande' carries a meaning close to 'disgrace', 'dishonour' or 'disrepute' and would be the term most closely resembling the sentiment of 'ignominy in defeat'. The self-censorship that Sebald describes in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, then, has no noble connotations of moral responsibility. Rather, it is a purely defensive reaction designed to shore up the self-image of a nation that finds itself morally, materially, philosophically and culturally in ruins and must suppress anything that affirms this reality. Thus, finding itself to be a "moralisch so gut wie restlos diskreditierten Gesellschaft" (*LL*, 7; "a society that was morally almost entirely discredited" *NHD*, ix),

die in den letzten Kriegsjahren von Millionen gemachte Erfahrung einer nationalen Erniedrigung sondergleichen nie wirklich in Worte gefaßt und von den unmittelbar Betroffenen weder untereinander geteilt noch an die später Geborenen weitergegeben worden ist (*LL*, 6)

the unparalleled national humiliation experienced by millions in the last years of the war had never really found verbal expression and those directly affected by the experience neither shared it with each other nor passed it on to the next generation. (*NHD*, viii)

Sebald's choice of words here, as always, is very deliberate. Throughout *Luftkrieg und Literatur* he is careful always to qualify what the subject of this taboo is. It surrounds the



“finstersten Aspekte des von der weitaus überwiegenden Mehrheit der deutschen Bevölkerung miterlebten Schlußakts der Zerstörung” (*LL*, 17; “darkest aspects of the final act of destruction, as experienced by the great majority of the German population” *NHD*, 10<sup>7</sup>). It is designed to repress “der wahre Zustand der *materiellen* und *moralischen* Vernichtung, in welchem das ganze Land sich befand” (*LL*, 17; “the true state of *material* and *moral* ruin in which the country found itself” *NHD*, 10). He does not suggest that the generation of witnesses did not speak of their experiences *at all*, nor does he suggest that at any level, public or private, the memory of the bombings was subject to any wholesale taboo, either internally or externally imposed. What has been suppressed is the *effect* of the bombings on the population, that is, the truth of having been thrust into a state of primitive existence and exposed to a version of the world over which they had no control. The term ‘Erniedrigung’ connotes ‘indignity’ or ‘humiliation’, but here most pertinently ‘degradation’, which in every sense defines the status of the Germans among the ruins for Sebald: in the archaic sense of being brought down in status, politically, socially and in terms of their relation to nature and the world, and in the sense of being reduced to a lesser form of being, of being debased, even de-humanised.

In the context of my reading of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* so far, let us clarify the cause of this intolerable sense of ‘Schande’ and the purpose of its repression. In the terms of Adorno and Horkheimer, it is a taboo imposed by a population on its experience of the futility of their battle with nature . The battle to impose subjectivity on nature, that is, everything outside of thought, has shown itself to be ongoing rather than won and to

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<sup>7</sup> The term ‘Schlußakt’ (final act) is used here, I would argue, to anchor the destruction of the cities in its causal pre-history of German aggression, which would be the ‘original act’.

represent it in historical narrative would be to realise the worst fear of enlightenment: the reversion to an archaic state subject to the sway of unknowable natural forces.

On a more historically specific plane, there is, as a nation-group, the collective experience of military and political defeat, which discredits the social and economic values on which the nation has based its commitment to a war, and of which the ruined cities are a potent symbol. As a nation seeking to re-establish itself politically among its neighbours, it is not hard to understand the German urge to brush the ignominy of defeat under the carpet. However, the extent to which these values have been unsettled goes beyond a mere sense of being beaten in a fight; the taboo is not just the reaction of bad losers. Under the National Socialists, Germany had condoned and enacted the systematic and technologically efficient extermination of millions on the basis of a detailed, supposedly logical and rational racial policy that is predicated on the belief that the Aryan Germans are a superior, more highly evolved and civilised group than those they have excluded. The category of the “Untermensch” (sub-human) involves the de-humanizing, or de-subjectifying of another human who is subsequently classified as a primitive being; thus in their confrontation with what I have described above as the creation of ‘human rubble’ and their exposure to the archaic, savage existence in an uncivilised world, the Germans have found themselves to be the object of their own devastating prejudice, and Sebald’s focus on the degrading and undignified aspects of life in the ruins serve to remind us of this.

In a passage from Nossack that Sebald singles out for its uniquely frank detail, we see that Germany, having been cleansed in such a brutal fashion of all that has been deemed ‘vermin’ by Nazi rhetoric, finds itself infested with actual vermin that take on

malevolent, mutated qualities that render the survivors impotent and usurp them in the natural order, feeding copiously on the unburied bodies:

Ratten und Fliegen beherrschten die Stadt. Frech und fett tummelten sich die Ratten auf den Straßen. Aber noch ekelregender waren die Fliegen. Große, grünschillernde, wie man sie nie gesehen hatte. Klumpenweise wälzten sie sich auf dem Pflaster, saßen an den Mauerresten sich begattend übereinander und wärmten sich müde und satt an den Splittern der Fensterscheiben. Als sie schon nicht mehr fliegen konnten, krochen sie durch die kleinsten Ritzen hinter uns her, besudelten alles, und ihr Rascheln und Brummen war das erste, was wir beim Aufwachen hörten. (*LL*, 42)

Rats and flies ruled the city. The rats, bold and fat, frolicked in the streets, but even more disgusting were the flies, huge iridescent green flies such as had never been seen before. They swarmed in great clusters on the roads, settled in heaps to copulate on ruined walls, and basked, weary and satiated, on the splinters of window-panes. When they could no longer fly they crawled after us through the tiniest of cracks, and their buzzing and whirring was the first thing we heard on waking. (*NHD*, 35)

The threatening incursion of the suddenly all powerful vermin contrasts with the exposure, naivety and vulnerability of a boy in a passage cited from a story by Borchert, who keeps watch over the buried body of his brother, “in der das Unwesen der Ratten gebannt wird durch die Versicherung, daß sie schlafen während der Nacht” (*LL*, 41-42; “his horror of the rats banished by the assurance that they sleep at night.” *NHD*, 34-35).

Beyond these examples Sebald is frustrated in his search for these details of man's exposure among the ruins, and concludes:

Die auffallende Spärlichkeit diesbezüglicher Beobachtungen und Kommentare erklärt sich aus einer unausgesprochenen Tabuisierung, die um so verständlicher ist, wenn man bedenkt, daß die Deutschen, die doch die vollständige Säuberung und Hygenisierung Europas sich vorgesetzt hatten, sich wehren mußten gegen die jetzt in ihnen aufkommende Angst, sie seien in Wahrheit selber das Rattenvolk. (*LL*, 41)

The conspicuous sparsity of observations and comments on this phenomenon can be explained as the tacit imposition of a taboo, very understandable if one remembers that the Germans, who had proposed to cleanse and sanitize all Europe, now had to contend with a rising fear that they themselves were the rat people. (*NHD*, 34)

It is the proximity experienced by the inhabitants of the ruined cities to the status of the inferior, foreign other that is felt as "Erniedrigung" and which cannot be tolerated. To remind us of the irony of their situation, perhaps, Sebald lingers on the detail from the Nossack passage above, which describes the deployment of forced labour in the cleaning-up effort by the inhabitants who presumably do not have the stomach for the job. It features:

[...] die Zuchthäusler, die in ihren gestreiften Anzügen zur Beseitigung „der Reste ehemaliger Menschen“ eingesetzt wurden, sich in der Todeszone nur mit dem Flammenwerfer den Weg zu den in den Luftschutzräumen liegenden

Leichen bahnen konnten, so dicht brausten die Fliegen um sie her und waren die Kellerstiegen und Fußböden bedeckt mit glitschigen, fingerlangen Maden.(*LL*, 42)

the convicts in their striped uniforms who were called in to clear away ‘the remains of what had once been human beings’ and could reach the death zone only with flame-throwers, so densely did the flies swarm around them and so thick were the floors and steps of the cellars with slippery finger-length maggots. (*NHD*, 35)

The dark irony inherent in the image of these convicts, in their unmistakable striped uniforms, using fire to extinguish vermin while the Germans are impotently overrun is only one aspect of this passage; it also serves to remind us, lest we begin to feel tempted by any notion that the Germans are victims in the manner that the convicts are, of the way in which Nazi Germany has been, and at this point in history still is, dealing with its ‘vermin’. Thus while the image of the corpses burning on the Dresdner Altmarkt might at first seem to problematically echo the camps, Sebald cements the causal link by noting that it was carried out by “einem SS-Kommando mit Erfahrung in Treblinka” (*LL*, 104; “an SS-Commando which had gained its experience in Treblinka” *NHD*, 98). Similarly, the scenes he describes of burnt and melted bodies in the aftermath of the Hamburg firestorm may feel uncomfortably reminiscent of the violence enacted in the camps, but Sebald pre-empts any implied equation of the two by reminding us that “Lagerhäftlinge nach dem Abkühlen der Trümmer im August mit der Räumung beginnen konnten” (*LL*, 35; “punishment labour gangs and camp inmates could begin clearing it in

August, after the rubble had cooled down” *NHD*, 28). Sebald would undoubtedly have been aware of the risky ethical territory into which he could be entering by drawing any connections at all between the victims of the Holocaust and the consequences of the allied bombings. His technique is to demonstrate that the memory of the bombings and the memory of the Holocaust are inextricably enmeshed. To deny the fullness of the memory of one, is also to deny the other. Rick Crownshaw, employing a model taken from the Mitscherlichs, argues that Sebald’s intention in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is to demonstrate the inextricability of the two events in memory: “It is only through demonstrating the thorough entanglement of memories that Sebald can begin to find adequate means of representing and remembering the airwar”.<sup>8</sup>

The examples above are consistent with efforts Sebald makes throughout the essay to undermine any notion that the Germans might make themselves ‘victims’ of the events. Indeed, he studiously avoids the term ‘Opfer’ (victim)<sup>9</sup>, with one notable exception, when describing the correspondence he received in response to the Zurich lectures:

Auch Privatpersonen schrieben mir mit der Bitte, in den Züricher Text Einblick nehmen zu dürfen. Einige dieser Ansuchen waren von dem Bedürfnis motiviert, die Deutschen endlich einmal als Opfer dargestellt zu sehen. (*LL*, 85)

I also heard from private individuals wanting to read my Zurich texts. Some of these requests were motivated by a need to see the Germans depicted, [finally and] for once, as victims. (*NHD*, 79)

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<sup>8</sup> Crownshaw, p. 560.

<sup>9</sup> In Anthea Bell’s translation, Sebald’s innocuous phrasing of “wieder Andere” (simply ‘more’ or ‘others’, p. 36) to denote people burnt to death, the English curiously and erroneously uses the more loaded term “victims” (p. 28). The original German studiously avoids this problematic choice of vocabulary.

The “endlich einmal” (which is rather softened in the English translation) implies a certain sarcastic, eye-rolling tone. Similarly, Sebald never describes the bombing raids as ‘attacks’, nor the bombers as perpetrators. He reminds us frequently that the bombings, the ruins and the camps are all components of the Nazi-conceived devastation, maintaining a strict sense that this catastrophe started and finished in Germany, referring to it as “die deutsche Katastrophe” (*LL*, 87; “the German catastrophe” *NHD*, 81), or the “im deutschen Reich sich vollziehenden Katastrophe” (*LL*, 5; “the catastrophe then unfolding in the German Reich” *NHD*, viii), of which this moment is the “Schlußakt” (final act). Furthermore, the genesis of this catastrophe cannot be conveniently ascribed to a ‘big-bang’ moment as Hitler came to power, lest we are led to think of the Germans as victims of a madman: a decade before Hitler entered the Reichstag, he reminds us, the Wehrmacht were building up to expansionist aggression:

Die Logistiker der Wehrmacht [arbeiteten] bereits, ein Jahrzehnt vor der Machtergreifung Hitlers, an ihrer eigenen Cheruskerphantasie, einem wahrhaft schreckenerregenden Skript, das die Vernichtung der französischen Armee auf deutschem Boden, die Verwüstung ganzer Landesteile und hohe Verluste unter der zivilen Bevölkerung vorsah. (*LL*, 103)

A decade before Hitler seized power the logisticians of the Wehrmacht were already working on their own Cheruscan fantasy, a truly terrifying script which provided for the annihilation of the French army on German soil, the devastation of whole areas of the country, and high losses among the civilian population. (*NHD*, 98)

In Germany, and in the FRG in particular, the Wehrmacht have represented an aristocratic tradition often appealed to by conservatives as evidence of a longer history of noble Germans, embodied by the near-legendary figure of Stauffenberg, the aristocrat officer who spearheaded the 20<sup>th</sup> July 1944 plot to kill Hitler. Here, Sebald suggests that the Wehrmacht were entirely capable of designing their own war of annihilation and through the allusion to the Germanic hero Hermann of the Cherusci, who defeated the Romans at the battle of Teutoburger Wald in AD 9, relates their capacities to a long tradition of teutonic warriors and planned warfare. In the published essay Sebald comments on some of the responses to the original lectures and seems dismayed to have to explicitly state what he must have hoped these allusions would more than adequately convey; in light of the responses he has received, he feels the need to state the facts of history:

Die Mehrzahl der Deutschen weiß heute, so hofft man zumindest, daß wir die Vernichtung der Städte, in denen wir einst lebten, geradezu provozierten [...] Und wenn wir an die Brandnächte von Köln und Hamburg und Dresden denken, dann sollten wir uns auch in Erinnerung rufen, daß bereits im August 1942, als die Spitzen der sechsten Armee die Wolga erreicht hatten und als nicht wenige davon träumten, wie sie nach dem Krieg in den Kirschgärten am stillen Don auf einem Landgut sich niederlassen wollten, die Stadt Stalingrad, die zu jenem Zeitpunkt wie später Dresden von Flüchtlingsströmen angeschwollen war, bombardiert wurde von zwölfhundert Fliegern, und daß dort während dieses Angriffs, der Hochgefühle auslöste unter den am anderen Ufer stehenden deutschen Truppen, vierzigtausend Menschen ihr Leben ließen. (LL, 110)



The majority of Germans know today, or so at least it is to be hoped, that we actually provoked the annihilation of the cities in which we once lived...And when we think of the nights when the fires raged in Cologne and Hamburg and Dresden, we ought also to remember that as early as August 1942, when the vanguard of the Sixth Army had reached the Volga and not a few were dreaming of settling down after the war on an estate in the cherry orchards beside the quiet Don, the city of Stalingrad, then swollen (like Dresden later) by an influx of refugees, was under assault from 1,200 bombers, and that during this raid alone, which caused elation among the German troops stationed on the opposite bank, 40,000 people lost their lives (*NHD*, 105)

The category of victim, then, is not applied to the bombed inhabitants of the cities, and the taboo Sebald laments is not on any representation of them as such. Similarly there is no room in Sebald's account of the bombings for any expression of the subjective experience of suffering by Germans. Indeed, Sebald appears to have no interest at all in a subjective memory of the fires or ruins. Helmut Schmitz writes that "Sebald's own work bears witness to the difficulty of finding an appropriate language. The four stories of *Die Ausgewanderten* and the novel *Austerlitz* are concerned with wresting away the individual fate from the immunity and abstraction that public discourse on 'the Holocaust' confers on the victims".<sup>10</sup> The taboo thesis in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is related to this concern but features an important distinction. The Germans in the cities are not afforded the same right to testimony as the victims of the Holocaust. The moral and ethical demands of the German status as perpetrator nation mean that no individual fate can be considered as unrelated to the "kollektive Aberration" ("collective

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<sup>10</sup> Schmitz, p. 291.

aberration”), but the taboo placed on any ‘natural history’ of the catastrophe serves only to mask this truth in favour of clichés and sob-stories. The taboo functions in support of the nascent FRG’s “Entstehung aus der absoluten Degradation” (“rise from total degradation”) by allowing the “Assanierung oder Beseitigung eines dem *Normalverstand* inkommensurablen Wissens” (LL, 19; “[Germans to] sanitize or eliminate a kind of knowledge incompatible with any sense of normality” NHD, 11-12). *Luftkrieg und Literatur*’s attempt to undermine this taboo, therefore, is the attempt to wrest the immunity and abstraction that the perpetrators have imposed on their own experience and which ultimately spares them from absorbing the full implications of their history.

With this in mind, Sebald deems that the Germans essentially cannot be trusted with the memory of their own downfall. As the subject of their history, they have turned complete defeat into victory and progress. Any subversion of this taboo will have to make the Germans the object of their catastrophic history in order to subvert the narratives they have employed:

Ich bezweifle nicht, daß es Erinnerungen an die Nächte der Zerstörung gab und gibt; ich traue nicht nur *der Form* in der sie sich, auch literarisch, artikulierten, und ich glaube nicht, daß sie in dem sich konstituierenden öffentlichen Bewußtsein der Bundesrepublik in irgendeinem anderen Sinn als dem der Wiederaufbaus ein nennenswerter Faktor gewesen sind. (LL, 87, my emphasis).

I do not doubt that there were and are memories of those nights of destruction; I simply do not trust *the form* – including the literary form – in which they are expressed and I do not believe they were a significant factor in the public

consciousness of the Federal Republic in any sense except as encouraging the will to reconstruction. (*NHD*, 81)

The second half of this chapter will explore the deficiencies of postwar literature and the ways in which they have colluded in the maintenance of the taboo, asking why Sebald accords so much importance to literary representation and providing a basis on which to posit a possible form for ‘the natural history of destruction’ in chapter 5. Before moving on from the fundament of the taboo thesis in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, however, it is pertinent to consider a model to which it is frequently related, that of the Mitscherlich’s ‘inability to mourn’.

Like *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, the Mitscherlichs’ seminal psycho-analytical study of 1967, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern (The Inability to Mourn)*,<sup>11</sup> detected a silence in postwar Germany regarding the German experience of the National Socialist era. It was diagnosed by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich as a symptom of the ‘inability to mourn’, as part of the ‘de-realisation’ of the past in reaction to the loss of the values of National Socialism and, centrally, of Hitler himself. According to the Mitscherlichs, the Germans had not achieved any emotional or psychological confrontation with the immediate past, neither in the form of shame at defeat and mourning of their losses, nor in that of an imperative to atone for the crimes of the Nazis on recognition of the facts of Auschwitz. Drawing on Freud’s definitions of mourning and melancholia, they diagnosed Hitler’s position as a narcissistic love object for the German Volk as the central factor in this failure. In narcissistic love, the desired object is loved not as separate from the self,

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander und Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlage kollektiven Verhaltens* (Munich, Piper, 1967).

but for its potential to support and enhance the ego of the subject, becoming internalised as part of the ideal self:

Der Verlust des »Führers« war für Millionen Deutsche nicht der Verlust irgendeiner Person...sondern mit seiner Person verbanden sich Identifikationen, die im Leben der Anhänger zentrale Funktionen erfüllt hatten. Denn er war, wie wir ausführten, zur Verkörperung des eigenen Ich-ideals geworden...Mit diesem plötzlichen Umschlag seiner Qualitäten erfährt das Ich jedes einzelnen eine zentrale Entwertung und Verarmung. Zumindest die Voraussetzung zur melancholischen Reaktion ist geschaffen.<sup>12</sup>

Losing the Führer, for the Germans, went far beyond the loss of an individual person [...] because his supporters identified with him in various ways, and these identifications played a central role in their lives. Because , as we have shown, he had become the embodiment of their own 'ego ideal' [...] with this sudden reversal of his qualities, the self of every individual underwent a central devaluation and impoverishment, thereby creating at least the possibility of a melancholic reaction. (My translation.)

With the loss of a narcissistic love object, it is the ego, rather than the world outside of it that is impoverished. This devaluation of the ego leads to a melancholic reaction, a grieving for the self that must give rise to a primal task of reconstitution of the ego through separation from the narcissistic object.<sup>13</sup> The downfall of the regime was equivalent to the mass impoverishment of the German ego and should have resulted in a

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> See Freud, "Trauer und Melancholie" in *Gesammeltewerke* Vol. X (Frankfurt, Fischer, 1967).

potentially crippling melancholia to work through the shattering of their narcissistic identification with Hitler.

The central thesis of the Mitscherlichs is that this process of melancholic working through never took place, since the wartime generation, to counter this devaluation of the ego, withdrew all libidinous energies from Hitler, their immediate past and their Nazi selves, breaking “alle affektiven Brücken” (“all emotional bridges”)<sup>14</sup> between themselves and their wartime experiences. This de-realisation of the past was achieved via a series of defence mechanisms, including the transferral of libidinous energies to the conquering allies, the identification with the victims of Nazism, and the manic activity of the *Wirtschaftswunder*. The concept of the inability to mourn was instrumentalised by a student generation in the late 1960s dominated by the impulse to accuse their parents and the state, not only of complicity in the Nazi regime and their subsequent failure to atone for it, but also of a continuation of National Socialist values into the FRG.<sup>15</sup> In his recent criticism of the Mitscherlichs’ study, Tilmann Moser observes that they too may have fallen prey to the rebellious, accusatory mood of the era. Despite the fact that the study purports to be an unhindered socio-psychological analysis, Moser argues that the anger at the wartime generation so prevalent in the 1960s pervades the text, causing it to read “eher wie ein Katalog von Beschimpfungen denn als ein Dokument des Verstehenswollens” (more like a catalogue of accusations than a document that seeks to understand).<sup>16</sup> It is the discrepancy in analytic positions, according to Moser, that gives rise to the shortfall in the Mitscherlichs’ study. Appearing to be analysing both a single

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<sup>14</sup> Mitscherlichs, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Tilmann Moser, *Politik und seelischer Untergrund* (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1993), p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Tilmann Moser, “Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Hält die Diagnose einer Überprüfung stand?” *Psyche* XLVI 5 (1992), pp. 389-406. Here p. 391.

patient and an entire Volk, and apparently speaking with the voices of therapist, culture historian and *Volkspädagogen* (public educator), at no point do the Mitscherlichs attempt to get closer to the ‘criminals’ in order to understand them, as established psychoanalytical criminology would dictate. Ultimately, Moser concludes, they fail to recognise the “tragische Paradox”<sup>17</sup> (tragic paradox) that even the worst criminal requires empathy if he is to find his way to integration and change.

That there are undoubtedly parallels between the theory of the Mitscherlichs and Sebald’s own diagnosis of repression in postwar Germany may well have inspired some of the similar criticism of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Certainly Sebald shares their conviction that the repression of any acceptance of their own experience fatally hindered the Germans’ ability to accept the full implications of the National Socialist catastrophe, and that the incredible energy poured into the economic miracle was enabled by a de-realisation of the recent past. As a member of that generation remembered as the 68ers, Sebald indeed shares the disapproval and lack of sympathy for the parent generation identified by Moser. However it would be inaccurate to classify Sebald in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as merely a later version of the Mitscherlichs.

*The Inability to Mourn* was the attempt to come to a clinical, psycho-analytical diagnosis of an entire nation based on a Freudian paradigm of narcissistic trauma, and while Sebald certainly wishes to discuss the mindset of the postwar Germans as a collective, he does not invoke psychoanalytical models of trauma in order to do so, though he is undoubtedly aware of them. If the Germans are paralysed by the trauma of their recent experience into a form of unconscious repression, this is not the reason behind the taboo Sebald identifies, which is a consciously applied effort to *make use of*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 389.

the past for the benefit of the present. There is also no evidence to suggest that Sebald believes the population to be crippled by the loss of Hitler and unworked-through loss; rather, they are defiant in the face of this challenge to their structures and values.

The ultimate difference between Sebald and the Mitscherlichs is that Sebald is operating within the realm of aesthetics and representation and his interest here is not in the subjective or individual experience of Germans under the bombs. The process of working through repressed trauma necessarily involves the extraction of personal testimony from the traumatised individual. As I have already argued, for Sebald, the Germans have renounced their right to bear witness to their own downfall and give testimony; the only valid form in which to represent the catastrophe involves a paradoxical non-subjective memory in which the conditions of destruction that brought about any trauma, rather than the trauma itself, are the subject of the narrative.

### **“Verquaste Abstraktionen”: The Failure of Literature**

Under the terms of this non-subjective memory, the value of eye-witness accounts, diaries and letters is limited. Sebald finds that in most cases these accounts are limited in their perspective by the necessary position of the subjective eye-witness who is bound by “sprachlichen Konvention” (*LL*, 32; “verbal convention” *NHD*, 25):

Dieses irgendwie Unwahre der Augenzeugenberichte entsteht aber auch aus den stereotypen Wendungen, derer sie sich vielfach bedienen. Die in ihrer extremen Kontingenz unbegreifliche Wirklichkeit der totalen Zerstörung verblaßt hinter einschlägigen Formulierungen wie „ein Raub der Flammen“, „verhängnisvolle

Nacht“, „es brannte lichterloh“, „die Hölle war los“, „starrten wir ins Inferno“, „das furchtbare Schicksal der deutschen Städte“ und dergleichen mehr. Ihre Funktion ist es, die über das Fassungsvermögen gehenden Erlebnisse zu verdecken und zu neutralisieren. (*LL*, 32)

The rather unreal effect of the eyewitness reports also derives from the clichés to which they often resorted. The reality of total destruction, incomprehensible in its extremity, pales when described in such stereotypical phrases as a ‘prey to the flames’, ‘that fateful night’, ‘all hell was let loose’, ‘we were staring into the inferno’, ‘the dreadful fate of the cities of Germany’, and so on and so forth. Their function is to cover up and neutralize experiences beyond our capability to comprehend. (*NHD*, 25)

These sorts of reminiscences are characterised by their “Neigung zum Vorgeprägten, zur Wiederholung des Immergleichen” (*LL*, 86; “tendency to follow a set routine and go over and over the same material” *NHD*, 80). Subject to the taboo on the reality of the catastrophe that has undermined the structures of meaning, the stories of these witnesses are inadequate in their recourse to the familiar but no longer appropriate linguistic and symbolic paradigms of the world as it was. These, we must remember, are also the paradigms put to such devastatingly efficient use by the Nazi regime and, in common with Adorno, Sebald believes that the conventional use of the German language cannot hope to legitimately represent the devastation in a post-Auschwitz world.



The restricted subjectivity of eye-witness reports blocks any access to a natural history of the bombings, and it is to literary representation that Sebald turns in his search for the traces of the natural history of destruction. The possibilities and complexities of the representation of historical events are a concern that pervades Sebald's writing. In *Austerlitz*, Hilary laments the recourse to cliché and set pieces in the narrative of history that are familiar to us, in terms that echo Sebald's own here:

Wir versuchen, die Wirklichkeit wiederzugeben, aber je angestregter wir es versuchen, desto mehr drängt sich uns das auf, was auf dem historischen Theater von jeher zu sehen war: der gefallene Trommler, der Infanterist, der gerade einen anderen niedersticht, das brechende Auge eines Pferdes, der unverwundbare Kaiser, umgeben von seinen Generalen, mitten in dem erstarrten Kampfgewühl. (A, 105)

We try to produce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us: the fallen drummer boy, the infantryman shown in the act of stabbing another, the horse's eye starting from its socket, the invulnerable emperor surrounded by his generals, a moment frozen amidst the turmoil of battle. (*Aust*, 101)

For literature to successfully represent the German catastrophe as the complete rupture with the past as Sebald sees it, it will have to strenuously and vigilantly work against this tendency for the reality to be subsumed under the familiar conventions that we use to re-tell it. In praise for parts of Nossack's *Der Untergang*, Sebald writes:

Das Ideal des Wahren, das in seiner, über weite Strecken zumindest, gänzlich unpräntentiösen Sachlichkeit beschlossen ist, erweist sich angesichts der totalen Zerstörung als der einzige legitime Grund für die Fortsetzung der literarischen Arbeit. Umgekehrt ist die Herstellung von ästhetischen oder pseudoästhetischen Effekten aus den Trümmern einer vernichteten Welt ein Verfahren, mit dem die Literatur sich ihrer Berechtigung entzieht. (*LL*, 59)

The ideal of truth in its entirely unpretentious objectivity, at least over long passages, proves itself the only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction. Conversely, the construction of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world is a process depriving literature of its right to exist. (*NHD*, 53)

This passage carries clear echoes of Adorno's famous and oft-quoted proclamation in 1951 that, after Auschwitz, to write poetry would be barbaric<sup>18</sup>, and in 1954 that the novel was no longer a valid form of representation<sup>19</sup>, and this is surely not accidental. The semantic, aesthetic and cultural tools that were used in the creation of the National Socialist aberration must be abandoned in the description of the resulting devastation if the true nature of that devastation is to be understood. In the earlier 1982 essay, Sebald clarifies this imperative:

The ideal of truth contained in the form of an entirely unpretentious report proves to be the irreducible foundation of all literary effort. It crystallizes

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<sup>18</sup> See Petra Kiedaisch ed., *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995), p. 48. The principle texts of the debate are presented in this volume.

<sup>19</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur I* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 61.

resistance to the human faculty of suppressing any memories that might in some way be an obstacle to the continuance of life.<sup>20</sup>

However, in his assessment, the vast majority of the literary efforts in the postwar period that attempted to represent the catastrophe of the cities have not provided the resistance to this faculty and, indeed, have colluded in the mammoth effort to extract a positive, useful and familiar meaning from the experience which will support the “continuance of life” as it was before.

We might consider Sebald’s judgement of literature here to be in line with Benjamin’s in Theses VII of the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*:

Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein. Und wie es selbst nicht frei ist von Barbarei, so ist es auch der Prozess der Überlieferung nicht, in der es von dem einen an den anderen gefallen ist.<sup>21</sup>

There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free from barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to the other.<sup>22</sup>

Here, instead of contrasting culture and barbarism as two mutually exclusive poles in the different stages of historical evolution, as in enlightenment philosophy, Benjamin presents them dialectically as a contradictory unity. The great works of art and

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<sup>20</sup> Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte”, in Walter Benjamin, *Sprache und Geschichte: Philosophische Essays* (Reclam: Stuttgart, 1992), pp. 141-55, here p. 145.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico Random House, 1999) p. 248.

civilisation could not have been produced without the oppression of the masses. In historical terms, the document of culture is barbaric because it tells a false story of victories and identifies with the victors, when the truth of history lies in a string of defeats for the oppressed. As long as history continues to identify with the oppressor and the march of progress, it will be barbaric. Sebald's engagement with the literature of the airwar is based on the accusation that the writers of postwar Germany continued to collude in the production of documents of barbarism. On inspection, he finds that for the most part, they have employed strategies of abstraction and fallen back on traditional enlightenment values to turn the history of a monumental defeat into a victory.

The abstractions employed by authors take several forms. Though reluctant to criticise a highly respected author, Sebald nonetheless finds Arno Schmidt's description of a bombing raid to be as far from his ideal linguistically as could possibly be:

“ [...] Eine fettige Wolke richtete sich am Magazin auf, blähte den Kugelbauch und rülpte einen Tortenkopf hoch, lachte kehlig: o wat!, und knotete kollernd Arme und Beine durcheinander, wandte sich steatopyg her, und fortzte ganze Garben von heißen Eisenrohren aus, endlose, die Könnernin, daß die Sträucher dabei knixten und plapperten.“ (*LL*, 64)

„A fat-lady cloud stood up above the warehouse, puffed out her round belly and belched a pastry head high into the air, laughed throatily: so what! And rumbling the while knotted up her arms and legs, turned towards us steatopygically, and farted whole sheaves of hot iron tubing, endlessly, the virtuosa, till the shrubs below us curtsied and babbled.“ (*NHD*, 58)

In his efforts to transcend linguistic convention, Arno Schmidt has gone too far and hidden the reality of what is being described behind his experimental phrasing. The foregrounding of the language in this way is an abstraction in the most obvious sense, and one that uses the catastrophe as merely the muse for a creative experiment that exalts and plays with the capacities of the (discredited) German language.

Peter de Mendelssohn's *Die Kathedrale* is also guilty of rendering any truth of the devastation invisible behind a narrative perspective that is narrowly focused on the protagonist, Torstenson. Sebald objects to the "egomaniacal viewpoint", perhaps on the basis that this amounts to a projection of his protagonist's subjectivity onto the destruction, the attempt to regain some sort of subjective control over the events unfolding, in what Adorno and Horkheimer might term the struggle to maintain the domination of nature. This process of mythologisation is an example of enlightenment returning to myth; the truth is evident to see everywhere the Germans look, but its reality is concealed by the process of domination for which everything outside of established thought is merely fiction. The scenes of destruction, "die jede Fassungsvermögen überstiegen" (*LL*, 30; "that exceeded anyone's capacity to grasp them" *NHD*, 24), are instead forced into the established paradigms of culture. Sebald especially objects to the narrative appeals made in *Die Kathedrale* to the tropes and plots common to Weimar culture and likens the plot to that of Thea von Harbou's script for the film *Metropolis*. Von Harbou was later to stay in Germany while her director husband, Fritz Lang, emigrated to Hollywood, and would later write scripts for the Nazi propaganda studios. The derivation of images, plotline and characterisation from a cultural stock that formed part of the building blocks of the Nazi state inevitably corrupt any attempts made by de Mendelssohn to accurately portray the catastrophe and the consequences are clear to

Sebald in the cringe-worthy love story between the protagonist and a maria-figure, Karena, who is Jewish, which indulges in “*erzdeutschem Rassenkitsch*” (*LL*, 63; “ultra-German racial kitsch” *NHD*, 57).

Probably the most pervasive and problematic flaw in the literature of the bombings, for Sebald, is the irresistible urge to extract a life-affirming, or at least transcendent meaning to the experience from any representation of it. These abstractions are part of a strategy to incorporate the story of the bombings and the ruins into a history of ‘homogenous time’. Many examples are shot through with a metaphysics of survival that calls on the traditional cultural codes to validate it. Hermann Kasack’s death-world fantasy, *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom*, with its recourse to “den zweifelhaftesten Aspekten expressionistischer Phantasie” (*LL*, 55; “the most dubious aspects of expressionist fantasy” *NHD*, 48) is therefore “der Versuch einer Sinngebung des Sinnlosen” (*LL*, 55; “the attempt to make sense of the senseless” *NHD*, 49). Its setting in the ruins is merely the backdrop for “den übergeordneten Plan der Mythisierung einer in ihrer Rohform der Beschreibung sich verweigernden Wirklichkeit” (*LL*, 55; “the paramount plan, which is to mythologize a reality that in its raw form defies description” *NHD*, 48). In the earlier essay, Sebald identifies a tendency in Kasack’s work to “bury the ruins of the time under the lumber of an equally ruined culture once again.”<sup>23</sup> Hans-Erich Nossack’s *Nekyia* falls into “philosophischen Überhöhung und falschen Transzendenz” (“philosophical exaggeration and false notions of transcendence”) whilst striving for “den präsumtiven metaphysischen Sinn” (*LL*, 57; “the presumed metaphysical meaning” *NHD*, 51) of life in the ruins. Even *Der Untergang*, a work that Sebald finds in part praiseworthy, contains the sentiment that for the author, this represented a hopeful new beginning:

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<sup>23</sup> Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 75.

In view of the utter catastrophe there seems to be something scandalous about the ‚feeling of happiness‘ that he experiences on the drive ‚towards the dead city‘ as something ‚true and imperative‘, the need ‚to cry out rejoicing: now, at last, real life begins.<sup>24</sup>

Sebald chose to publish *Luftkrieg und Literatur* alongside an essay on the writer Alfred Andersch, a respected author of the postwar period who styled himself as an inner émigré. In the essay, Sebald denounces Andersch’s image as a moral authority on the past on the basis of his collaboration with the fascist regime; Andersch applied to join the Reichschriftskammer, and divorced his German-Jewish wife in order to be eligible. Though Andersch is an extreme case, the lengths gone to by the writers of the postwar era to abstract the reality of the national catastrophe are for Sebald bound up in the national impulse to expunge the collective “Schande” in the interests of restoring normality:

Für die überwiegende Mehrzahl der während des Dritten Reichs in Deutschland gebliebenen Literaten war die Redefinition ihres Selbstverständnisses nach 1945 ein dringlicheres Geschäft als die Darstellung der reale Verhältnisse, die sie umgaben. (*LL*, 7)

To the overwhelming majority of the writers who stayed on in Germany in the Third Reich, the redefinition of their idea of themselves after 1945 was a more urgent business than the depiction of the real conditions surrounding them.

(*NHD*, ix)

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

The overriding impulse to look forward and establish a legitimate aesthetic, culture and language took precedence over any confrontation with the ruins. The practices employed by these writers, contrary to their narrative intent, for Sebald de-legitimizes their efforts and establishes them within a cultural paradigm that had more in common with the recent past than any positive future.



## 5. Traces of Natural History: Böll, Nossack, Kluge, Fichte, Ledig

The responses to Sebald's lectures in the press, as I will discuss in chapter 6, largely debated the ethics and politics of a memory of the German experience of the war that positions them as victims and as such classed *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as the attempt to intervene as a voice speaking for change. However, the context of the essay as a piece of literature and literary criticism became lost to the interest in its subject matter. In short, all the talk was about the *Luftkrieg* at the expense of the *Literatur*. In his analysis of Sebald's relation to the revolutionary philosophy of Walter Benjamin, Santner is sceptical about the potential for any messianic intervention in history in Sebald's work:

Sebald's project is a literary one, not a political or even an ethical one in any straightforward sense. Whatever he achieves unfolds within the framework of an aesthetic experience that, although it may have political, ethical and even religious meanings and consequences, is an intervention in the world in only a very limited and particular sense.<sup>1</sup>

Although *Luftkrieg und Literatur* does explore the situation of postwar Germany and offer thoughts on the choices it has made and their consequences, it does not intend to intervene in the present, nor even believe that this is possible. As Helmut Schmitz writes in relation to *Austerlitz*, "the salvaging power of allegory remains foreclosed after the Holocaust. What remains is only the melancholic gaze at a destroyed world"<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Santner, p. 134-135.

<sup>2</sup> Helmut Schmitz, *On Their Own Terms: The Legacy of National Socialism in Post-1990 German Fiction* (Birmingham: Uni Birmingham Press, 2004), p. 308.

theories regarding literature put forward in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* are relevant to this framework of aesthetic experience above and beyond their relevance to political debates.

Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of Sebald's essay is its contribution to Sebald's framework of aesthetic experience with its attempt to define a viable form of literary representation of the bombings that can remove itself from the ethical categories of victim and perpetrator and allow the catastrophe itself to be the subject of history. It is the search for a means of representing what I have called a non-subjective memory of the event, one that places the Germans in the position of object rather than subject of history and whose materials are not the testimony of the witnesses but the spectral remnants that form the index of natural history. *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is structured around this task: the first section centres on Sebald's frustrated attempts to implement his usual bricolage of remnants from the documents and sources of history which are thwarted by the abstractions and clichés that hide the degradation he feels must have been all pervasive. This frustration is summed up at the end of the first part by the experience of Solly Zuckerman, who was charged with reporting on the conditions in the ruined cities but found that he was so arrested by the sights there that he was never able to find the words to describe it, leaving only a title with no content: "On The Natural History of Destruction." The absent report comes to signify the core subject of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*: the unwritten natural history of destruction. Part II of the essay begins with the question "womit hätte eine Naturgeschichte der Zerstörung einsetzen müssen?" (LL, 40; "How ought such a natural history of destruction to begin?" NHD, 33) and sets about piecing together fragments of evidence that might answer that question. The carefully selected excerpts from literary works are chosen for their particular gaze upon the fires and ruins: one that can reveal their natural historical truth

without falsely imposing symbolic meaning onto their memory nor any positive message of hope. In this chapter I will attempt to define the parameters of a natural history of destruction by exploring the features of the texts that Sebald selects for (qualified) praise in his essay, tracing links between their technique and Sebald's own in terms of narrative strategy and the aspects of the bombings on which their gaze rests. The second half of this chapter then offers a reading of a novel that does not feature in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Gert Ledig's *Vergeltung (Payback)* of 1956, arguing that it is an example of a text that comes close to Sebald's ideal of a natural history of destruction. The existence of this novel is often cited as evidence that can refute Sebald's theory of a taboo on representations of the bombings. However, I argue here that its complete rejection by the postwar German public only serves to support Sebald's theory that representations such as these were incommensurable with the postwar mindset.

### **The Synoptic and Artificial Gaze: Nossack, Böll, Fichte, Kluge**

The awareness of the complexity and delicacy of historical representation goes to the heart of Sebald's oeuvre, which as a whole could be considered as an extended meditation of the possibility of making the past accessible to the present. In particular, he is conscious that our default perspective when recalling past events is one that does not necessarily make them clear to us and that we must work against ourselves in order to truly remember, particularly in the case of events which expose the limits of our structures of meaning. In *Schwindel. Gefühle*, Mare Henri Beyle's experience of trying to remember what he has witnessed on the battlefield is an indication of this complexity:

Einmal besteht seine Vorstellung von der Vergangenheit aus nichts als grauen Feldern, dann wieder stößt er auf Bilder von solch ungewöhnlicher Deutlichkeit, daß er ihnen nicht glaubt trauen zu dürfen, beispielsweise auf dasjenige des Generals Marmont, den er in Martigny zur Linken des Wegs, auf welchem sich der Troß voranbewegte, in dem himmel- und königsblauen Kleid eines Staatsrats gesehen zu haben meint, und das er genau so, wie er uns versichert, immer noch sieht, wenn er, die Augen schließend, sich die Szene in Erinnerung ruft, obwohl Marmont ja damals, wie Beyle sehr wohl weiß, seine Generalsuniform und nicht das blaue Staatskleid getragen haben muß. (SG, 8-9)

At times his view of the past consists of nothing but grey patches, then at others images appear of such extraordinary clarity he feels he can scarce credit them – such as that of General Marmont, whom he believes he saw at Martigny to the left of the track along which the column was moving, clad in royal- and sky-blue robes of the councillor of State, an image which he still beholds precisely thus, Beyle assures us, whenever he closes his eyes and pictures that scene, although he is well aware that at that time Marmont must have been wearing his general's uniform not the blue robes of state (V, 5)

Beyle's recollection of the event applies symbols and meanings that make the General a clearer representative of the state, enhancing and falsifying the memory, as it were, in post-production. Our capacities for remembrance are subject to the demands of the event on our powers of representation, it seems, and in the case of events that challenge our powers, our capacities falter:

[...] daß er von der großen Anzahl der toten Pferde am Wegrand und von dem sonstigen Kriegsgerümpel, das die sich fortwindende Armee als ihre Spur hinterließ, derart betroffen gewesen sei, daß er von dem, was ihn seinerzeit mit Entsetzen erfüllte, inzwischen keinen genaueren Begriff mehr habe. Die Gewalt des Eindruckes hätte diesen selber, so käme es ihm vor, zunicht gemacht. (*SG*, 9)

He was so affected by the large number of dead horses lying by the wayside, and the other detritus of war the army left in its wake as it moved in a long-drawn-out file up the mountains, that he now has no clear idea whatsoever of the things he found so horrifying then. It seemed to him that his impressions had been erased by the very violence of their impact. (*V*, 5-6)

To try to counter this impact, Beyle recreates the scene artificially in a diagram. It is a birds-eye view map of the area and Beyle marks his position on it, as well as the positions of others. Thus he creates an image that is artificially broader in its perspective than a real memory would have been and it is only by falsifying his perspective in this way that he comes closer to recollecting the images that were so troubling. The inherent narrowness of perspective in a subjective memory can only provide a limited access to a moment in the past therefore. As Beyle notes, “es sei selbst da, wo man über lebensnähere Erinnerungsbilder verfüge, auf diese nur wenig Verlaß” (*SG*, 9-10; “even when the images supplied by memory are true to life, one can place little confidence in them” *V*, 7).

A true representation of any past event must therefore be able to shed this subjective quality that is bound by the limits of human perspective. For Sebald, this is the

value of a natural historical approach to recreating the past. In an interview he clarified the position of natural history thus:

Naturgeschichte [hat] keinen Sinn. Das ist nur etwas, was sich abspielt. Jede andere Form der Geschichte birgt in sich irgendwie eine Versuch, Sinn zu stiften [...] der naturgeschichtlichen Ablauf ist ja per Definition etwas, was völlig neutral ist, in das sich keinerlei Sinn heran projizieren lässt wenigstens von der heutigen Warte aus nicht.<sup>3</sup>

Natural history has no meaning. It's just something which happens. Every other form of history represents some sort of effort to create meaning [...] but the course of natural history is, per definition, absolutely neutral, and it is not possible to imbue it with any meaning, at least not from today's perspective.

[My translation]

The ability of natural history to resist the projection of meaning structures make it a doubly appropriate template for a representation of the bombings. Firstly, given the unsatisfactory nature of the vagaries and clichés inherent in the accounts Sebald has found thus far, it will provide access to the event that is fuller than any subjective memory can provide. Secondly, it will resist the application of symbolic or hopeful meaning onto the event that might provide the foundations for the rebuilt state.

With eye-witness accounts unreliable and historical works occupying a position that is too far above the devastation to really access it, literature presents itself as the viable method by which the natural history of destruction might be achieved. In his speech at the Stuttgart Literaturhaus, Sebald praised this capacity:

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<sup>3</sup> Andrea Köhler, 'Interview with W.G. Sebald', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 22nd November 1992, p. 52

There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts and over and above scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

The ability of literature to do this rests in the artificiality of its perspective, as demonstrated by Beyle's diagram. In *Die Ringe des Saturn* Sebald notes, in relation to the Waterloo Rotunda, that this "ist die Kunst der Repräsentation der Geschichte. Sie beruht auf einer Fälschung der Perspektive" (*RS*, 152; "this is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective" *RSat*, 125). This too is the pre-condition for a natural history of destruction:

Die Berichte einzelner Augenzeugen sind darum nur von bedingtem Wert und bedürfen der Ergänzung durch das, was sich erschließt unter einem synoptischen, künstlichen Blick. (*LL*, 33)

The accounts of individual eyewitnesses, therefore, are of only qualified value, and need to be supplemented by what a synoptic and artificial view reveals. (*NHD*, 26)

The practice of literary manipulation of the events is the only way to induce this synoptic and artificial gaze that can reveal natural history, and the extracts of writing Sebald analyses can be seen to employ this gaze, to a lesser or greater degree, with the resulting evocation of the breakdown of civilisation.

It is worth noting here that the works Sebald looks at are not considered complete examples of the natural history of destruction and the excerpts are carefully

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<sup>4</sup> Translated by Anthea Bell and published in *New Yorker*, December 20<sup>th</sup> 2004.

chosen but do not necessarily represent the whole. Hans-Erich Nossack's *Der Untergang* is used by Sebald to extract details from the ruins that reflect natural history, and Sebald praises the "unprätentiösen Sachlichkeit" (*LL*, 59; "unpretentious objectivity" *NHD*, 53) of his gaze upon the ruins over passages of the work. The main strength of Nossack's objective style of reporting rather than fictionalising, is that it takes him, for the most part, beyond a consideration of the effects of the firestorm on his own subjectivity or those around him and thus allows his gaze to settle on the devastation itself:

Insgesamt geht es ihm hier doch in erster Linie um die schiere Faktizität, um die Jahreszeit und das Wetter, den Standpunkt des Beobachters, das mahlende Geräusch der sich nähernden Geschwader, den roten Feuerschein am Horizont, um den körperlichen und seelischen Zustand der aus der Stadt Geflohenen, um die ausgebrannten Kulissen, die Schornsteine, die seltsamerweise stehen geblieben sind, die Wäsche, die auf dem Gestell vor dem Küchenfenster trocknet, um eine zerrissene Gardine, die aus einer leeren Veranda weht, um ein Wohnzimmersofa, mit gehäkelter Decke und die ungezählten anderen, für immer verlorenen Sachen und den Schutt, unter dem sie begraben sind, um das grauenvolle neue Leben, das sich darunter regt, und die plötzliche Gier nach Menschen nach Parfüm. (*LL*, 57-58)

On the whole he is primarily concerned with plain facts: the season of the year, the weather, the observer's viewpoint, the drone of the approaching squadrons, the red firelight on the horizon, the physical and mental condition of refugees from the cities, the burnt-out scenery, chimneys still curiously standing, washing put out to dry on a frame outside a kitchen window, a torn net curtain blowing from an empty veranda, a living-room sofa with a crochet cover,



countess other objects lost forever, the rubble burying them and the dreadful  
new life moving beneath it, people's sudden craving for perfume. (*NHD*, 51-52)

By allowing his perspective to be reduced to this index of spectral materiality, Nossack offers some insight into the breakdown of civilisation that has occurred and seems to be sensitive to the full implication of the scene before him, remarking that he feels the imperative to record what he has seen as soon as possible, “da es der Vernunft niemals möglich sein wird, das, was damals geschah, als Wirklichkeit zu begreifen und dem Gedächtnis einzuordnen” (“For reason will never be capable of comprehending as a reality or preserving in memory what happened there.”<sup>5</sup>). His perspective allows the undeadness of the city to appear to him and the familiar markers of civilised life suddenly appear absurdly redundant:

And why are the chimneys still there, meaningless and without smoke? But there's no stove left. What did we cook for? And no beds, either! Why did we sleep? Why did we sustain ourselves? why did we collect provisions and save money?<sup>6</sup>

The material world as it now appears has dropped out of the structures of meaning that it once carried, so that “what surrounded us did not remind us in any way of what was lost”.<sup>7</sup> Once able to recognise the undeadness of the remnants around him, Nossack

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<sup>5</sup> Hans-Erich Nossack, *Der Untergang: Hamburg 1943*, in *Die Erzählungen*, ed. by Christof Schmid (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), p. 7. In English as *The End, Hamburg 1943*. trans. Joel Agee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Nossack, , p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

realises that this is a moment of natural history and that the city has dropped out of autonomous history, that they are “outside of time”<sup>8</sup> and “no longer have a past”<sup>9</sup> and it is uncertain whether they will regain their mastery over time: “For what we have gained and what has changed is this: we have become present. We have slipped away from the precincts of time.”<sup>10</sup>. Sebald recognises the difficulty Nossack seems to encounter by adopting this narrative stance, which he does not manage to sustain throughout, as one that is inherently felt by any writer of the time trying to convey the truth of the devastation:

Der Ton, in dem hier berichtet wird, ist der des Boten in der Tragödie. Nossack weiß, daß man solche Boten oft hängt. Eingebaut in sein Memorandum zum Untergang Hamburgs ist die Parabel von einem Menschen, der behauptet, erzählen zu müssen, wie es war, und der von seinen Zuhörern erschlagen wird, weil er eine tödliche Kälte verbreitet. (*LL*, 58)

The narrative tone here is that of the messenger in classical tragedy. Nossack knows that such messengers are often strung up for their pains. Inserted in his account of the fall of Hamburg is the parable of a man who claims that he must speak of what actually happened, and whose audience kills him for the deathly chill he spreads. Those who can salvage some metaphysical meaning from the destruction are usually spared such a wretched fate. (*NHD*, 52)

The reaction of the audience in the parable finds an echo in the rejection of Heinrich Böll’s first novel, *Der Engel Schwieg* (*The Silent Angel*), written in 1950 but rejected by

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Böll's publishers and left unpublished until 1992.<sup>11</sup> If Nossack, at least in part, assumes the role of the melancholy messenger, then Böll's novel creates a protagonist who is the melancholy explorer of the ruined world and is temporarily crippled by a feeling of not being able to salvage a life from this new form of existence. For Sebald, it is the only work written at the time that conveys the bleakness of the ruined world:

Von sämtlichen Ende der vierziger Jahre entstandenen literarischen Werken ist es eigentlich nur Heinrich Bölls Roman *Der Engel schwieg*, der eine annähernde Vorstellung vermittelt von der Tiefe des Entsetzens, das damals jeden zu erfassen drohte, der wirklich sich umsah in den Ruinen. (LL, 18)

Of all the literary works written at the end of the 1940s, probably only Heinrich Böll's *Der Engel Schwieg* gives some idea of the depths of horror then threatening to overwhelm anyone who really looked at the ruins around them. (NHD, 10)

Sebald is particularly struck by the darkness that underpins Böll's aesthetic in the novel in details such as the black, sticky blood spewing from the dying Frau Gompertz, a darkness that symbolises:

[...] der gegen den Überlebenswillen gerichteten *acedia cordis*, jener fahlen, nicht mehr zu behebenden Depression, in die die Deutschen angesichts eines solchen Endes eigentlich hätten verfallen müssen. (LL, 18)

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<sup>11</sup> Heinrich Böll, *Der Engel Schwieg* (Hamburg: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1992), in English as *The Silent Angel*. trans. Breon Mitchell (London: Andre Deutsch).

the despair that militates against the will to survive, the bleak depression that refuses to lift and to which the Germans might have been expected to succumb in view of such a horrific end. (*NHD*, 11)

Böll's protagonist, Hans, is returning to the bombed out city from the front to seek out the wife of a dead comrade, and through his eyes we are offered an unflinching gaze onto the ruins and the creaturely existence of those who are living amongst them. The novel opens with his descent into a dark cellar with slimy steps that feels like "den Boden eines Aquariums" ("the bottom of an aquarium"), covered in "unkenntliche Dreck" ("unidentifiable debris"). For much of the novel Hans' thoughts and words are reduced to the instinctive, primitive demands of physical survival, reduced by hunger so that he can only repeat the word "Brot" ("bread") to himself and to those he meets,<sup>12</sup> later exchanging the opportunity to re-establish a now worthlessly defined social identity by buying bread with money that was supposed to buy an ID card. The fact that Hans used to be a bookseller serves only to heighten his unsuitability for this new world of primitive survival and the hopelessness of his situation is symbolised by the fact that for the first half of the novel he is wearing a dead man's uniform, adorned with medals and symbols that are entirely without meaning.

Despite being sensitive to the bleakness of the ruined world, however, Böll's novel cannot sustain a true "synoptic and artificial" gaze because the narrative structure is anchored in his protagonist's subjectivity, through which Böll eventually draws back from the horror of the ruins to offer a glimpse of hope in the possibility of human love and communion to overcome the devastation. Hans meets Regina, who is a widow living

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 5 and p.4.

alone after her baby had been killed. For no reason other than human compassion and the need for human contact she takes him in and allows him to share her dark, grubby flat where she has blocked out the view of the rubble from the windows. This connection between two human beings proves to be the salvation for both of them, and as their affection for each other grows, they slowly re-enter the familiar world, even if they find it a painful experience. Hans' realisation that in the connection with Regina he can envisage a future again inspires him to see his world differently, with colour and light:

Er stand auf, ging leise zur Tür und machte sie vorsichtig auf. Aus der Küche kam Licht. Der alte blaue Mantel, den sie vor die Scheibe gehängt hatte, ließ an den löcherigen Stellen große gelbe Kreise von Licht sehen, und die Strahlen fielen in den Schmutz der Diele; irgendwo blinkte die Schneide es Beiles, und er sah die dunklen Holzklötze, deren Schnittflächen gelblich leuchteten. Er ging langsam näher und sah sie jetzt, und es fiel ihm ein, daß er sie noch nie so gesehen hatte. [...] Plötzlich wußte er, daß er sie sein Leben lang sehen würde. [...] diese Erkenntnis berührte ihn sehr tief und schmerzlich, und er spürte etwas Unerbittliches, es war, als habe jemand in eine verborgene Stelle seines Inneren kaltes Wasser gegossen von jener Sorte, wie es die Zahnärzte in die angebohrten Zähne schütten; es war sehr wohltuend und zugleich schrecklich.

He stood up, walked quietly over to the door and opened it cautiously. Light was coming in from the kitchen. The old, blue coat that she had draped over the window-pane let in large, yellow beams of light in through its tattered holes, and the rays fell onto the debris in the hall: the axe blade gleamed somewhere and he saw the dark logs, their split surfaces glowing yellowy. He approached

slowly and now he could see her. He realised he had never seen her like this before. [...] Suddenly he knew that he would see her his whole life long [...] this realisation moved him deeply and painfully, and he sensed something inexorable, as if someone were pouring cold water in a hidden part of his inner self, like a dentist rinsing a tooth he'd just been drilling on. It was both a pleasure and a shock.<sup>13</sup>

The couple engage in an old-fashioned style courtship and when Hans attends mass not long after, and feels “etwas wie Frieden und Freude” (“something akin to peace and joy”<sup>14</sup>). Böll’s novel maintains a belief in the possibilities of love and religion to overcome the catastrophe and perhaps this is the reason that Sebald offers only qualified praise for the novel.

If the employment of a fictional subjectivity through which to gaze upon the ruins proves itself unable to sustain the artificial gaze, then the passage selected by Sebald from Hubert Fichte’s *Detlevs Imitationen >Grünspan<* (*Detlev’s Imitations*<sup>15</sup>) is successful for its use of an opposing strategy and one which has much in common with Sebald’s own, the merging of real documents into fiction. Fichte’s book is set in 1968, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Hamburg firestorm. The excerpt that attracts Sebald in particular is one in which the central figure Jäcki, while researching the Hamburg raid, comes across the genuine notes made by a Dr. Siegfried Gräff on his forensic examinations of burnt bodies. The value of the use of the passage is two-fold for Sebald’s natural history of destruction.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 137-38 and p. 124-125.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 160 and p. 145.

<sup>15</sup> Hubert Fichte, *Detlevs Imitationen >Grünspan<* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1971), in English as *Detlev’s Imitations*. trans. Martin Chalmers (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1991).

Firstly, the documentary nature of the material, its inherent authenticity, resists any abstraction. As a real historical remnant, Fichte is able to juxtapose the undeniable truth of the document with snippets of conversations and things Jäckli has heard in his efforts to understand the firestorm, tiny scraps of knowledge that intermingle as he reads the pages from Gräf. The result is a picture of the struggle to come to any coherent picture of what happened and a demonstration of the need for a multifaceted memory. Sebald remarks that the informative value of a document like this is one “vor denen jede Fiktion verblaßt” (*LL*, 66; “before which all fiction pales” *NHD*, 61) and Fichte’s passage demonstrates this ably by contrasting the irresistible horror of Gräf’s soberly written notes with the flourish of descriptions such as “the city was burning well as a really brilliant jewel of flame”<sup>16</sup>.

The second element of the passage that appeals to Sebald is what we learn about Dr. Gräf’s attitude to his work. Placed here in isolation from any context in Fichte’s work of fiction, the incongruity of them exposes the brutality at the heart of his activity that is masked by the clinical, scientific context in which he is performing his gruesome examinations. The proposed benefits of his research is unclear and the reader begins to suspect that the motives are perhaps darker:

Köpfe oder Extremitäten konnten je nach der Trockenheit der Gelenkverbindungen vielfach mühelos abgebrochen werden, wofern sie überhaupt noch im Laufe der Bergung und des Transportes den Zusammenhang mit dem Körper bewahrt hatten. Insoweit die Körperhöhlen nicht schon durch Zerstörung der Decken frei vorlagen, bedurfte es der Knochenschere oder der Säge, um die erhärtete Haut zu durchtrennen. Verfestigung und Schrumpfung

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 39 and p. 53.

der inneren Organe verhinderten Messerschnitte; vielfach konnten die einzelnen Organe, besonders die Brustorgane auch mit anhängender Trachea, Aorta und Karotiden, mit Zwerchfell, Leber und Nieren als Ganzes herausgebrochen werden. Organe, die sich in fortgeschrittener Autolyse befanden oder durch die Hitzewirkung vollkommen durchhärtet waren, waren mit dem Messer meist schwer zu durchtrennen; faulende, weich-feste, lehmartige, schmierige oder zundrig-bröckelige Gewebsmassen oder Organrückstände wurden zerbrochen, zerrissen, zerkrümelt oder zerpfückt.

Depending on the dryness of the joints, heads and extremities could be broken off without difficulty, if they remained attached to the body at all in the course of recovery and transport. Insofar as body cavities were not already exposed through destruction of the tegument the bone scissors or saw were required, in order to cut the hardened skin. Solidification and shrinkage of the inner organs, especially the chest organs, could be broken out as a whole with windpipe, aorta and carotid artery, with diaphragm, liver or kidneys adhering. Organs which were in an advance state of autolysis or had been completely hardened by the effects of heat were usually difficult to cut with the knife; decomposing, cheesy, clay-like buttery or charred-crumblly masses of tissue or organ residues were broken, torn, crumbled or plucked apart.<sup>17</sup>

The purpose of Dr. Gräf's activity does not seem to go beyond the breakdown and mutilation of human bodies, both physically in the breaking off of limbs and cutting open of organs, and linguistically in the terms he uses. The result is a picture of complete

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 35 and p. 35-36.



de-humanisation of the body and we begin to suspect that the autopsy is less a means to an end than a means in itself. In this it recalls Sebald's description of Rembrandt's painting of an autopsy in *Die Ringe des Saturn* that I discussed in chapter 2, in which he suspected that the dissection of the thief's hand was a sign that archaic violence and scientific progress were mutually motivations for the experiment. In this passage from Fichte we are shown both the vulnerability of the human body in its new state as rubble, and the speed with which the values of enlightened progress have been re-established to cause further violence to the body. Sebald sees this as a view "in den Abgrund der gegen alles gewappneten Seele" (*LL*, 67; "the view into the abyss of a mind armed against all contingencies" *NHD*. 61).

The work that probably best encompasses the capacity of the synoptic, artificial gaze to produce natural history of Sebald in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is Alexander Kluge's *Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt (The Airraid on Halberstadt)*.<sup>18</sup> Sebald devotes several pages of the essay to a summary of the text, which in many respects informs his own method and attitude to the representation of the bombings. With its montage of fictional fragments, photographs and non-fictional material it creates a narrative perspective that manages to be close and yet distant from its subject. In the 1982 essay Sebald describes this technique more fully than in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*:

In precisely the opposite way from Nossack, Kluge's retrospective presentation of what happened follows not what the author saw with his own eyes, or what he may still remember of it, but events peripheral to his own existence past and present. For the aim of the text as a whole, as we shall see, depends on the fact that experience in any real sense was actually impossible in view of the

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<sup>18</sup> In Alexander Kluge, *Neue Geschichten. Hefte 1-18, "Unheimlichkeit Der Zeit"* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 33-111.

overwhelming speed and totality of the destruction; it could be acquired only indirectly, by learning about it later.<sup>19</sup>

Sebald offers a quite extensive analysis of this text isolating two aspects of it in particular. Firstly, the distance enabled by the narrative strategy allows Kluge a tone of detached irony which elucidates the discrepancy between the attitudes and behaviour of the people he describes and the situation in which they find themselves. Frau Schrader, the manageress of the local cinema, is vexed by the mess caused when a bomb hits the cinema in the middle of a screening:

Im Kellergang lagen etwa 6 Toten mit einem Strahl Heizwasser übergossen. Frau Schrader wollte wenigstens hier Ordnung schaffen, legte die gekochten und – entweder durch diesen Vorgang oder schon durch die Sprengwirkung – unzusammenhängenden Körperteile in die Waschkessel der Waschküche. Sie wollte an irgendeiner verantwortlichen Stelle Meldung erstatten, fand aber den Abend über niemand, der eine Meldung entgegennahm.<sup>20</sup>

In the cellar corridor there lay about 6 bodies which had had hot water poured over them. Frau Schwader wanted to create a semblance of order here, at least, so she put the boiled and disconnected body-parts – the result of the boiling or the effect of the explosion – into the wash boiler in the laundry room. She wanted to pass on a report to the relevant authorities, but couldn't reach anyone that evening. [My translation.]

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<sup>19</sup> Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 90.

<sup>20</sup> Kluge, p. 36.

The text consistently shows in this manner the extent to which, in the face of a complete breakdown of civilisation, the inhabitants are completely unequipped to abandon their adherence to structures of behaviour and meaning. Secondly, this inability to deviate from the pre-ordained paths of behaviour is shown to be the pre-requisite for the re-occurrence in history of systematic and technologically organised destruction, as demonstrated by the non-fictional material from an interview with an Allied officer, who explains that such expensively produced items could not go to waste.<sup>21</sup>

Where Kluge differs from Sebald's view of history as demonstrated by the bombings is in the potential for hope of resisting future disasters, which Sebald deems to be irrevocably lost:

Kaum von der Hand zu weisen ist andererseits, daß die planmäßige Form der Zerstörung, die Kluge herleitet aus der Entwicklung der industriellen Produktionsverhältnisse, das Prinzip Hoffnung kaum mehr zu rechtfertigen scheint. (*LL*, 70)

It is difficult to dismiss the idea that the systematic destruction Kluge sees arising from the development of the means and modes of industrial production hardly seems to justify the principle of hope. (*NHD*, 65)

The natural history of destruction, it seems, for all its efforts to make the true violence of the past visible to us, does not attempt to intervene to prevent further catastrophe. The melancholy gaze can merely stare, horrified.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

In the remainder of this chapter I will examine a text that did not feature in Sebald's original lectures and whose existence is sometimes cited as the evidence for the flaw in Sebald's diagnosis of a taboo. However, Gert Ledig's unique use of the synoptic, artificial perspective in his account of a bombing creates a natural history of destruction that encompasses many of the features of Nossack, Böll, Fichte and especially Kluge.

### **The Exception that Proves the Rule: Gert Ledig's *Vergeltung***

First published in 1956, Gert Ledig's novel *Vergeltung* (*Payback*)<sup>22</sup> is an unremittingly brutal account of sixty-nine minutes of an Allied air raid on a German city towards the end of the war. He experienced the war as a young Wehrmacht soldier at Stalingrad, then later, when wounded, in Munich in the midst of the bombing raids. Following the success of his first novel, *Stalinorgel* (*The Stalin Organ*, 1955),<sup>23</sup> a similarly stark narration of warfare on the Eastern Front, Ledig had been celebrated and invited to meetings of the Group 47. The novel *Vergeltung*, by contrast, was uniformly dismissed by critics as everything from unrealistic and sensationalist to badly written and ungrammatical. It achieved none of the commercial success of the first novel and sank, along with Ledig's literary career, into obscurity.

His novel of the bombings was almost entirely absent from the postwar canon until 1999 and Sebald therefore made no mention of it in his original lectures, but gave it brief yet strong praise in his postscript to the published version as a "gegen die letzten Illusionen gerichtetes Buch" (*LL*, 101; "book that attacks the final illusions" *NHD*, 95) and that threatened to break through the "*cordon sanitaire* [...] mit dem die Gesellschaft

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<sup>22</sup> Gert Ledig, *Vergeltung* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1999). English translations are from, *Payback* (London, Granta, 2003). Page numbers will be given in parentheses.

<sup>23</sup> Gert Ledig, *die Stalinorgel* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2003).

die Todeszonen tatsächlich entstandener dystopischer Einbrüche umgibt” (*LL*, 101; “*cordon sanitaire* cast by society around the death zones of the dystopian incursions that actually occurred” *NHD*, 97).

The novel describes sixty-nine minutes of a bombing raid in an unnamed German city in 1944. The narrative shifts frequently between simultaneous episodes occurring in different parts of the city, in the air and underground. It features a disparate group of largely unnamed people, identified usually only by military rank or social position. The reader is given only scant detail about these people which, coupled with the speed of the narrative shifts, precludes any real empathetic identification with them. The detail with which the scenes of destruction are described is sharp and unremitting and the narrative voice restricts itself to raw sensory description. It is this peculiarly constructed narrative voice, his “synoptic, artificial” gaze, that is Ledig’s most powerful tool and that makes *Vergeltung* a viable example of a natural history of destruction.

To better understand the nature of the narrative voice both Ledig and Sebald employ to write about the bombings, it is helpful to appropriate some of the terms of phenomenology. When employing the phenomenological gaze towards an object, we are required to suspend our intentionalities, that is, the conscious relationship we have with that object.<sup>24</sup> By doing this, we suspend our “default attitude” to the object, and can move into the “phenomenological attitude,” from which we can focus reflectively on everything in the default attitude. The aim is to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, such as those drawn from cultural and religious traditions and protocols, even common sense, in order to allow the world to

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<sup>24</sup> This is not to be confused with “intention” as in the purpose we have in mind when we act. The phenomenological notion of intentionality refers to knowledge rather than action. See Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge, CUP, 2000), 8.

appear to us as it “really is”.<sup>25</sup> When we move into this attitude, we become “like detached observers of a passing scene or like spectators at a game” and contemplate the involvements we have with the world as well as the world in its human involvement.<sup>26</sup>

A natural history of destruction would require any narrator to contemplate the violence in this way and this is the value of Ledig’s narrative voice, resulting in what Gregor Streim has called a “distant proximity,”<sup>27</sup> which is precisely the goal of the phenomenological gaze: the suspension of conscious involvement with the world allows us to become datives of truth *to whom* the world can appear, enabling us to get closer to the object we are contemplating. It is the empathetic distance from the scene in Ledig that enables the “truth” of the violence and the state to which the world has been brought to emerge from the behind the smokescreen.

The language of this phenomenology is accordingly stripped of extraneous embellishment and reference to external categories, giving the violence the space to become the subject of the scene:

Neben der Mutter stand eine Frau und brannte wie eine Fackel. Sie schrie. Die Mutter blickte sie hilflos an, dann brannte sie selbst. Von den Beinen herauf über die Unterschenkel bis zum Leib. [...] Eine Explosionswelle barst an der Friedhofsmauer entlang, und in diesem Augenblick brannte auch die Straße.

Der Asphalt, die Steine, die Luft. (*Ver*, 10).

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<sup>25</sup> See Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London, Routledge, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Sokolowski, p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> See Gregor Streim, “Der Bombenkrieg als Sensation und als Dokumentation: Gert Ledigs Roman *Vergeltung* und die Debatte um W.G. Sebalds *Luftkrieg und Literatur*” in Heinz-Peter Preusser ed., *Krieg in den Medien* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2005), 293-312, here p. 308.

Next to the mother stood a woman burning like a torch. She was screaming. The mother looked on helpless, then she too was on fire. It raced up her legs, up her thighs, to her body... a shock wave exploded along the graveyard wall and in that moment the road burned too. Asphalt, stones, air. That was what happened in the graveyard (*P*, 2).

Here, as throughout the novel, the bodies of the women are equal components of the destruction as the road, the wall, even the air. The people who feature, like all objects of the narrative, become nothing more than datives of the destruction which is, rather than the people, the subject of the narrative. Both before and after death, humans feature as nothing more than bodies *to whom* violence is done:

Der MG-Kolben glit dem Turmschützen aus der Schulter, zerschlug ihm den Kiefer. Fast schmerzlos verlor er dreißig Zähne. Ein Explosivgeschoß zerriß ihm die Brust. Es fetzte seine Lunge aus den Rippen. Die Wunde klaffte vom rechten Schlüsselbein bis zur linken Brustwarze. Zwei Liter Blut brachen hervor (*Ver*, 28).

The butt of the machine gun slipped from the turret-gunner's shoulder, smashing into his jaw. Almost painlessly he lost thirty teeth. An explosive round ripped through his chest and shredded his lung through his ribs. The wound gaped from his right collar-bone to his left nipple. Half a gallon of blood gushed out (*Pk*, 20).

The separation of parts of the body from its whole is a recurrent theme, making abstract objects out of previously living beings: “Er griff in warmes Fleisch. Ein Stück der Windröhre geriet zwischen seine Finger“ (*Ver*, 29), “He clutched warm flesh. He was holding a piece of windpipe between his fingers” (*P*, 21). Such sensory experiences are not given further context, since it is to these that the world is reduced. It is only with sight, smell, taste and sensation, rather than with reason, that the destruction is represented.

Despite this, the narrative voice is what would traditionally be classified as omniscient. The book has a narrative structure that is spatial rather than temporal, relying on the omniscience of the narrative voice, which can move freely around simultaneously occurring events. Nevertheless, this omniscience is a limited one. While it is privy to some of the thoughts of the people featured, it never takes us into their heads, always keeping its distance by reporting isolated thoughts: “er dachte: Mein Großvater hat Baumwolle gepflückt” (*Ver*, 14; “He thought: My grandfather picked cotton” *P*, 7). Although it is made certain that the narration is of a past event, these events appear to the reader in real time, or even in slow-motion. What we witness as readers is only of the now, restricted to the current moment, with little in the way of temporal context. The narrative does not employ flashbacks or quicken the pace, as would usually be the strategy of the omniscient narrator.

This limited omniscience provides the crucial “synoptic” element of the natural-historical narrative Sebald demands. Only a narrator who is omniscient in the sense of being able to see more than a normal human being will be able to tell the true story of the bombings, which is not of life and survival, but of death and violence. The majority of the people featured in *Vergeltung* do not live past the end of the narrative and, since it is



their deaths rather than their lives which are the subject of the novel, only a narrator of this kind could fulfill the task. Furthermore, it is only from this position that the aim of a natural history of destruction, as Sebald dictates, can be achieved; if the Germans are to be written as object rather than subject of history, the narrative voice must be able to transcend the confines of human concerns. That Ledig sets out to do just that is made clear in the very opening scene of the novel, which describes a bomb falling on a graveyard and blowing up a pile of child corpses. This, as in other episodes, is an incident that is not witnessed by any living person in the text. The narration is thus from the outset placed outside of human memory and is able to make the violence itself the subject of the narrative: as Susanne Vees-Gulani has put it, “the true hero of the novel is not one of the characters but destruction itself.”<sup>28</sup> The occasional autobiographical excerpts that permeate the text represent the attempt by a human, subjective narrative to break through and impose itself. However, amid the narrative of violence, the scant, disjointed details about their lives that the characters offer from beyond the grave now sound hollow and inconsequential, ultimately failing to regain control of the narrative and extract empathy from the reader.

Ledig’s narrative strategy foretells Sebald’s own in the narrative passages of *Lufkrieg und Literatur*. Compare, for instance: “Überall lagen grauenvoll entstellte Leiber. Auf manchen flackerten noch die bläulichen Phosphorflämmchen, andere waren braun oder purpurfarben gebraten und zusammengeschnurrt auf ein Drittel ihrer natürlichen Größe“ (*LL*, 34; “Horribly disfigured corpses lay everywhere. Bluish little phosphorous flames flickered around them; others had been roasted blue or purple and

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<sup>28</sup> Susanne Vees-Gulani, *Trauma and Guilt: Literature of Wartime Bombing in Germany* (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2003), p. 90.

reduced to a third of their size” *NHD*, 28); or “in den Straßenwaggons schmolzen die Glasscheiben, der Zuckervorrat kochte in den Kellern der Bäckereien. Die aus ihren Unterständen Geflohenen sanken unter grotesken Verrenkungen in den aufgelösten, dicke Blasen werfenden Asphalt” (LL, 34; “The glass in the tramcar windows melted; stocks of sugar boiled in the bakery cellars. Those who had fled their shelters sank, in grotesque contortions, in the thick bubbles thrown up by the melting asphalt” *NHD*, 27-28). It is a form that opens the way for a lifting of the taboo Sebald identifies, as Ledig’s “distant proximity” exposes the evidence of the futility of the effort to dominate nature: Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the effort to demystify the world drives enlightened thought to pull everything inside into a condition of “pure immanence” and that anything that cannot be brought inside of thought is mere fiction. To demystify the world outside of thought, the subjective must be projected onto it. By reducing the world to physicality, Ledig shows us how the violence of the bombings is exemplary of the futility of this endeavour: experience is wrenched out of thought and the world is mediated solely through the body. The body is the mediating force between man and nature that cannot be mastered. It is repeatedly shown to be vulnerable, fallible and totally subject to the demands of the physical environment. Whether by a rotting, severed hand (*Ver*, 10/*P*, 2), or spilt blood seeping back into the earth or evaporating into the air (*Ver*, 82/*P*, 78), the body is shown continuously to be a component of the natural world. Whilst death is often depicted as painful but swift, ongoing suffering is a result of the physical demands of the body for air, water or defecation. Even emotions are expressed purely physically: shame, guilt and horror are not described explicitly, but are signaled by vomiting (*Ver*, *P*, 11); fear is not a reasoned reaction to danger, but merely a complex system of actions in the brain (*Ver*, 50/*P*, 45). Even without the incursions of violence such as this, we are

reminded that the body is always slowly decaying by Dessy Cheovski's worries about looking old (*Ver*, 25/*P*, 19). Ultimately, despite the efforts to the contrary, people are shown to have no control even over their own death: a man who sinks into burning tar does not die "nach einer Todesart, die bereits erfunden war. Er wurde gegrillt" (*Ver*, 128; "any manner of death that was ever invented. He was grilled" *P*, 125).

In this remystified, pre-enlightened world, people are returned to just the archaic state that they most fear. Excrement and urine permeate the burning city (*Ver*, 161/*P*, 161) in which people are losing the battle to retain human dignity: "ein Kanonier stand im Graben. Breitbeinig. Die Hose geöffnet, griff er zwischen die Beine. Seine Hand angelte Kot hervor und schmierte ihn an die Grabenwand" (*Ver*, 153; "A gunner stood in the trench, legs splayed. With his trousers open he reached between his legs. His hand fished out shit and smeared it on the wall of the trench" *P*, 154). The gunner is called a "pig" by his officer in just one of numerous incidences of people becoming animals. Similarly, Sebald's descriptions show a regressed people, for whom the distinctions between animal and human, natural and manmade, interior and exterior have become blurred. Life in the ruins is mere existence governed by the struggle to survive in the natural world.

In this exposed world all civilized and moral structures that might otherwise give comfort are shown to be illusory. Like Sebald, Ledig recognizes the absurdity of the supposed German need for order in the face of the downfall of the familiar. Sebald mentions, with some disgust, the tendency for orchestras to hold concerts in the ruined halls immediately after bombings so that the population might continue to uphold "höheren kulturellen Rituale" (*LL*, 49; "higher cultural rituals" *NHD*, 44). In *Vergeltung*, the Cheovski couple, awaiting death wearing their best clothes in their newly cleaned

apartment, are exemplary of this tendency, even discussing where best they should wait (*P*, 17). Instrumental logic, as well as the desperate attempt to hold onto it, is showcased as having become absurd: “‘Vor einem Angriff soll man nicht essen.’ Er fügte hinzu: ‘Mein Vater hat gesagt, wegen der Bauchschüsse’” (*Ver*, 21; “‘You shouldn’t eat before an air raid.’ He added: ‘My dad said it was in case you got hit in the belly’” *P*, 14).

Categories that are usually clearly defined melt away into an indistinct amalgam of human behavior. Innocence and guilt, for example, are not mutually exclusive as many of the people featured repeatedly cross the boundaries of victim and perpetrator: Maria Weinert, for instance, has drunk champagne sent from the conquered France, and is implicated in the murder of an invalid woman to save herself, but is later subject to a rape while buried under rubble. Uniforms, medals or marks of rank prove meaningless or motivated by empty values, such as the iron cross that is bartered for a case of wine. Trusted structures of society betray those who still have faith in them: the American pilot Strehen thinks he has finally found safety in the care of a doctor only for the doctor to commit an archaic act of retribution and violence (*Ver*, 188/*P*, 188).

Even the most universal constructions break down. In desperate attempts to retain control of their world, people repeatedly seek out ways to tell the time and keep track of it passing, but always in vain. Temporality is repeatedly employed as a potent symbol of the illusion of control that is rapidly being dispelled: “Er bewegte sich langsam. Oder mit rasender Geschwindigkeit. Das konnten sie nicht unterscheiden.” (*Ver*, 59; It was moving slowly, or at breakneck speed, they couldn’t tell” *P*, 54). Even when attempts to tell the time are successful, the illusion of being in control of it has been lifted: “Der große Zeiger und und der kleine Zeiger richeten auf Ziffern. Niemand von ihnen sah sie” (*Ver*, 52; “The big hand and the little hand pointed at numbers. Nobody saw them” *P*, 46).

Time, a potentially comforting sign of the familiar which everyone craves, becomes the enemy that no one can control: “Ohne auf die Uhr zu blicken, wußte er, daß sich der Zeiger bewegte. Die Zeit verrann. Es war plötzlich gekommen.” (*Ver*, 26; “Without looking at the clock, he knew that the hand was moving. Time was running out. It had come too suddenly” *P*, 19).

In contrast to the writers that Sebald criticizes in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, then, Ledig’s narrative deliberately avoids the strategies of abstraction that might be employed to subsume the reality of the bombings into a progressive, teleological history. One of the most common of these strategies is the inception of a universal, biblical model of retribution, redemption and rebirth from the ashes. In *Vergeltung*, by contrast, this model is turned on its head as the possibility of Christian redemption and continuing faith in God is precluded.<sup>29</sup> In the course of the narrative, numerous people lose their faith in God as they die, not least a priest who in the last throes of death makes a final plea to God for salvation, but is betrayed (*P*, 81). The American pilot, who tried to sabotage the dropping of his bombs, suffers a death that resembles the passion of the Christ as he is lynched, though unarmed, by the waiting mob. Yet his martyrdom is pointless, since those who might be redeemed by his death are themselves seconds later blown to pieces (*P*, 188).

By unsettling the most universal of cultural paradigms and civilized structures, Ledig is consciously reinforcing the process that occurs naturally in war and to which Sebald wishes to draw our attention, namely, the shattering of blind faith in instrumental

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<sup>29</sup> For a full treatment of the Christian narrative in *Vergeltung*, see Florian Radvan, “Religiöse Bildlichkeit und transtextuelle Bezüge in Gert Ledigs Luftkriegsroman *Vergeltung*” in Wilfried Wilms & William Rasch eds., *Bombs Away! Representing the Airwar over Europe and Japan* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2006), 165-179.

progress. In *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, the bombing campaigns are an example of enlightened man being led into the inferno by his blind faith in technological and economic progress. He describes how the campaign acquires a momentum of its own regardless of the human cost and marvels at the technological fervor with which bombing strategies were pursued, and reminds us again of the continuing threat by noting that this eventually led to the production of the atomic bomb (*NHD*, 16). Ledig too sees the destructive tendencies at the heart of technological progress: “Technology shattered technology. It bent masts, tore apart machines, opened up craters, demolished walls, and life was just so much rubbish” (*P*, 39). The archaic, violent heart that is veiled by enlightened values is best represented by the figure of the doctor, that most potent of symbols of the enlightenment, who indulges in torturing the American pilot: “as far as I’m concerned... war is the father of all things” (*P*, 197).

Like Sebald, Ledig recognizes that without the interjection of a disruptive history, the future will be founded on the same belief: “An hour was all it took for terror to triumph. Afterwards, some people wanted to forget that fact. Others claimed not to have known it” (*P*, 200). The result is that “progress destroyed both past and future” (*P*, 199).

As an example of the natural history of destruction, Ledig’s rejection by a Germany in the throes of the economic miracle makes him the exception that proves Sebald’s thesis. His refusal to allow the memory of the bombings to form a platform for any positive message of rebirth made him inaccessible to an audience wishing to carry on as before. In a later interview Sebald expressed his lack of surprise at the rejection of *Vergeltung*

Es ist ein sehr brisanter Text, es ist einer Art Denunziation des deutschen Kollektivs in jener Zeit. Es hat mich nicht gewundert, daß der Roman aus der sich neu konstituierenden Kultur jener Zeit eliminiert, ausgeschieden werden mußte.<sup>30</sup>

It is a very explosive text and is a kind of denunciation of the German collective of the time. I wasn't surprised that the novel had to be eliminated from the newly constituted culture of the time.

Ledig could be said to have suffered the fate of the doomed messenger Nossack describes, who is compelled to speak of what he has seen in Hamburg, but whose audience then kills him.

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<sup>30</sup> Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung*, p. 264.

## **6. The Sebald Debate: Cultural and Historical Conditions for a Misappropriation**

A consideration of the role played by *Lufikrieg und Literatur* in the discourse surrounding ‘Germans as victims’ quickly reveals that it is possible to distinguish quite clearly between Sebald’s actual text and the so-called ‘Sebald Debate’, by which I am referring to the flurry of contributions to the *feuilleton* pages of most newspapers and weekly publications following the initial lectures of 1997. As I aimed to demonstrate in the previous chapters of this thesis, a close reading of the *Lufikrieg* essay shows its motivations and concerns to be more abstract and working on a level beyond established notions of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* than the terms of the media debate would suggest. An overview here of the positions taken by the players in the furore can therefore provide a valuable context in which to consider the text and its role in the development of the ‘Germans as victims’ discourse.

What is immediately striking about the way the debate progressed is the insularity with which it became self-perpetuating, steadily becoming divorced from its original source, the content of Sebald’s Zürich lectures. The text of the lectures was not reprinted in any German publication at the time, meaning readers were reliant on the comments of the columnists and writers who offered their opinions. Very little of the extensive comment pertained to Sebald’s actual words as contributors responded by and large to each other’s opinions on the two elements of discussion that provoked much of the debate: the existence or otherwise of a taboo on representing German suffering and the validity or desirability of representing Germans as victims of war, especially now.



The debate over these issues was in fact set in motion by the literary editor at *Der Spiegel*, Volker Hage, in his article of January 1998. Following the lectures in November 1997, reports in the Swiss press discussed the matter soberly, and in general with sympathy to Sebald's message. Literary critic and author, Andreas Isenschmid, writing in the Swiss *Tagesanzeiger*, recognised the incendiary nature of Sebald's subject matter, but also heard the voice of the eminent writer among the passages of literary criticism and historical theorising in the most interesting passages of the lectures, in which, he said, no longer only the historian or the literary scholar speaks, but rather the poet. Isenschmid's keen ear for Sebald's poetic instinct led him to conclude that "er ist kein deutscher Revisionist" (he is no German revisionist).<sup>1</sup> The first and only German correspondent to pick up on the lectures at the time, Martin Lubschinger, went unmentioned on by fellow journalists.<sup>2</sup> Hage's article came several months later and until then the Zurich lectures had gone largely unnoticed in the German press, and may have stayed that way but for the provocative article Hage wrote.

Hage was a veteran of the maelstrom that is the German literary press in the postwar context, having started his career at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in the 1970s, before becoming literary editor at *Die Zeit* in 1986 and at *Der Spiegel* since 1992. His initial article on the Sebald lectures took in all of his experience of the long tradition in West Germany of literary debates over the representation of the Nazi past to proclaim this a breakthrough, a taboo-shattering discovery and that perhaps now the work of postwar literature could really begin. He noted that although there were some 150 novels about the war published before 1960, these were mostly tales from the front and are now

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Isenschmid, "Deutschland's schandbares Familiengeheimnis", *Tagesanzeiger*, 4.12.1997.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Lubschinger, "Luftkrieg und Literatur", *Frankfurter Rundschau* 25.11.1997.

long forgotten, telling tales of the suffering soldier and the meaninglessness of war.

Likening this literary climate to that in many German families, he claimed that though there was talk of the war, it was a war of which many had no experience and it did not tell the full story:

So it was in many German families, and so it was in literature: the fathers told tales of the war, of the parts they wanted to tell about, that they wanted to remember. There were no tales told of the war that fell out of the skies onto the towns. Neither were there tales of the crimes of German soldiers. Nor of the Holocaust. And so the fathers did not in fact tell tales of the war, not of this war.<sup>3</sup>

For Hage the evidence of a taboo on German suffering is convincing and he cites others, including Hans-Magnus Enzensberger who agree. In the kind equivalence that was to outrage his commentators, Hage likened this taboo to that identified by the Auschwitz survivor Ruth Kluger on representation and to the 30 years war, after which it took 20 years for the first epic novel to appear. But it is when considering the question of what happens next that Hage introduced the concept that was to provoke much of the fiercest reaction: the assumption that Sebald was calling for the gap in literary production on the airwar to be filled: “Should German authors now rummage in the archives and try to empathise with the claustrophobic world of the air raid cellar?” he asked. Noting that Martin Walser was about to publish his tale of a childhood untouched by Nazism, *Ein Springender Brunnen* (A Springing Fountain) and that Walter Kempowski his compendium of eye-witness accounts of the bombing of Dresden, *Der Rote Hahn* (The

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<sup>3</sup> Volker Hage, “Feuer von Himmel”, *Der Spiegel* 12.1.1998.

Red Rooster), Hage concluded by suggesting: “it could be that German postwar literature is only just beginning, at the turn of the century, at the turn of the millennium”.

Arguably it was this statement, more than anything claimed by Sebald, that caused the copious and heated reactions of Hage’s fellow literary correspondents in the initial bout of contributions. Though Hage managed to focus his article on literature rather than wider issues of ethics and engaged with questions of aesthetics and representation, at no point does he engage with any of Sebald’s arguments in any detail. As would be the case in much of the reaction, the topic seems to overwhelm the specificity of the subject, that is, Sebald’s lectures.

The first response came from the *FAZ* literary editor Frank Schirmmacher, whose article was entitled “Luftkrieg: beginnt morgen die deutsche Nachkriegsliteratur?” (Airwar: does German postwar literature begin tomorrow?).<sup>4</sup> Schirmmacher was of the opinion that while Hage was right to agree with Sebald on the existence of a taboo, he strongly disagreed with Hage’s idea that there can be a new postwar literature, arguing instead that it was over, lost forever and with good reason. Also in the *FAZ*, Klaus Harprecht began his editorial by quoting Hage and warning of the dangers of any new wave of bombing literature: once the flood gates were open, he opined, how would the next generation of authors maintain the basic level of tact and shame that had been so painstakingly built into German culture?<sup>5</sup> A review of the ensuing contributions shows that this initial scuffle between Hage and Schirmmacher was the catalyst for many of the articles written in early 1998. Ulrich Baron, for instance, is typical in framing an article

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Schirmmacher, “Luftkrieg: beginnt morgen die deutsche Nachkriegsliteratur?”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 15.1.1998.

<sup>5</sup> Klaus Harprecht, “Stille Schicksallose. Warum die Nachkriegsliteratur von vielem geschwiegen hat”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 20.1.1998.

around a review of the dispute between Hage and Schirmmacher to answer the questions asked not by Sebald, but by Hage: “Gab und gibt es für die Dichter ein Darstellungsverbot, ein Erzähltabu, das heute überwunden werden müßte?” (Was and is there for writers a ban on representation, a taboo, that must be overcome today?)<sup>6</sup>

As already mentioned, in the aftermath of the initial exchange, Hage styled himself as something of an expert on the literature of the bombings and led a campaign of awareness of the bombings in forgotten novels. His research brought the forgotten novelist Gert Ledig to his attention, who had found success with his unremitting account of front-warfare, *Die Stalinorgel* (the Stalin Organ), but who had fallen into obscurity after the complete failure of his follow-up on the bombings, *Vergeltung* (Payback) of 1956. Unnoticed by literary critics and scholars for decades, Hage published an interview with Ledig<sup>7</sup> and used his influence to have *Vergeltung* republished in 1998. Hage also became a champion of the work of Dieter Forte, whose epic novel *Der Junge mit den Blutigen Schuhen* (The Boy with the Bloody Shoes) centered around everyday life in the bombed cities had been published in 1995, the sequel to which was published in 1998 also. Hage went on to reverse his initial unreserved acceptance of the ‘taboo’ theory as he read it in Sebald in his volume *Zeugen der Zerstörung*, in he documented dozens of instances of the bombing war in literature throughout the postwar period. This apparent reversal was furthered by the *Hamburg 1943* anthology, which traced literary reactions to the Hamburg bombing from 1943 to the present day. What motivated Hage to so openly reverse his position and place himself as the expert in this field? Having been resoundly

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<sup>6</sup> Hage, quoted in Ulrich Baron, “im Schatten zweier künstlicher Sonnen”, *Rheinische Merkur*, 6.2.1998. Other articles that focused heavily on Hage, Schirmmacher and Harprecht include Rolf Schneider in *Die Welt* 28.1.1998, Martin Ebel in the *Badische Zeitung* 22.1.1998

<sup>7</sup> Volker Hage, “Die Angst Muß Im Genick Sitzen”, *Der Spiegel*, 4.1.1999.

disputed by some of his fellow columnists, perhaps he wanted to reverse his position in such a way that left him untouchable by critics? More cynically, he may have spotted an approaching boom in the market and saw his chance to exploit it. *Hamburg 1943* was published one month before the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Operation Gomorrh, as the bombing was known, and which by now was publicly commemorated in the city and in the press. There may have been more personal motivations, also. Hage, born in 1944, grew up in the ruins of Hamburg and may have genuinely felt a compulsion to commemorate the destruction and rebuilding of his home city. Whatever was motivating Hage, it was his initial adherence to a theory that, because of a taboo, the bombings had never featured in literature, and that they now could be featured, that was the driving force of the debate in early 1998.

The idea that a taboo on expression of German loss and suffering either had or hadn't prevented representations of the bombings became the central, most controversial and most interesting point of contention. Whatever the opinion of columnists on the matter, the idea "of a general collective silence on the devastating nature of the bombing experience was widely adopted and extended to the issue of German suffering as a whole."<sup>8</sup> A first group of commentators found it very easy to accept the idea of a taboo and lauded Sebald for 'lifting' it so that open discussion could now take place, including Hage himself and Tilman Krause.<sup>9</sup> Another group, which Hage would later join, were of the opinion that no such taboo had ever existed. Sebald was either wilfully or lazily neglecting many works, both recent and of the time, in which the airwar featured, including Hage's championed novel by Ledig. Jost Nolte accused Sebald of being so

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<sup>8</sup> Schmitz, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Tilman Krause, "Trauer um uns Selbst", *Tagesspiegel* 17.1.1998.

fond of his theory that he was unwilling to let the existence of many novels dissuade him from it: “Mag sein, W.G. Sebald hat sine Schularbeiten nicht gemacht...Mag sein, er fand seine Verschwörungstheorie zu schön, um wegen ein paar störender Tatsachen auf sie zu verzichten” (It could be that W.G. Sebald has not done his homework...it could be that he found his conspiracy theory too nice to give it up just because of a few contradictory facts).<sup>10</sup> Several pointed to Sebald’s silence on the recent work of Dieter Forte, and Forte himself later wrote an angry piece in the *Spiegel* in which he accused Sebald of a lack of empathy and a cold, professorial tone of distance. He defended the silence of those who had lived through the bombings, since the hell they had experienced could take years to process and express: “Es gibt ein Grauen jenseits der Sprache, ein unaussprechliches Entsetzen” (There is a horror that is beyond language, an unspeakable terror).<sup>11</sup> Marting Luchsinger defended Sebald’s omission of Forte, noting that since the academic had turned his hand to fiction, he had avoided commenting on his contemporaries in his critical work. Sebald’s taboo theory was also rejected on the basis that in the GDR the bombings had never faded from the public imagination and that commemorations had always be maintained, largely for political gain. Here, argued Joachim Güntner, there were plenty of literary renderings of the bombings, particularly of Dresden.<sup>12</sup>

Though the contributors differed on their opinion on the idea of taboo, what they all had in common, and what made the issue so contentious, was the assumption that the taboo was motivated by the shame and guilt of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. In his collection of the articles of the debate, Hage introduces the crux of the matter around the

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<sup>10</sup> Jost Nolte, “Sebald oder Neues über Untergänge”, *Die Welt*, 24.1.1998.

<sup>11</sup> Dieter Forte, “Menschen werden zu Herdentieren”, *Der Spiegel*, 5.4.1999.

<sup>12</sup> Joachim Güntner, “Der Luftkrieg fand im Osten statt”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 24.1.98.

question, “gab und gibt es ein Erzähltabu, das zum Ausklammern bestimmter Schrecken zwingt, etwa der Leidenserfahrung der deutschen Zivilbevölkerung- angesichts der von Deutschen begangenen Verbrechen und Morde?” (was and is there a taboo that forces certain horrors to be left aside, such as the experience of suffering of German civilians- in the face of the crimes and murders carried out by Germans?).<sup>13</sup> As I have demonstrated, this is a feature of the taboo thesis brought into the debate that does not feature in Sebald’s text, but which in the context of the ongoing wrangles over *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, is the obvious assumption for many and what makes the question so problematic. A large faction of the debate agreed on the existence of a taboo in this context, but defended it or defended writers for adhering to it in postwar Germany. Harprecht was the spearhead here, grounding the silence of postwar Germany in an understandable and desirable shame at their guilt as perpetrators:

We measured our own experiences (whether consciously or unconsciously) against the degradation, the starvation, the exploitation, the fear, the certainty of death- we measured them against the horrors that Germany’s thugs brought to the people of the East, and above all, to the victims of the racist will to exterminate.<sup>14</sup>

Thanks to recent research, we know that in the early postwar climate the plentiful expression of loss and suffering showed no awareness at all for this kind of guilt. Harprecht’s argument here is not only symptomatic of a degree of ‘political correctness’, but also of a tendency of the second generation to mark itself as almost secondary

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<sup>13</sup> Hage, Moritz, Winkels, eds., p. 249.

<sup>14</sup> Klaus Harprecht, “Stille Schicksallose. Warum die Nachkriegsliteratur von vielem geschwiegen hat”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 20.1.1998.

victims of the burden of guilt, a burden so heavy that they must always play the role of perpetrator, never expressing their own suffering. In the face of the Holocaust, he says, “fand mancher nicht mehr den Mut, vom Verrecken an den Fronten, von den Bunkernächten, von den Vergewältigungen, von der Flucht zu reden” (some could no longer find the courage to talk about the horrors of the front, the nights in the bunkers, the rapes or the flight). The obligation to the suffering of “die anderen” (the others) guilted the Germans out of any recognition of their own suffering. This attitude is shared by many of the contributors, who naturally assume that the taboo Sebald refers to is caused by “durch die Schuld am Judenmord verursachte Scham” (the shame caused by the murder of the Jews).<sup>15</sup>

The many fears and warnings against revisionism that formed much of the criticism of Sebald at the time go hand in hand with this assumption that the taboo is maintained by shame for the Holocaust. Political correctness meant that many were keenly aware of having to tread the fine line between recognising that perhaps the bombings were repressed in literature, and prioritising the obligation to recognise guilt over suffering. For Harprecht, “das Schweigen verbarg vielleicht eine Scham, die kostbarer ist als alle Literatur. Der wahre Verlust wäre, dies zu vergessen” (the silence perhaps concealed a shame that is more valuable than all literature. The real loss would be to forget this). Martin Ebel’s answer to whether Germans wanted the epic novel of total war was a simple “Lieber nicht” (rather not). Author and translator Gunhild Kübler was clear on the matter: anyone today speaking of the ghostly exodus of thousands of the bombed-out, she wrote, is relativising the suffering of the long trains of concentration

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<sup>15</sup> Gustav Seibt, “Sprachlos in Feuersturm”, *Berliner Zeitung* 14/15.2.1998.



camp prisoners.<sup>16</sup> Tilman Krause recognised an embarrassing inevitability in the resurgence of bombing memory since, he wrote, the airwar turned a nation that should see itself as perpetrators into victims.

This dominant line of argument throughout the debate saw the representation of past events as a tool of exculpation in the present. As I have already noted, it was in response to Hage that the validity of new writing about the bombings in the present came into question and led to the perception that Sebald was calling for writers to plug the gap that he detected in the postwar canon. But Sebald didn't need to put this idea in the heads of the commentators who debated it, as it seemed already to be brewing before he ever took to the lectern in Zürich. As Helmut Schmitz observes:

Sebald's lectures about a *historical* failure resulting from the complex post-war emotional landscape of guilt, denial, traumatisation and continuities in Nazi mentality were received by the German press as lifting a taboo on public discourse about German wartime suffering and as legitimising a *present* debate.<sup>17</sup>

As I argue below, and as Schmitz has pointed out elsewhere, those who took their cue from Sebald to further this present debate overlooked the fact that his lectures never called for any re-emergence of the subject in literature. He observes a phenomenon and a missed opportunity, but it becomes clear that the chance for literature to document the destruction is irrevocably past and cannot be re-discovered in the present. Furthermore, I will argue, he is not in favour of a representation of Germans *as victims*, quite the

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<sup>16</sup> Gunhild Kübler, "Luftkrieg und Literatur", *die Weltwoche*, 11.12.1997.

<sup>17</sup> Helmut Schmitz, 'The Birth of the Collective from the Spirit of Empathy: From the Historians' Dispute to German Suffering' in *Germans as Victims* ed. by Bill Niven (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 93-109, here p. 93.

opposite in fact. The ellipsis in postwar representations is of Germans living in a shameful, degraded state as a result of the earth-shattering violence they themselves unleashed. Given this, and the fact that (as already noted), research shows us that the subject of German suffering was freely discussed and represented until at least the 1960s, why were commentators so quick and so keen to leap on the idea of a taboo? If we know that the claims of a taboo were exaggerated, why was the *perception* of one so strong and so compelling at that time? Sebald was not the first public figure to bring the bombings to the attention of the media after reunification, nor was his the first cultural offering to feature them: Dieter Forte had already published his airwar-epic, Heinrich Böll's first novel, set in the ruins of a city, was published for the first time in 1992 and many cities commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of bombings and the end of the war between 1993 and 1995. Why then was it this rather more obscure event that unleashed such strong reactions?

That the debate in late 1997 and early 1998 was somewhat emotional and 'of the moment' is evidenced by a comparison to reactions in the foreign press to the publication of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Both British and American critics, for whom Sebald was something of a darling, were much more measured in their reactions, and Europe-wide the book was received with a more open-minded approach to the concept of German suffering. Raphaele Rerolle of *Le Monde* was typical in her defence of Sebald, noting that "L'auteur ne souhaite pas poser le peuple allemand en victime, comme l'ont fait certains" (the author has no wish to pass the German people off as victims, as some would have it).<sup>18</sup> The German media, too, having had the chance to read and digest Sebald's book in 1999 offered rather more sympathetic reviews than they might have in

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<sup>18</sup> Raphaele Rerolle, *Le Monde*, 6.2.2004.

1997. Hage too, by the time of *Zeugen der Zerstörung*, had come to a more nuanced understanding of Sebald's thesis. Though he takes pains to document all the instances of bombing literature he can find, he notes that Sebald would not have been interested in the "rein quantitative" (purely quantitative) argument and that "eine Forderung an Schriftsteller, nun endlich einen Bombenkriegsroman zu schreiben, hat es nie gegeben" (there was never any demand that writers finally produce a bombing-novel).<sup>19</sup>

It was the timing of the original debate that provides the context and explanation for the willingness to appropriate Sebald for the purposes of the discourse. Discussions and events in both politics and culture made for a climate in which Sebald's words were explosive. It was something of a perfect storm that made the years spanning the turn of the millennium so decisive in the course of German cultural memory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* was swept into its eye.

### **Memory Culture in the New Germany**

By the late 1990s the culmination of political and cultural shifts in the discourse surrounding the Nazi past acted like a tinderbox that needed only a spark to set it burning; Sebald's lectures turned out to be such a spark and the factors that made up this incendiary environment can explain how and why a dispute over a point of literary history came to represent something of a foundational moment for the 'Germans as Victims' paradigm. In the newly reunified Germany of the 1990s the past became a commodity to be fought over for present gain, first in the political sphere and then, increasingly, in the cultural arena. As a result, where once political strategy was the

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<sup>19</sup> Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung*, p.123 and p.129.

principle determiner of how the past was publicly commemorated, the late 1990s saw a transferral of this influence to the public and cultural sphere.

Post-reunification Germany was a state with a fractured past, but also a fractured understanding of its past. As the research of Bill Niven has decisively demonstrated, the Cold War had prevented a useful engagement with Germany's past as a Nazi state, but also with its own suffering during the war on both sides of the German-German border. Where the former was troubled by what Niven calls a "system of mutual self-exculpation and inculcation"<sup>20</sup> that hampered attempts to come to terms with German crimes, a similar phenomenon of political manipulation of memory in both the FRG and GDR resulted in "the distorted and manipulative representation of themes such as bombing and expulsion."<sup>21</sup> While it may have appeared that this was the moment to focus on the present and plan for a reunited future, it soon became clear that this would have to include a re-engagement with past in order to undo some of the damage done during the cold war. For Niven, 1990 represented an opportunity for a new engagement on behalf of all Germans that could finally represent and articulate the entirety of the wartime experience in a depoliticised, empathetic way without undermining atonement for German perpetration and allowing even for critical self-reappraisal<sup>22</sup>. This hope was not to be realised under the Kohl administration between 1990 and 1998, which harnessed public commemoration of the war in order to promote a policy of 'inner unity': the drive to create not only a political and economic, but a spiritually reunited nation. Kohl sought to found a common understanding of the past that remembered the Germans as having suffered and survived two forms of totalitarian rule, first under National Socialism and

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<sup>20</sup> Niven, "Introduction", p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.4.

then in the GDR under Soviet socialism. Epitomised by the controversial Neue Wache (New Guardhouse) memorial, which implied that German civilians and soldiers were the prime victims of the war, Kohl's memory politics displayed a "proclivity for transforming Germans retrospectively into victims of war, of Hitler, of expulsion by the Poles and Czechs – and also of Stalinism and socialism after 1945", so that a shared sense of victimhood could "become the glue to hold together Germany's new national identity, at least in its historically derived elements"<sup>23</sup>.

The re-politicisation of the past, and of German suffering in particular, was to have repercussions that would turn the 1990s into a decade marked by bitter disputes over the role of history in the new Germany. Kohl's efforts to unite Germans as a nation of victims were welcomed by the conservative right, but only heightened fears of historical revisionism among the left. The problem of how to create a historically complete and morally sound narrative of the past remained unresolved. With the advent of the Red-Green coalition in 1998 under Gerhard Schröder, however, the task of commemorating German suffering receded from the political agenda as the new government sought to reinstate the primacy of German culpability and Jewish victimhood. In keeping with their heritage as the generation of '68, the administration understood Germans as perpetrators first and foremost and rejected attempts to commemorate them as victims. In response, conservatives reprised the charge heard throughout the decade that a left-liberal 'political correctness' dominated the discourse on the past. After the election in 1998, Ingo Cornils notes that a "plethora of new books, essays and editorials" were published with the aim

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.6.

of challenging the “cultural hegemony” of the ’68 generation<sup>24</sup>. Conservatives maintained that “cultural memory had been usurped by an elite that had emerged from the student movement of the 1960s”<sup>25</sup>, at the expense of an empathetic engagement with the suffering of Germans. Thus the trope of Germans as victims embedded itself firmly in political rhetoric both by being cited freely by conservatives and by being pointedly omitted by the left.

Not only did the policy of the Red-Green government to exclude the theme of German suffering from the political agenda do nothing to diminish its political significance, it served also to shift the discussion from political rhetoric to public and cultural arenas. Niven refers to “a ‘handing over’ of the theme to the public realm”, where it emerged resurgent, as if unchained<sup>26</sup> and where it became so strong as to “represent a serious challenge to the primacy of memory of the Holocaust and undermine an awareness of German perpetration”<sup>27</sup>. This ‘handing over’ coincides with a more general, even global shift to a more public and cultural ‘ownership’ of the past. Where once politically motivated historical narratives that focussed on the collective and its leaders dominated public commemoration of the past, increasingly a more individual-centered, private form of memory has invaded the public realm. For the German public, an interest in the fates of ‘ordinary Germans’ increasingly demanded that history recognised the sufferings of their parents and grandparents. Helmut Schmitz, in common with Aleida Assmann, identifies this shift as occurring “at the intersection of two

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<sup>24</sup> Ingo Cornils, “Successful Failure? The Impact of the German Student Movement on the Federal Republic of Germany” in *Recasting German Identity* ed. by Frank Finlay and Stuart Taberner (Rochester: Palgrave, 2002), pp 109-26, here p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Taberner, “German Wartime Suffering in Recent Fiction” in *Germans as Victims* ed. by Bill Niven (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 164-180, here p. 166.

<sup>26</sup> Niven, “Introduction”, p.8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

important developments: the passing away of witnesses and the emotionalising of history”<sup>28</sup>.

In her attempt to explain the popularity and ubiquity of German suffering narratives in the 1990s and since, Assmann notes that the “experiential memory of bombings and flights is about to vanish, as the last of those who were contemporary to these events are passing away”<sup>29</sup>. Schmitz concludes that “this puts the postwar generation in a position of proxy, of mourning on behalf of the ‘experiential’ generation that has, allegedly, been unable to do so”<sup>30</sup>. In Assmann’s terms (derived from Jan Assmann’s theory of collective memory), this is the moment at which a communicative, private form of family memory shifts to cultural memory, the form in which it will be publicly commemorated after the passing of the witnesses. The historical knowledge of future generations is therefore at stake, and the competing players of history fight to be included. Schmitz describes this as “exercises in collective meaning creation” which are “almost inevitably in the interest of re-forming an imaginative community”<sup>31</sup>. In Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural memory, this activity is termed the ‘semiotisation’ of history, that is, the transformation of historical fact into a foundational myth<sup>32</sup>. This activity parallels that which Sebald identified among the writers of the postwar FRG, who sought to create meaningful narratives out of the ruins. Ironically it is also this activity that heavily motivates the mis-reading of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as a call to ‘lift the lid’, and thus facilitate this “collective meaning creation”. Thus, both the conditions to which Sebald was responding and the reception of his argument would suggest that the

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<sup>28</sup> Schmitz, *A Nation of Victims?*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Assmann, “On the (In)Compatibility of Guilt and Suffering”, p. 192.

<sup>30</sup> Schmitz, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> See Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity”, *New German Critique* (65: 2005), pp. 125-133.

continuation of this activity is the principle motivator for the mis/non-reading of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*.

The second of these concomitant factors is a more global development during this period in the practice of historiography from one driven by fact to one that tells a story. This individual-centered history has more in common with oral history than traditional historiography and allows more space for emotion, empathy and the turning of a blind eye to the bigger picture. For Aleida Assmann this paradigm privileges individual historical experience and in doing so “brings with it new conflicts about symbols, concepts, representations, and the normative value of memories”<sup>33</sup>. Schmitz notes that this development facilitates a re-appropriation of the history of German suffering by sentimental mass media constructions in film, TV and elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> This is not an exclusively German phenomenon and can be considered as part of a globalisation of Holocaust memory during this period (the *Schindler’s List* effect, perhaps), which renders the Germans free to consider themselves as only one nation with a duty to remember among all nations and when it comes to German suffering, allows individual fates to be remembered in their own context, rather than an explicitly German context of perpetration.

Sebald’s lectures, the reception of them and ensuing debate, and finally the publication of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* span exactly the period of political and cultural flux outlined above, characterised by the re-politicisation of the theme of German suffering in 1989 and the ‘handing over’ of the theme to the public realm in 1998. This context of the rise of ‘Germans as victims’ is central to an analysis of the function of the

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<sup>33</sup> Aleida Assmann, p. 199.

<sup>34</sup> Schmitz, p. 6.



text in German cultural memory and its appropriation by the discourse. As public interest in the theme grew to a demand for representations of Germans as victims, the cultural machinery sought out opportunities to meet this demand. Sebald's message is lost beneath the attraction of his subject matter, the bombed cities. In the new climate of story-led history and after the 'handing over' of the reigns to the public by the political sphere, Sebald, as a respected cultural figure, becomes a valued player and an attractive spokesperson for the resurgent discourse. As Stefan Berger notes, this was not a development that was being played out in the history books or the classrooms, but rather in the press and the creative media. Historians "are not driving the debate and are, at best, reacting to the publications and interventions of others"<sup>35</sup>. Sebald's qualifications as one of these 'others' are numerous: born shortly after the war (and so ostensibly one of the '68 generation so maligned for their political correctness by conservatives), he is free from personal culpability to discuss the sufferings of the wartime generation and to be used as a pillory for those who have supposedly imposed a 'taboo' on German victimhood. Though not wildly successful as an author of prose in his native Germany, by 1997/8 Sebald is well established as a darling of the English-speaking literary scene and is considered part of the canon in translation, especially following *The Emigrants*. As such he enjoys something of a 'legitimised' voice, having been accepted on the global stage as a German writer. This effect is strengthened by his having lived and taught in Britain for almost his entire adult life, thus lending an air of 'foreignness' to his words, almost as though the Germans were being called to remember their own victim status from the outside. The legitimate nature of Sebald's voice is most strongly supported by

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<sup>35</sup> Stefan Berger, "On Taboos, Traumas and other Myths: Why the Debate over German Victims of the Second World War is not another Historians' Controversy" in *Germans as Victims* ed. by Bill Niven (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 210-225, here p. 212.

the subject matter of his previous literary successes. Having found critical success for excavating the lost voices of history and, specifically, those of Holocaust victims, it was convenient to assume that now Sebald turned his attention to the ‘lost’ victims of the German cities. Much as was the attraction of Gunter Grass after the publication of *Im Krebsgang*, Sebald presents the opportunity for those keen to legitimate the creation of a victim status for the Germans to appoint a weighty and ‘clean’ spokesperson.

The particular attraction of Sebald as a figurehead for this discourse, as governed by the confluence of political and cultural factors outlined above, mean that the specificity of his literary thesis is buried in favour of a universality surrounding ‘Germans as victims’. This is not something restricted to those in favour of the discourse, however, but is also picked up by the other side of the conflict. In fact, Sebald’s nuanced and a-political consideration of the theme is trampled by the boots of interest groups on *all* sides fighting over the rights and ethics of a memory of German suffering. The deep-seated fear of historical revisionism that accompanied the rise of the paradigm must therefore be considered if we are to explain the ferocity of the reaction to Sebald’s text.

### **The Revisionist Threat**

The particular political and cultural developments of the 1990s that gave rise to the increased interest in the bombings provide some explanation for the widespread misappropriation of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. The ferocity of the critical reactions, however, and the establishment of the debate as a test case for the viability of ‘Germans as victims’ can be explained further when considered in light of the extreme tension and anxiety surrounding the subject. As I have already observed, the 1990s were marked by intense conflict over the meaning of the Nazi past in the newly unified Germany and this

conflict was played out over a series of debates and events in both politics and cultural circles between those for whom the Holocaust must assume a central significance in German national identity (generally the liberal left) and those who sought to destabilise the perceived hegemony of a perpetrator-centred memory (generally the conservative right). The central threat underlying this tension is that of historical revisionism.

However the fear among the liberal left that the primacy of German perpetration could be undermined and even reversed dates back in West Germany before unification with debates over ‘normalisation’, controversies such as US President Reagan’s visit to the Bitburg cemetery and, most of all, the ‘Historikerstreit’ (Historians’ Dispute) of the 1980s.

The dispute between conservative and leftist historians that erupted in 1986 had at its heart the two ‘revisionist’ lines of argument that have continued to cause tension with respect to the memory of German wartime experience ever since: First, that the Holocaust has wrongly come to negatively dominate our understanding of the National Socialist era because it has been utilised by the left and the survivors as a political tool to delegitimise any German perspective on the past; second, that the historical singularity of the Holocaust must be revised to reverse its position as a historically isolated event. The conflict began with Jürgen Habermas’ polemic against the views of certain conservative historians, in particular an article written by the conservative historian Ernst Nolte, in which Nolte called for an end to the negative consideration of the Nazi era as a historically unique event<sup>36</sup>. Instead, Nolte suggested that the Holocaust was only one

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<sup>36</sup> Ernst Nolte, “die Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will” (the past that will not pass), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1986. Habermas was also responding to similar views Nolte expressed in the same newspaper in July 1980. For an English version of both articles see James Knowlton and Truett Cates (trans.), *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents on the Historikerstreit, the Controversy*

episode in a European tradition of genocide that had formed as a response to the traumatic ruptures of European modernity. In this case, he argued, Hitler was responding to the ‘threat’ he perceived was posed by Jews and the Soviets and the ensuing genocide was essentially a copy of the original annihilation perpetrated by the Soviets: “Auschwitz is not primarily the result of traditional anti-Semitism and was not just one more case of ‘genocide’. It was the fear-borne reaction to the act of annihilation that took place during the Russian Revolution”<sup>37</sup>. For Nolte, the insistence on the singularity of the Holocaust not only blocks the attempt of historiography to fairly evaluate the Third Reich in favour of an almost mythical construction, it also results in a hegemony of victim perspective that invalidates any authentic ‘German’ perspective, and which is wielded as a political instrument against the Germans: “the talk about ‘the guilt of the Germans’ all too blithely overlooks the similarity to the talk about ‘the guilt of the Jews’, which was a main argument of the National Socialists”<sup>38</sup>. Helmut Schmitz identifies the problematic kernel of Nolte’s rhetoric:

Nolte’s attempt to read the Holocaust as Hitler’s copy of Stalin is essentially an attempt to relativise its historical singularity in a reversal of cause and effect...in which the Jews appear either as the original aggressor or as the originators and proprietors of a victim-centred discourse that is holding the articulation of a specifically German memory of National Socialism in check...Nolte’s argument thus moves the accused Germans into the structural

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*Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1993), pp. 1-15 and pp. 18-23.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

position of the Nazi victims, with the '68ers and survivors in the position of aggressor.<sup>39</sup>

The revisionist position, then, seeks not only to diminish the authority over the National Socialist era felt to be held by the victims, but also to claim part of that authority on behalf of the Germans. A second provocative publication to draw criticism from Habermas was Andreas Hillgruber's, *Zweierlei Untergang: die Zerschlagung des deutschen Reiches und das Ende der europäischen Judentums* (Two kinds of Demise: the Destruction of the Third Reich and the End of European Jewry)<sup>40</sup> which adopted a position that, as the title implies, equated the annihilation of the Jews with the sufferings of the German army in the East. For Hillgruber, the only valid identification for Germans with respect to the National Socialist era can be with the fate of the German 'nation as a whole', one which must necessarily exclude the fate of the Jews, resulting in two comparable but incompatible historical narratives. Again, Schmitz identifies a revisionism that was "deeply problematic in its suggestion of a victim status for the German population of the East that was equal to that of Hitler's victims"<sup>41</sup>.

At stake in this revisionist argument is, not only, the primacy of an awareness of German perpetration and the importance of Holocaust commemoration in public and political life, but also, more fundamentally, a challenge to the philosophical understanding of the Holocaust as a rupture in European civilization. Adorno and Horkheimer's description of the inevitable culmination of the dialectic of European enlightenment, as discussed above, positioned the National Socialist phenomenon as a

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<sup>39</sup> Schmitz, "The Birth of the Collective from the Spirit of Empathy", pp. 97-98.

<sup>40</sup> Andreas Hillgruber, *Zweierlei Untergang: die Zerschlagung des deutschen Reiches und das Ende der europäischen Judentums* (Berlin: Siedler, 1986).

<sup>41</sup> Schmitz, "The Birth of the Collective from the Spirit of Empathy", p. 99.

the implosion and invalidation of progressive civilization, and Auschwitz as the essence of that catastrophe; a concept that, as Schmitz notes, was taken up widely in historiography, social theory and philosophy (led by the leftist Frankfurt School and including, of course, W.G. Sebald) and came to represent a negative foundational myth for the present<sup>42</sup>. At the heart of the conservative, revisionist history proposed by Nolte and Hillgruber is a reversal of this myth that understands Auschwitz not as a foundational rupture, nor as an essential experience unknowable to Germans, but part of a tradition from which the German past must not be dislocated. It represents the first significant challenge to the position of the Holocaust in historical understanding since the 1960s and as such sets in motion an epistemological anxiety that continues to cause conflict over the matter for many years. The exchange of letters and articles now known as the 'Historikerstreit' raged at its height for 5 months, but was still unresolved and audible in 1989. However, if those on the intellectual left hoped that the reunification of the German people would also reunite intellectual opinion on the memory of the Nazi era, they were to be disappointed. Instead, the series of events and debates that marked the 1990s would serve only to heighten their anxiety, which reached a peak in 1997/98, the time of Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur*.

As already mentioned here, the first administration of the united nation under Chancellor Kohl applied a policy of 'inner unity' with respect to the memory of the past that sought to unite the Germans as the victims, and survivors, of two totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The policy was epitomised in the 1993 re-dedication of the 'Neue Wache' (New Guardhouse), a historical building in East Berlin that had served as a war memorial and then, in the GDR as a memorial to the 'victims of fascism'. In its new form

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

as the ‘Central memorial for the Federal Republic of Germany for the Victims of War and Tyranny’ as conceived by Kohl himself, the memorial set the tone for other commemorations and, according to Niven, “epitomised Kohl’s appropriation of the topos of German victimhood for building a post-unification national identity”<sup>43</sup>. Both the form of the memorial (a sculpture showing a mother grieving over her dead son) and the text of the dedication foreground the suffering of the innocent civilian. More problematically, however, the text made general references to ‘peoples who suffered through war’, both in and outside their homeland and only subsequently mentions the murdered Jews, Sinti and Roma, implying, as Niven terms it “a problematic memory hierarchy”:

Kohl’s 1994 dedication... suggests that civilian casualties, soldiers and the victims of expulsion were [the war’s] prime victims. That these casualties and victims are not to be understood as including Jews is implied by the distinct reference to Jewish deaths which follows. If they don’t include Jews, they must largely consist, so the reader is meant to infer, of Germans and perhaps other nationals who died in the war. Thus the explicit referencing of Jewish deaths serves not to highlight Jewish suffering, but to rank Jews outside the memorial’s prime focus: the Germans.<sup>44</sup>

For those intellectuals still reeling from the revisionist onslaught of the Historikerstreit, here in concrete and as the centrepiece of official memorial culture was the fulfilment of their concerns: the displacement of Jewish victims in favour of ‘German victims’. Even if, as Niven asserts, Kohl’s version of history was “never accepted by the public at

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<sup>43</sup> Niven, “Introduction”, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6.

large”<sup>45</sup>, the anxiety aroused by the foregrounding of German suffering remained palpable throughout the CDU years and manifested in numerous ‘memory contests’, such as the debate over Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* in 1996, Hannes Heer’s *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* exhibition which began in 1995 and the literal contest to decide the form of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, which was first proposed in 1989. Driving all of these, in particular the latter two, was a form of defence against the revisionist threat that sought to build a national identity that did not have the perpetration of the Holocaust as its foundations. In the case of the Wehrmacht exhibition, this was aimed at private, family memory and took the form of a partial re-discovery of the ‘68ers’ impulse to uncover the ‘forgotten’ deeds of the wartime generation, this time in respect of ordinary soldiers and for the benefit of a new generation. The proponents of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, in contrast, sought to categorically reject the message of the Neue Wache by positioning Jewish victims in an unquestionable position of importance both to national memory and national identity.

To a large extent this fight-back against conservatism was successful. The Berlin memorial occupies a massive central space in the nation’s capital, and the reception of both the Wehrmacht exhibition and Goldhagen’s book seem to suggest the public’s willingness to accept the centrality of the Holocaust to Nazi history. Nevertheless, the battle was not won decisively and, if anything, by the end of the decade revisionist arguments seemed less like political manoeuvring and more like the response to a demand for a broadening perspective. With the policy of the Red/Green government not to politically utilise the memory of German suffering after 1998, as Niven explains, came

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 7.



also a sense of confidence and pride in Germany's success at dealing with its past as perpetrators:

That a supposedly left-wing coalition, populated to a large extent by former members of the 1968 generation, should have taken to celebrating the health of German democracy certainly represented a break with previous traditions. The very generation which insisted in the 1960s and 1970s that West Germany must face its Nazi past was suddenly given to implying, if not exactly stating, that this past had been faced, and that Germany could move on. [...] Freed of a sense of guilt-ridden obligation, Germany could develop a vigorous interest in German victimhood.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed it is from 1998 onwards that cultural representations of German suffering become increasingly commonplace and, indeed, popular. The conservative novelist Martin Walser took the opportunity in late 1998 to re-assert some of the arguments that had provoked the *Historikerstreit*, only now that the topic had shifted to the public/cultural arena they were made in the service of literary production. In a speech that was then reproduced in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*<sup>47</sup>, he criticised commemorative language as being sterile, ritualised and limited by the shackles of 'political correctness' and called for a privilege of individual experience and conscience in the representation of the Nazi era. What followed was an ugly and very public exchange of views between Walser and Ignatz Bubis, the president of the Central Council of German Jews, in which the accusations against the '68 generation's hegemony over the past morphed into a construction that sees the private, authentic

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Martin Walser, "Erfahrung beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1998.

German historical consciousness constantly under siege from inauthentic, accusatory memory in the hands of an outside ‘other’, namely the Jews. Schmitz reads this episode as “the dialectic switching station from commemoration of Nazi atrocities to a collectivised memory of German experience that is conceived of in emphatic difference to that of Nazi victims”<sup>48</sup>. In the resulting framework of understanding, a binary history is produced that is “ultimately underpinned by the Nazi-like distinction between the German *Volk* and those who do not belong to it”<sup>49</sup>. Despite criticisms, Walser’s words resonated with many as the confirmation that their private memories of hardship and suffering in the war had been sidelined; the increasing acceptance of a more German-centred memory of the Nazi past in the years that followed, in the public arena at least, suggested that Walser’s speech had had a lasting effect, and not one to be taken lightly. Concerns about an anti-Semitic motivation for the new historical framework mix with criticisms that it all too easily “runs the risk of re-invoking the homogenous Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*”<sup>50</sup>, an effect that Sebald lamented in the narratives of the postwar period. For Niven there is no doubt that “the idea that the left, in cahoots with the Jews, stands to benefit from any German culture of contrition reproduces the conspiracy theories of the Nazis, who argued that the Jews and the socialists were committed to undermining German political strength and national feeling”<sup>51</sup>. This suspected re-affirmation of a ‘*Volksgemeinschaft*’ not only undermines the centrality of the Holocaust to an understanding of the past, it reverses the very structure of our understanding of the

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<sup>48</sup> Schmitz, “The Birth of the Collective from the Spirit of Empathy”, p. 100.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>50</sup> Schmitz, *A Nation of Victims?*, p. 13.

<sup>51</sup> Niven, “Introduction”, p. 11.

past by appropriating tropes of suffering and victimization in order to reverse the polarity of the victim-perpetrator opposition.

The Walser affair followed closely on the heels of the press debate in reaction to the *Luftkrieg und Literatur* lectures, and though the figures at the centre of both controversies spoke from almost opposite ends of the spectrum of historical understanding, they both emerged at a time of deep-seated uncertainty about the future function of the past that made it difficult to differentiate Sebald's position from that occupied by Walser and those who thought like him. In the subsequent inscribing of the period's developments into literary history and scholarship, the effects and the intentions of the two become conflated as a point of origin for the subsequent 'normalisation' of representations of Germans as victims. The speed and ferocity of the condemnations and refutations of Sebald's lectures are less surprising, then, when considered in the context of the real fear of historical revisionism. The willingness to mis-read and misappropriate *Luftkrieg und Literatur* for the purposes of 'lifting the lid' on German suffering was typical of a public and cultural determination to re-invent the German collective's relationship with its past in order to shore up its still uncertain present.

## 7. Discourse Analysis or Discourse Itself? The Scholarly Reception of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*

So significant is the paradigm shift in the memory of the Nazi past and so alarming the destabilisation of the victim-perpetrator dichotomy that scholars of German history, culture and traditional 'Germanistik' have devoted much critical attention to the rise of the 'Germans as victims' phenomenon over the last decade or so. Sebald's essay is widely regarded among scholars as a pivotal moment in the development of the discourse and it has become convention to preface any examination of these representations with a mention of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. However, even among those engaging in close discourse analysis, it is rare to find a scholar engaging fully or objectively with Sebald's text or its context. As I have already observed, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* has to a great extent been dislocated in its reception from Sebald's prose oeuvre, but also treated as separate from his earlier work as an academic. For some, therefore, it instead emerges as a self-indulgent polemic, for some as a genuine attempt to intervene in contemporary German culture and for some an almost unconsciously symptomatic, autobiographical reflection. In many cases critics have been guilty of absorbing the reactions to the text and confusing a reading of the *effects* of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* with a reading of the text itself.

Over time, Sebald's essay has, for many critics, become merely a moment in the 'story' of the rise of 'Germans as victims' as a cultural phenomenon, along with, among other things, the Walser speech and the publication of Günter Grass' *Im Krebsgang*. The text is often cited unquestioningly in passing, often by title only, as a foundational

moment of the discourse, even its ultimate point of origin. Hans-Peter Preußner, as a typical example, begins a discussion of the boom in representations of the air-war with the sentence “In 1997 W.G. Sebald presented his Zurich ‘Poetikvorlesungen’ on *Luftkrieg und Literatur...*”,<sup>1</sup> before going on to discuss the press reaction and Jörg Friedrich, adhering to Mary Cosgrove’s theory that “Sebald is regarded as the instigator of increasingly frenzied memory work on the controversial issue of German suffering”.<sup>2</sup> Susanne Vees-Gulani echoes the formulation of many critics when she states that Sebald “broke new ground”, paving the way for the ‘new’ discourse,<sup>3</sup> and Stefan Berger notes that “the publications of Sebald, Grass and Friedrich, in particular, have been crucial in bringing about a debate about the status of German victims of the war in the cultural memory of the nation.”<sup>4</sup>

It is, perhaps, symptomatic of how powerful the ‘Germans as Victims’ paradigm has become that it is possible to detect a second-hand understanding of the text that has not engaged with it first-hand, as the reception of the text overwhelms its content even here, meaning that those who are engaged in an analysis of the discourse are instead (unwittingly?) perpetuating the discourse itself. In a ‘Chinese whispers’ effect, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* comes to be summed up in a sentence or two either partly or entirely inaccurately, or at least reductively. Susanne Vees-Gulani’s over-simplified statement

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<sup>1</sup> Heinz-Peter Preußner, “Regarding and Imagining, Contrived Immediacy of the Allied Bombing Campaign in Photography, Novel and Historiography”, in Niven ed., pp. 141-159, here p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Cosgrove, “The Anxiety of German Influence in Sebald’s Work”, in Fuchs and Cosgrove eds., pp. 229-253, here p. 231.

<sup>3</sup> Susanne Vees-Gulani, “The Experience of Destruction: W.G. Sebald, the Airwar and Literature”, in *W.G. Sebald: History-Memory-Trauma* ed. by Denham and McCulloh (Walter de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 335-349, here p. 335.

<sup>4</sup> Berger, p. 211.

that Sebald “asserted that there are few literary accounts”<sup>5</sup> dealing with the airwar is not atypical in its misrepresentation of the argument. Daniel Fulda renders Sebald’s central query as “warum die Bombenkriegszerstörungen in Deutschland kaum zum Thema literarischer Darstellungen geworden sind” (why the destruction of the bombing war was hardly represented in literature),<sup>6</sup> while for Henning Hermann-Trentepohl, Sebald’s accusation was that “die Literatur habe sich dem Thema des Luftkriegs verschlossen” (literature shut itself off from the subject).<sup>7</sup> The problem with these simplifications of Sebald’s argument with regard to literature is that they reduce his point to one of absolutes: either there was literature about the bombings, or there was not. As a result, it becomes too easy to claim victory over the didactic Sebald by merely proving the existence of literary representations of the bombings, as in the frequent references to GDR commemorations of the Dresden bombings<sup>8</sup> or to ‘forgotten’ novels of the early FRG. The adoption of this stance allows Menke, in common with others<sup>9</sup>, to conclude that “Sebalds Meinung, es sei kaum Literatur über den Bombenkrieg vorhanden, konnt überzeugend widerlegt werden” (Sebald’s view that there had hardly been any literature about the bombing-war could be convincingly rejected).<sup>10</sup> The nuance of Sebald’s literary thesis is entirely lost in what amounts to a literary treasure hunt and he is

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<sup>5</sup> Susanne Vees-Gulani, *Trauma and Guilt: Literature of Wartime Bombing in Germany* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Fulda, “Abschied von der Zentralperspektive. Der nicht nur literarische Geschichts-diskurs im Nachwende-Deutschland als Dispositiv für Jörg Friedrich’s *der Brand*” in Wilms and Rasch eds., pp. 45-65, here p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Henning Hermann-Trentepohl, “Das sind meine lieben Toten” in Wilms and Rasch eds., p. 81-97, here p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Thomas C. Fox, “East Germany and the Bombing War” in Wilms and Rasch eds, pp. 113-130: Sebald, and others “draw incorrect conclusions about contemporary Germany precisely because they omit the East German context”, p. 114.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance Preußner: “The diagnosis of a taboo is incorrect, Sebald himself names several literary examples in his published version of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*” (p. 141.)

<sup>10</sup> Menke, p. 162.

dismissed as short-sighted, poorly researched or embedded in an FRG-centred conception of contemporary Germany.

The ‘Chinese whispers’ effect also has implications for Sebald’s status as a potential revisionist. Serving as a convenient starting point for the history of ‘Germans as victims’, over time the text has the conventional terms of that debate applied to it as a matter of course. Thus Berger and Taberner cite the publications of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* and Grass’s *Im Krebsgang* as foundational moments for the discourse, “the second seeming to respond to the first’s accusation that postwar writers had failed to document *German suffering*.”<sup>11</sup> Menke sums up “die Ansicht Sebalds, das Thema *deutschen Leidens* sei ein Tabu-stoff für die Autoren gewesen” (Sebald’s view that *German suffering* was a taboo for authors)<sup>12</sup> and Scott Denham sums up the essay briefly as arguing for the existence of a “taboo on *German loss and suffering*”.<sup>13</sup> Stephen Brockmann, whose reading of Sebald is sensitive and nuanced, nevertheless broadly describes the subject of the essay as being “a taboo on *German suffering*”, crediting it with “putting ‘German wartime suffering’ back on Germany’s intellectual agenda”,<sup>14</sup> and Steve Plumb similarly identifies Sebald’s concern as the failure of authors to “engage with the issue of *German suffering* during the Allied bombing offensives”.<sup>15</sup> It may seem like merely a question of semantics, but the use of these problematic formulations in relation to *Luftkrieg und Literatur* carries important implications: firstly, it implies that Sebald is speaking *on behalf of* those Germans who were in the bombed cities, seeking to

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<sup>11</sup> Taberner and Berger, p. 2, my emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Timm Menke, “W.G. Sebald’s ‘Luftkrieg und Literatur’ und die Folgen” in *Bombs Away!* ed. by Wilfried Wilms and William Rasch (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 200?), pp. 149-163, here p. 151, my emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> Scott Denham, “Foreword” in Denham and McCulloh eds., here p. 4, my emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Brockmann, “W.G. Sebald and German Wartime Suffering” in Taberner and Berger eds., pp. 15-29, here p. 15, my emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Steve Plumb, “Art and Air Campaigns of 1940/41 and 1945” in Wilms and Rasch eds., pp. 281-294, here p. 286, my emphasis.

give a voice to those who were silenced by a taboo on their experiences, who were literally ‘suffering in silence’. By placing the impetus on the subjective experience of suffering, rather than an objective view of the violence itself, Sebald is positioned as an ‘insider’ in relation to the discourse as if he were advocating victim status for the bombed-out Germans; a position, as I have demonstrated, he explicitly rejects. Secondly, the use of the term ‘*German suffering*’ suggests a group of suffering victims defined by nationality, suffering *as Germans*, even *for being* Germans.<sup>16</sup> This construction suggests a group attacked by external forces, not only in the airwar but also with the imposition of an externally created taboo on any expression of this suffering. This runs counter to Sebald’s concept of the taboo, which derives from *within* and is willingly self-imposed by the German population. A reversal of the taboo concept places Sebald erroneously in line with a revisionist agenda that seeks to relativise the centrality of the Holocaust and claim its victims’ ‘special’ status for the Germans. The terms used in the analysis of this discourse have, quite rightly, been the subject of much debate. The terms ‘German victims’ and ‘German suffering’ both carry problematic associations, both with a victim-definition that parallels Holocaust discourse, and with Nazi rhetoric on the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a group under attack from foreign or racial forces, as well as inherently excluding the suffering of other victims who are not, apparently, classified as ‘German’. Any study of the contemporary representations of the airwar (or expulsions etc.) is faced with an almost impossible task to remain vigilant against such connotations and so the adoption of such terms is more often a practical choice, rather than an intellectual one. Nevertheless, its use in relation to a text, writer or event inevitably

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<sup>16</sup> For an engagement with the problematic semantics see Annette Seidel-Arpaci, “Lost in Translations? The Discourse of ‘German Suffering’ and W.G. Sebald’s *Luftkrieg und Literatur*” in Schmitz ed., pp. 161-179.



carries the implicit suggestion of a ‘dangerous’ or potentially revisionist idea, and as such can be deployed inappropriately, even lazily.

The mis-alignment of Sebald with such dubious enterprises is demonstrated by the frequent conflation of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* with Jörg Friedrich’s highly controversial *Der Brand* of 2002. With widespread condemnation of *Der Brand*’s apparent equation of the airwar and the Holocaust raging, frequent re-appraisals of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* retrospectively attributed a similar revisionist stance to Sebald, creating a causal link between the ‘new ground’ broken in 1997 and the worrying erosion of the victim-perpetrator dichotomy represented by Friedrich. For many, as for Preußner, Friedrich’s “narrative historiography of the bombing war could almost be imagined to deliver what Sebald claimed to be lacking”, as though Friedrich were responding to Sebald’s ‘call’ for ‘German victims’ to be given a voice. Annette-Seidel Arpacı goes so far as to suggest that Sebald, already in 1999, somehow pre-approved of *Der Brand* by noting that “on the back cover of *Der Brand* we find praise [for Friedrich] from W.G. Sebald”<sup>17</sup> taken from *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. This is a rather disingenuous remark since Sebald had died before the publication of *Der Brand* and, as Seidel-Arpaci is forced to admit in a footnote, the praise was for Friedrich’s much earlier, more sober historiographical work that focussed on the German campaign in the East.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of this, the motivations and positions of the two men are aligned, suggesting that, as Mary Nolan believes, “Sebald searched in vain for authentic experience in literature; Friedrich claimed to have found it in the realm of the local and

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<sup>17</sup> Seidel-Arpaci, p. 162.

<sup>18</sup> The work in question is Friedrich’s *Das Gesetz des Krieges: das deutsche Heer in Rußland 1941-1945* (Piper, 1993), in which he analysed the crimes of Wehrmacht soldiers and the trials of those in command. For this work Friedrich was awarded the 1995 prize by the University of Leiden’s institute for genocide research, as well as an honorary doctorate at Amsterdam University.

unpolitical...they both wanted exemplary victims, ennobled by suffering”.<sup>19</sup> The application of Friedrich’s attitude to *Luftkrieg und Literatur* entails a reversal of Sebald’s argument (the ‘ennobling’ of suffering is precisely Sebald’s criticism of postwar literature), dragging him into a confrontation over revisionism that blocks a useful engagement with his essay.

An analysis of the arguments made by two critics in particular ably demonstrates Sebald’s placement in this confrontation. On one side, Annette Seidel-Arpaci has argued that the seed of Friedrich’s linguistic affront to the centrality of the Holocaust was sown in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* and that the fruit of their efforts can be found in the rhetoric of the neo-Nazi party (NDP) in Germany, who in 2005 invoked the term ‘Bombenholocaust’ to describe the air raids. For Seidel-Arpaci, this term was merely a condensation of sentiments already expressed “in far more respectable form”<sup>20</sup>, namely in the texts of Sebald, then Friedrich. Furthermore, these views have been not just inspired by, but actually facilitated by them: “Not only Friedrich’s, but already Sebald’s use of language contributed to the ingredient imaginary for the creation of a term like ‘Bombenholocaust’.”<sup>21</sup> Like other critics, Seidel-Arpaci’s argument leans heavily on an analysis of one carefully chosen passage of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* from its opening page, which states that the destruction of the German cities was an “in der Geschichte bis dahin einzigartige Vernichtungsaktion” (an act of destruction unique in history at that time) (*LL*, 11).<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly this is a problematic construction that warrants very close attention. As Seidel-Arpaci observes, “the term ‘Vernichtung’ - in particular as a noun-

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Nolan, “Air Wars, Memory Wars”, *Central European History* (38:1, pp. 7-40), here p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Seidel-Arpaci, p. 162.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Preußner similarly focuses on this sentence, stating that “historically speaking, this is an affront since it specifically omits the victims on the other side (e.g. in the Soviet Union) by its implicit comparison”, p. 141.

can hardly be used in the German language at this point in time without connoting first and foremost the murder of the Jews in Europe”.<sup>23</sup> Most commonly translated as ‘extermination’ or ‘annihilation’, as in ‘Vernichtungskrieg’ (war of annihilation), this is a term frequently found in Nazi rhetoric. Furthermore, “Sebald doubles his linguistic effort on appropriation with the addition of the term ‘Aktion’”, which was used by the Nazis to refer to raids for the rounding up of Jews to be deported.<sup>24</sup> Seidel-Arpaci is in no doubt of the connotations of this term:

This use of language results in shifting a part of German guilt and responsibility onto the Allies via the shifting of terms from one discursive context into another. Sebald’s choice of language thereby implicitly compares the bombing of German cities to the Shoah and the German war in the East. Thus ‘everyone’ can be viewed as victim and perpetrator.<sup>25</sup>

By deeming this an “*einzigartig*” (unique) event from the outset, she continues, Sebald “overwrites his own references to Coventry and other places destroyed by German raids.”<sup>26</sup> As a writer who has engaged deeply with the memory of the Holocaust, and who is highly attuned to linguistic nuance, Seidel-Arpaci is justified in judging this choice of words to be deliberate. The English translation of the text, which Sebald is said to have approved before his death, only supports this conclusion, she argues, since the term “*Vernichtungsaktion*” is ‘softened’ for the English-speaking audience (made up of the ‘bomber’ nations) to “destruction, on a scale without historical precedent” (*NHD*, pp. 3-4).

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<sup>23</sup> Seidel-Arpaci, p. 165.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Although I have argued in my reading of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* that Sebald's understanding of history, in line with Adorno and Horkheimer, recognises the Holocaust as a fundamental rupture in European history and is thus in opposition to typical conservative attempts to 'historicise' German perpetration, Seidel-Arpaci's concerns about this feature of the essay raise valid concerns that must be addressed. Indeed, so compelling are the objections to this sentence that the entire essay risks being reduced to this one problematic phrase for some critics, including Seidel-Arpaci here. Is there an argument in defence of Sebald's choice here? There are some technical points to bear in mind: First, with regard to the 'softening' translation of 'Vernichtungsaktion', could it not be the case that the translator and British publishers may have felt that the use of a term commonly associated with Nazi perpetrators (extermination) may have been offensive to British and American readers when applied to bomber crews, generally thought of as heroes in those countries? Second, in respect of the disputed 'unique' status of the destruction of the German cities, while it is true that the strategy itself was already in use elsewhere, the scale, technique and severity of the air raids on the German cities indeed was incomparable to anything that had gone before, both at the time of the raids and in terms of the after-effects.

More fundamental than these technicalities, however, is the question of Sebald's intention when choosing this phrase. Seidel-Arpaci admits that she cannot charge Sebald with "any explicitly revisionist political agenda" and finds it surprising that the author of *The Emigrants* should "focus on 'German suffering' and their experience of 'horrors' during the Second World War".<sup>27</sup> The mistake here, as elsewhere in criticism, is to isolate the 'Vernichtungsaktion' phrase without considering its context. Just as no

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 162 and 166.

comprehensive understanding of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* can be achieved without situating it in Sebald's oeuvre, so it is misleading to consider the implications of this phrase without considering Sebald's greater concept of the bombings as a component part of the 'Katastrophe' that was National Socialism. I would argue that the point Sebald is making with the use of the term 'Vernichtungsaktion' (and later 'Vernichtungskrieg') in German would be entirely lost in translation: the employment of Nazi Germany's own term for the act of Europe-wide annihilation they carried out to describe the violence they themselves experienced makes it clear that the war in the air is the same as the one in the East, not a separate conflict that can be remembered differently as the terms 'Bombenkrieg' or 'Luftkrieg' might suggest. Sebald is indeed acutely sensitive to the use of language, especially the careful and manipulative use of the German language by the Nazis. The term 'Vernichtungsaktion' was used by the Nazis as a characteristically euphemistic term for the deportation of the Jews, specifically constructed as a very 'German' compound noun in keeping with the Nazis' appropriation of language to support their bureaucratic administration of mass murder. The use of the term in relation to what the Germans themselves experienced therefore turns the violence, enacted even at the level of language, back onto its originators. The corruption of the German language for the service of mass murder was an idea at the heart of Adorno and Horkheimer's philosophy that was such an influence on Sebald. In English this linguistic evocation of the self-corruption of the German language would be lost, and so is perhaps best avoided altogether.

Whether or not one accepts this defence, it seems fair to say that Seidel-Arpaci, like other scholars, allows her analysis to become fixated on this passage at the expense of the remainder of the essay, in particular its main focal point, that is the literary

representation of the bombings. Finally she notes that the sentence is a (typically Sebaldian) very long one, which “leaves one breathless” and in it he mentions the “erstickende Folgen” (suffocating effects). In something of an over-extension, Seidel-Arpaci asks whether this “structuring breathlessness and its linguistic linking reveal a desire for the Germans to be recognised equally as victims, like their victims who suffocated in the gas chambers?”<sup>28</sup> Despite her earlier reservations about accusing Sebald of revisionism, Seidel-Arpaci thus judges his intentions as classically revisionist and in the service of ‘German victims’ on the basis of one sentence alone.

On the opposite side of the scholarly conflict into which Sebald is drawn, Wilfried Wilms has argued in favour of Sebald’s ‘lifting of the lid’ to allow for a full historical engagement with the airwar, even criticising Sebald for not going far enough:

Sebald correctly observes that the violent deaths of more than half a million civilians and the destruction of more than three million homes had not found adequate voice in German literature. To suggest, however, that Germany’s transition to a consumer society alone aided the welcomed collapse of witnessing by supporting an initial forgetfulness is misleading...[and]...neglects the political reality of postwar Germany.<sup>29</sup>

Sebald’s shortcoming, for Wilms, is that he “remains faithful to a taboo he himself grew up with in the Federal Republic: the taboo against criticizing the Allies for their conduct during World War II. This taboo ultimately tames his investigations by assigning “final

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>29</sup> Wilfried Wilms, “Speak no Evil, Write no Evil: In Search of a Usable Language of Destruction” in Denham and McCulloh eds., pp. 183-204, here pp. 200-201.

responsibility for the destruction of life and property to Nazi Germany.”<sup>30</sup> With this, Wilms hijacks an ostensibly objective analysis of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* in a volume dedicated to Sebald to put forward his own argument that any silence about the bombings was forcibly imposed by the Allies who controlled the media in postwar Germany: “To avoid the recent technological mass-murder in the process of cultural re-organization was, for obvious reasons, very much in the interest of victors who were decidedly unwilling to look back.”<sup>31</sup> While this may not be historically inaccurate, Wilms takes his argument in a direction that clearly seeks to blur the victim-perpetrator divide and suggest that both Germany and the Allies can equally be accused of war crimes, with the former having to take all the blame while the latter occupy a “very moral high ground”.<sup>32</sup> Acting out of vengeful feelings and seeking to quell any suggestion of sympathy for the Germans, the victorious Allies employed a “subtle mechanism of repression that made it impossible for the outside world to realize the extent to which Germany had been destroyed and its people dehumanized.”<sup>33</sup> Reading his chapter it becomes clear that in his line of argument and choice of language Wilms has used the discursive opportunity afforded by *Luftkrieg und Literatur* to promote a discourse that claims Germans to be victims of the Nazis, then the bombs and finally the victorious Allies. The repression techniques of the Allies, he argues, amounted to the “desubjectification of the German ‘kraut’ or ‘Hun’”, in a direct reversal of the de-subjectification of ‘Untermenschen’ by the Nazis.<sup>34</sup> Wilms refers to ‘Germany’ when describing Allied aggression, but ‘Nazi-Germany’ when referring to German perpetration, as though the two were not

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

contemporaneous and thus eroding the causal link between Nazi foreign policy and the Allied bombing campaign. In fact, Wilms argues specifically for an evaluation of the Allied bombings in isolation from its historical context: “What else does ‘it all began in Coventry’ achieve but to prevent a balanced account of the predicament of German civilians from reaching a contemporary public by which it could then be scrutinized and evaluated?”<sup>35</sup> Both Sebald’s adherence to this apparently cowardly stance and the discourse as a whole, he argues, “adheres to the official script” that assigns “responsibility for all war crimes, those committed by Germans and those committed by the Allies, solely to Nazi Germany”, an attitude which “underscores the comfortable suppression of the whole story by the Allies.”<sup>36</sup> Wilms offers no concrete evidence of suppressed novels to support this theory and the wealth of research that counters *Luftkrieg und Literatur* with lists of texts featuring the raids from the 1940s and 1950s (in both East and West), such as Hage’s *Zeugen der Zerstörung*, would seem to disprove his argument of widespread Allied censorship. The inclusion of Wilms’ polemic in a volume dedicated to literary scholarship on Sebald is evidence of how entangled in the ‘Germans as victims’ conflict the consideration of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* has become, even in academic discourse.

Though fighting for opposite camps, the two extremes represented by Seidel-Arpaci and Wilms<sup>37</sup> are commonly bound by discursive conventions dictated by the scholarly milieu in which they were produced. Much of the criticism, in fact, is entrenched in a branch of Germanistik that has, for decades, been deeply engaged with

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 185 and 204.

<sup>37</sup> This is not to suggest that the work of Seidel-Arpaci shares the polemical or at times unscholarly approach of Wilms, merely that they represent the opposite ends of the spectrum of opinion on *Luftkrieg und Literatur*.



the debates surrounding Vergangenheitsbewältigung, and which has accorded great influence to literary works that deal with the Nazi past, setting high standards of moral responsibility for authors who are obliged to reflect the historical conscience of the nation. In some of the criticism it is possible to detect an almost bewildered reaction to a text that seeks to place itself ‘outside’ these conceptual parameters, such as that by Anne Fuchs:

Against the backdrop of the memory contests of the 1980s and 1990s, the historical reductionism of Sebald’s argument is astonishing: at no point in the essay does he reflect on German reunification as the most dramatic historical turning point since 1945 or its consequences for cultural memory.<sup>38</sup>

My own argument that *Luftkrieg und Literatur* operates outside of what can be conventionally termed Vergangenheitsbewältigung notwithstanding, it seems odd that an essay on literature of the immediate postwar era should be obliged to reflect on the effects of reunification in 1990.<sup>39</sup> It is almost as if Fuchs cannot accept that *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is, as it claims to be, an essay on literature and literary representation unless it ticks these boxes, and so she assumes this to be a ruse: “On a thematic level the essay deals *superficially* with a critical stock check of postwar society and literature”, veiling Sebald’s almost unconsciously pursued ‘real’ motives, which are an enacting of personal trans-generational traumatic symptoms.<sup>40</sup> Susanne Vees-Gulani, in a comparable stance to Fuchs, struggles to define Sebald’s starting point in terms of his perspective on these

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<sup>38</sup> Anne Fuchs, “A ‘Heimat’ in Ruins and the Ruins as ‘Heimat’: W.G. Sebald’s *Luftkrieg und Literatur*” in *German Memory Contests* ed. by Anne Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove, pp. 287-302, here p. 291.

<sup>39</sup> In an editorial decision that is perhaps demonstrative of Fuchs’ positioning of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* within the Vergangenheitsbewältigung paradigm, she includes her chapter in a section entitled ‘Memory Politics’.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287. My emphasis.

matters, viewing him principally as an academic whose “strictly critical approach is undermined” by allowing his own literary technique to colour his argument: “For an objective literary and cultural analysis by a distanced critic, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* thus seems, while tackling important questions, at times strangely confused, unbalanced and contradictory.”<sup>41</sup> Like Fuchs, Veas-Gulani concludes that if Sebald is not speaking as a “distanced critic”, he must be motivated by a personal quest for knowledge about an experience that he himself did not live through.

Both Fuchs and Veas-Gulani approach the essay from a psychological angle, making use of trauma theory. For Fuchs, the most striking quality is “the obsessive tonality of Sebald’s essay that shows through in the strikingly repetitive quality of his line of argument.”<sup>42</sup> Leaving aside the literary focus of the text altogether, she instead reads *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as “a symptomatic narrative that betrays Sebald’s emotional ambivalence towards his German origins” and “not so much an academic exercise as a disguised autobiographical reflection”.<sup>43</sup> Fuchs’ in-depth analysis offers a fascinating new perspective on the essay and elements of the text would certainly support this view. Sebald makes clear that he feels a connection to the ruined cities as the origin of the nation in which he grew up, despite having spent his childhood in a largely rural setting (*LL*, 78/*NHD*, 71). In spite of this, however, I would argue that Fuchs misdiagnoses the essay as being driven by Sebald’s personal lament for a lost sense of ‘Heimat’. Fuchs posits a “nostalgic tenor” to the essay that “gives expression to Sebald’s desire for an unbroken tradition and an intact cultural heritage without rupture.”<sup>44</sup> This

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<sup>41</sup> Veas-Gulani, “The Experience of Destruction”, p. 343.

<sup>42</sup> Fuchs, p. 290.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 292-293.

would seem to suggest that Sebald laments both the bombings and the past-erasing efforts of the Wirtschaftswunder because it leaves him adrift, dislocated from any greater sense of his country's history. Citing Sebald's critique of the postwar architectural landscape, Fuchs detects evidence of this in his distaste for the ubiquity of its style:

In the current context the massive criticism of the dreariness of postwar German cities points to the nostalgic longing for an anchorage of subjectivity in meaningful traditions. However, since for Sebald National Socialism has delegitimized the notion of cultural heritage and devalued traditional forms of memory culture, this longing for tradition can no longer be fulfilled. Thus viewed, the awareness that National Socialism, the Holocaust, and the war destroyed the Heimat represents the basis on which Sebald's nostalgic longing for tradition is founded.<sup>45</sup>

Though it is certainly the case that Sebald considers the 'Heimat' delegitimized in terms of its cultural heritage by National Socialism, it is precisely this rupture with the past that Sebald accuses German culture of ignoring, precisely in the service of anchoring the new Germany in what it considers to be meaningful traditions. The attempt by the fledgling FRG to restore cultural health along much the same lines as it was previously known at the expense of a confrontation with the rupture that had occurred is at the heart of his dissatisfaction with his home nation. It seems therefore to be a drastic reversal of his attitude to suggest that, unconsciously, he is in fact mourning the loss of this very tradition and the analysis relies on, arguably, an over-foregrounding of Sebald's own subjectivity as well as a corresponding neglect of his literary analyses.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

The privileging of authorial subjectivity in critical analysis is perhaps a side-effect of the dominance of trauma theory in literary scholarship, which came to the fore especially during the 1990s and the boom in Holocaust studies. Undoubtedly Sebald is conscious of such theories and many features of his prose appear to explore the phenomenon of traumatic repression, latency and return. Furthermore, he expresses an awareness of the traumatic effects of the bombing raids on the population in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Nevertheless, an analysis of the essay that leans too heavily on trauma theory risks becoming one-dimensional in its approach. Susanne Veas-Gulani's argument, for instance, uses a detailed application of critical trauma theory and the diagnostic criteria of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to make two main arguments about the text. The first is that Sebald's position is too flawed and confused to represent a literary treatise and thus Veas-Gulani concludes, similarly to Fuchs, that Sebald is engaged in an act of what Marianne Hirsch terms post-memory, that is, the memorial work of "a generation which has not lived through traumatic events of the past directly, but nevertheless feels strongly connected to, and influenced by them."<sup>46</sup> For Veas-Gulani, Sebald's futile search for glimpses of authentic experience of the bombing war is an attempt to bridge this gap between lived experience and post-memory. Secondly, this search will necessarily be futile because the writers who had lived through the raids were too heavily traumatised to offer a direct and authentic engagement with the events that could be transmitted to future generations.<sup>47</sup>

While the issue of trauma is undoubtedly relevant in any consideration of the postwar situation and especially concerning the sudden and apocalyptic experience of the

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<sup>46</sup> Veas-Gulani, "The Experience of Destruction", p. 344.

<sup>47</sup> See Veas-Gulani, *Trauma and Guilt*, p. 120.

bombings, there is a problem when it is applied to Sebald's theory. The focus on the traumatising of the individual assumes that what Sebald seeks is a record of the *experience* of being bombed, of its effect on individual subjectivity. Offering fascinating insights into the psyche of the postwar author, Vees-Gulani explains that most would hide from their experience by "pulling back into a more abstract realm of narration when the focus on the individual becomes too painful",<sup>48</sup> chiding Sebald for not taking account of this difficulty in his criticisms. In the course of his argument, Sebald makes it clear that this is not a search for the lost stories of individuals.

Returning to the links between the raids and the Holocaust in Sebald's conception, there is an important distinction to be made between the right to testimony claimed by the victims of the Holocaust, the imperative driving Sebald's writing in *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, and those who were bombed in the German cities. The bombed populace can claim no such right to testimony that must be preserved. Instead their humiliation and degradation, and the violence that caused it, must be the subject of any representation. The privileging of subjectivity when it comes to any writing of the bombings is exactly the step that leads to problematic notions of 'German victims', and one against which Sebald consciously guards.

It would be a generalisation to suggest that all scholarly criticism that examines *Luftkrieg und Literatur* mis-aligns Sebald's position with regard to a discourse of 'Germans as victims' and the divergent approaches to the text form a rich basis of criticism with which to read it. Nevertheless, taken as a whole the body of work on the text, on Sebald and on representations of German suffering betrays a discursive context that exerts a distorting influence on readings of the essay.

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<sup>48</sup> Veas-Gulani, "The Experience of Destruction", p. 341.

## Conclusion

In their recent evaluation of the impact of the rise of the ‘Germans as victims’ discourse on new literature about the Nazi past, Karina Berger and Stuart Taberner suggest that the debate over the “memory contests” that were so dominant in the 1990s and early 2000s may in fact overstate the real level of disagreement over the inclusion of certain elements into the memorial paradigm, or indeed understate the extent of acceptance of the contradictory elements introduced by a more empathetic approach to the German experience of the war.<sup>1</sup> If this assessment is correct, and, as they claim, “the bombing, mass rape and expulsion are now very much part of public discourse”,<sup>2</sup> then we must assume that the controversies and bitter disputes played out in the media and in intellectual circles over the ethical possibility of a memory of German suffering, of which the Sebald debate was one of the most prominent, have had little impact on popular culture or the public at large, which has absorbed the narrative of German suffering relatively unproblematically. What, then, can we learn from a re-evaluation of Sebald’s essay and its reception more than a decade later, now that the dust has settled?

This thesis has argued that the so-called Sebald debate of the late 1990s had little to do with *Luftkrieg und Literatur* itself and was first and foremost a symptom of the particular anxiety and tension surrounding the political and cultural “ownership” of the Nazi past in the infant Berlin Republic. Back then, the question that provoked such heated reactions was whether or not there had been a taboo on representations of German suffering. Perhaps now, the more pertinent question to ask is, why was the issue of a

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<sup>1</sup> Berger and Taberner, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

taboo so important? I have argued that Sebald's essay presented itself as a discursive opportunity which was harnessed by those commentators wishing to legitimise a renewed emphasis on German suffering. However, this misappropriation of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* was not one-sided. The essay and the idea of a taboo on a memory of the bombings were equally leapt upon by those on both sides of the argument with equal promotion and acceptance of its mis-reading. The concept of a taboo on German memory was one that was ultimately useful to both sides of the ethical debate: for those wishing to disturb the perceived hegemony of a perpetrator-centred memory, it was an opportunity to call for a reversal of an enforced repression, while for those wishing to protect the centrality of the Holocaust to a memory of the Nazi past, it was an opportunity to remind the German nation, and a new generation, that this centrality was not an epistemological certainty and was still subject to threat.

In my reading of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* I have aimed to demonstrate that Sebald's essay was not an attempt to intervene in these debates, but was contained within an aesthetic and creative framework of Sebald's own project of literary representation. The force with which his text was wrenched out of this framework by the intellectual milieu in which it was received, I suggest, is indicative of a universal readiness in Germany at the eve of the millennium to continually disrupt and re-establish its relationship to its past for the purposes of renewed collective identification. Thus, when Sebald gave his lectures in 1997, it was the existing discourse that thrust his subject matter into the discursive limelight, rather than the other way around.

Perhaps now that the particular moment itself has passed, we can employ critical distance to conclude that the significance of the Sebald debate lies less in what it might have said about Sebald and about the memory of the bombings, and more in the

enthusiasm and insistence with which it was said. The willingness to launch into a cultural spat that was, as I have argued, ultimately self-referential and self-perpetuating would seem to indicate that when it comes to the memory of German experiences of the war, the fight itself is more important than who wins. Caroline Pearce has posited the notion of a “dialectic of normality” in the Berlin Republic whereby the continual conflict over the memory of the Nazi past and the continual reminders of German perpetration that they afford act as a system of checks and balances, that ultimately produce a level of “normality” with respect to the past.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps in the case of the Sebald debate what we have seen is a similar process at work in respect to the memory of German experiences of the war, or at least a merging of the two in a holistic dialectic. The trope of German suffering may have established itself more or less comfortably in popular culture, but perhaps this is only possible *because* the public display of ethical conflict has served as a moral buffer for the new model of remembrance. Thus we can conclude that perhaps Sebald’s *Luftkrieg und Literatur* did indeed break new ground in the memory of German suffering, but only because it was harnessed as the discursive ballast required to stabilise a pre-existing discourse.

The appropriation of the essay by the discourse perhaps also had an impact on the place of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* within the reception of Sebald’s oeuvre. Overshadowed by the debate that positioned Sebald’s line in the essay as potentially revisionist, it may be that scholars were reluctant to engage with the work on the same terms as they had engaged copiously with the prose works that had gained such respect for their sensitive treatment of the Holocaust. As a result, the insights into Sebald’s literary practice and his

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<sup>3</sup> Caroline Pearce, *Contemporary Germany and the Nazi Legacy: Remembrance, Politics and the Dialectic of Normality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).



complex relationship with the country of his birth offered by the text went largely unmentioned upon. In turn, the extent to which the scholarly response to the text was influenced by the debates over German victimhood is an indicator of how deeply the discipline has become enmeshed in the ethical battlefield over the right way to remember the Nazi past in Germany. As these moments of conflict pass, it is important to engage critical hindsight and distance in order to open out and unpack the lines of argument and dispute. In this case, it is a mutually illuminating process: we can learn more about *Luftkrieg und Literatur* if we separate it from the discourse, and in turn, the knowledge that the discourse was not sparked by or predicated on the content of the text is a point of departure for a deeper understanding of the memory politics of that time.

The correction of the critical separation of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* from Sebald's other works provides a valuable bridge between his practice as an academic and as a literary author. In doing so I have aimed to demonstrate that it can be seen as an intersection between Sebald's continuous reflection on the possibilities of historical aesthetic practice and his preoccupation with the catastrophic prehistory of the country of his birth. As such, I have read *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as a reflection on Germany during and after the war that operates outside the usual parameters of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, and yet Sebald's text does make a contribution to that field by reflecting on a viable form or representation that can transcend the categories of victim and perpetrator in order to show the violence, destruction and degradation that were the catastrophic consequences of Germany's aberration.

This reading of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is far from a comprehensive piece of research into the implications of the text as it opens up further channels of inquiry with its findings. In his criticisms of postwar authors Sebald finds that they have employed

various means of abstraction to both cover up the truth of the bombings and extract some kind of metaphysical or transcendent meaning from the experience. The potential for further research lies in the exploration of the forms chosen by these authors to abstract the recent past, and of how these forms relate to the cultural and social demands of the time. Such an exploration goes beyond the parameters of the current thesis, but will be the subject of my subsequent research.

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