

# What Counts as True? Pictures and Fiction in W.G. Sebald

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- On pages 14 and 15 of *The Rings of Saturn* one of four novels written by W.G. Sebald, there is a black and white reproduction of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*. Sebald mentions the painting again on page 182 of *On The Natural History of Destruction*, his one book of non-fiction. In both cases, the painting is invoked for the same reason: *The Anatomy Lesson* depicts the dissection of the corpse of a hanged criminal in Amsterdam in 1632. As Dr. Nicholas Tulp conducts the dissection, the Guild of Surgeons looks on. But what they look at – to a man – is not the body being dissected, but the anatomical textbook propped up at the deceased man's feet. These surgeons, men of science, do not or will not or can not look at the man himself: the body laid bare and then some. They – each and every one of them – overlook the tendons being forcibly withdrawn from the dead man's arm with a pair of forceps. They look beyond the actual contents of the human body before them, in favor of a representation of the body in the book. Rembrandt's composition is such that they literally must look over and beyond the body to see the representation in the book. Even in death, reduced to object-status, the subject cannot escape the unreliable, subjective condition of the human. The trust of science is in the book, not the body; in the object rather than the subject.

- Sebald points out that the hand being dissected is, in the painting, the wrong way around. Where the thumb of the left hand should be pointed inward, exposing the tendons on the back of the arm, it is turned outward – which would not give the surgeon access to the tendons he is tugging at, absentmindedly, with his forceps. Sebald reads this inaccuracy as an intentionally-included clue to the violence done to the man whom Sebald refers to as the victim: that is, to the criminal who has been hanged. The inclusion of this clue, says Sebald, signifies that it is with "him, the victim, and not the Guild that gave Rembrandt his commission, that the painter identifies." (*Saturn* 16) I wonder if, instead, it might not be an accentuation of the earlier, more central point of the painting: the Guild of Surgeons are so focused on the anatomy book, that they fail to notice that this man's hand is anatomically incorrect. The displacement of our trust from subject to object, from here to elsewhere, goes hand in hand with the displacement of our engagement with the particular to an engagement with the general; from the arm of a man, to the picture of the human arm as a generalized, a-subjective idea.
- Art is an attempt to deal with the joint disappointments of religion and politics. I've stolen this assertion from Simon Critchley, substituting art where Critchley says philosophy. I doubt Critchley would object to the substitution though. What he says about disappointment holds equally for art and philosophy. According to Critchley, the disappointments of religion have to do with meaning: what is the meaning of life in the absence of religious belief? The disappointments of politics have to do with justice. Critchley's book *Very Little...Almost Nothing* begins with this codification of disappointments. It continues by addressing itself philosophically to the religious side of disappointment. "The great metaphysical comfort of religion, its

existential balm," writes Critchley, "surely resides in its claim that the meaning of human life lies outside of life and outside humanity." (2) Critchley says "philosophizing begins from the recognition of the literal incredibility of this claim." Art also begins here, at this attempted displacement, this passing of the buck to someone or something or somewhere else.

- Actually, it doesn't matter to me whether its philosophy or art which starts at the disappointment of religion. What really starts here is an attempt to replace the missing meaning once provided by the buck-stops-here omniscience of god. In fact, I think Critchley is wrong to suggest that justice and meaning are equivalent and simultaneous starting points. Justice, too, follows on from meaning. Justice depends on the answers to the question: what is the meaning of life? No matter whether we seek or make this meaning in philosophy or art, the responsibilities are the same.
- Sebald's four novels and his one book of non-fiction are all peppered with black and white images, most of them photographs. Sebald is a long-time amateur photographer and a collector of photographs found at charity shops, at garage sales, in garbage bins, along road sides. In his books, these photographs always arrive unannounced, but always just in time to buoy a claim or stabilize a reference. In Sebald's books, the photographs fulfill the role played by the anatomy textbook in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*. Actually, to be more precise, the photographs fulfill the role played by the anatomy textbook in the scene depicted in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*. Reading Sebald, we are the members of the Guild of Surgeons, distracted from the subjectivity of the testimony before us by the apparent objectivity of the photographs.

- About post-War German literary efforts to address the Nazi years, Sebald has this to say: "They felt they had to say something, but it was lacking in tact or true compassion; the moral presumption is insufferable. [Alfred] Andersch was married to a Jewish woman from Munich, and he divorced her in about 1936, exposing her to danger. I don't think one can write from a compromised moral position." (Jaggi) I leap upon such a sentiment: "Who are you to issue such a condemnation? Don't you, W.G. Sebald, also write from a compromised moral position?" Then I fall back into my chair, struck with heavy vengeance. I, too, write from a compromised moral position. I ask myself these questions then: Are we all equally imprisoned by our compromised moralities? Are we all equally freed by this leveling condition? Or is there a hierarchy of compromise; are some more compromised than others?
- According to Sebald, German post-War literature finds itself trapped in the German literary tradition which "extends from Goethe's idealistic vision in *Wilhelm Meister* of a community devoted to self-improvement, through Stefan George's *Stern des Bundes* ('Star of the League')." (*Destruction* 50-51) So the question of the appropriate German, post-War literature Sebald longs for, apparently, is a question of form. Literature must find a new form, appropriate to the demands of history's devastating new content. But no, it is not that simple. I have to confess, I've been disingenuous in presenting Sebald's quote (it is so easy, after all, to play fast and loose with appropriated materials). After mentioning Goethe and Stefan George, Sebald extends his account of the sweep of the German literary tradition: "on to Stauffenberg and Himmler." Stauffenberg was the leader of an attempted assassination of Hitler. Himmler was the chief of the

Gestapo. In light of this extension, it cannot be a simple matter of form. One wonders: can it ever be that simple? There must be a hierarchy of compromise; some are undeniably more compromised than others.

- Sebald emigrated from Germany to England in 1966. In leaving Germany, perhaps he hoped to step outside the German literary tradition of Goethe, George, Stauffenburg and Himmler. The tradition he might have inherited is a very different one. As Terry Eagleton would have it, in the absence of a pervasive, persuasive religious morality, English literature has been called upon to dramatize the moral exigencies of its culture: meaning both its time and its place. Around the time of Matthew Arnold, Henry James, and F.R. Leavis, English literature had to re-imagine its responsibility, re-imagining the idea of morality in the process. Eagleton writes, "Morality is no longer to be grasped as a formulated code or explicit ethical system: it is rather a sensitive preoccupation with the whole quality of life itself, with the oblique, nuanced particulars of human experience." (*Literary Theory*, 24) This moral process is not an accounting of facts. The process cannot be bureaucratic; it cannot be objective: centered on the object. Reflecting on his own literary response to the rise of mid-century fascism, Carlo Levi, who had been exiled by Mussolini for his anti-fascist activities, wrote "The process is not, and has never been, identification with a datum, a flight into objectivity, but is rather the continual discernment of love." (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*, 7) In this context, I take love to mean what Eagleton called "a sensitive preoccupation with the whole quality of life itself". Love – absolutely unquantifiable in the ledger books of history – is very nearly the same as morality.

- In *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Derrida writes that testimony is, by definition: unique, indivisible, singular; testimony must always be exemplary. Derrida distinguishes the mechanism of evidence at work in testimony from that in science or law: testimony says, "You must believe me, because you must believe me – this is the difference, essential to testimony, between belief and proof – you must believe me because I am irreplaceable." (*Demeure* 40) Testimony's filtration through the sieve of a subject is not seen as corrupting. On the contrary, this subjective filtration grants testimony its value.
- Legal or scientific evidence, on the other hand, calls for an unfiltered objectivity; a certainty upon which we can all rationally agree. *Austerlitz*, in particular, of all of Sebald's novels, seems to want to present evidence rather than testimony. Published after *On The Natural History of Destruction*, Sebald's fiction appears to have been influenced by his non-fiction.

**First:** *Austerlitz* is told at a constant remove. the book is told by an unnamed narrator, who carries no apparent content of its own. The narrator is merely a conduit. The book, tells the story of Jacques Austerlitz, the young son of Czech Jews, smuggled to Wales aboard one of the kinder transports which removed children from beneath the enormous fist hovering in the skies of Nazi Europe. The narrator recounts very long stories told to him by Austerlitz, sometimes told to Austerlitz by other characters, hearsay upon hearsay. The narrator, himself, is not a "player," in any of the novel's episodes; but merely a medium through which Austerlitz's story reaches us. Why not straight from the horse's mouth? Why not from Austerlitz himself? Standing at a remove from the action, the narrator objectifies – that is, the narrator makes objective – not only the narration, but also the *ability* to narrate, to pick and to choose, to judge. Testimonies, contaminated by the subjectivities which convey them, are converted into narrative. The narrator – mediator and

censor of testimony, of histories with a small h – becomes the creator of History with a capital H.

**Second:** Memory in *Austerlitz* is always corroborated or documented or contained in air-tight, vessel-like minds of bystanders and witnesses too innocent to doubt. When Austerlitz returns to his native, but forgotten Prague, seeking traces of his family name, he discovers in the city records, six Prague families during the war named Austerlitz. A visit to the first of those six addresses instantly and effortlessly (this is not Kafka) reunites him with his mother's best friend (the nanny of his youth), whose picture-perfect memory is abetted by a heartbrokenness which places her memories beyond any suspicion of self-service or manipulation. In *Austerlitz*, when the characters' memories fail, there is invariably a video tape or a written record. The impression is created that history's memory is never lost, never inaccurate. Memory, in *Austerlitz*, acts like a steel cable upon which the funicular of our consciousness is suspended. The cable stretches from the terminus of time – which is the present moment – back to the truth which got us here, back to reality. Memory, the cable connecting origin to outcome, does not add or subtract cargo from the funicular; it does not alter or interpret the contents on their way from a to b. The cable is an objective facilitator: a taut, straight, line, bereft of subjective bending, fraying, or going astray.

**Third:** There is a funny kind of reliance placed on the photographs with which Sebald peppers not just *Austerlitz*, but all his texts. It is as if these photographs, or at least this funny kind of reliance has been shipped in from a previous time, perhaps aboard the funicular suspended from Sebald's memorious cable, packed in ice so as to arrive freshly naïve, unspoilt by the cynicism which has *turned* so much of our contemporary sensibility; curdled our looking, poisoned our thinking. The meaning of each individual picture is negligible. It is the meaning of the pictures' collective presence, which is crucial to the functioning of Sebald's books. The photographs say that the narrator, the writer, (whoever), isn't just making this stuff up. It's out there in the world. The meaning of the photographs is that the objects in them *are photographable*: the buildings, the landscapes, the planes, the monuments, the trees, even the occasional person, exist. These photographs are admissible as evidence.

Perhaps it is the writer's peculiar affliction to see the photograph as objective. Or perhaps it is just the writer who suffers this affliction most acutely. Where words struggle to identify the particular, the photograph effortlessly indicates a particularness that stands in metonymically for the universal. Every photographed object is particular essentially and essentially particular. The writer *feels* the objects which constitute the photograph's objectivity. As Roland Barthes would have it in *Camera Lucida*, the photograph "is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This*." (*Camera Lucida* 4) Barthes relates the photograph to a "child pointing a finger at something and saying: *that, there it is, lo!*" (*Camera Lucida* 5) Should the reader begin to wonder about Sebald's narrator's motives or the author's license with the narration: lo! there it is: a photograph to anchor the testimony to truth, the fiction to fact.

- In *On The Natural History of Destruction*, Sebald writes about the German Jewish painter and writer, Peter Weiss. "The extremist practice of art to which Weiss...subscribes, is ultimately equivalent to an attempt by the subject, horrified as he is by human life, to do away with himself through successive acts of destruction." (*Destruction* 184) Is it not possible, however, that so-called extremist art is an attempt to violently re-encounter subjectivity? Might one, in fact, back off from Sebald's qualification of "extremist" art and say that all art, in order to qualify as art and not as entertainment or advertisement or something else, must reject any impulse toward transcendental displacement; toward seeking its meaning outside of life and outside of humanity?
- Sebald makes a positive example of Peter Weiss, placing his work "far beyond all other literary attempts to 'come to terms with the past.'" This judgment is based on the idea that Weiss was willing in his work to identify himself as both Jew and German and therefore to identify with both victim and perpetrator – indeed, to identify himself *as* both victim and perpetrator. This identification allows Weiss to admit to a

knowledge of "the society giving rise to the regime which could create camps." (*Destruction* 192) Sebald finds culpability in this knowledge and value in this culpability. The value comes in the form of "compensation for the subjective sense of personal involvement in genocide [which] could be made only if he placed the objective social conditions and preconditions of the tragedy at the centre of his discourse." (*Destruction* 191)

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How does one justify the high judgment of Weiss' work based on its objective dual identification with victim and perpetrator, placing it beyond the literature of those who identified themselves as victims alone? This strikes me as a self-serving judgment; one that assuages the conscience of the perpetrators themselves and of those most closely implicated: the sons and daughters of the perpetrators. Greater moral and aesthetic value lives in the works of writers like Primo Levi, Carlo Levi, Tadeucz Borowski: the list, unfortunately, goes on. Writers, who – perhaps naively – refused to imagine the telos of the transformations of European society. Human beings who, innocently, at each juncture, each invasion, each successive erosion of civil rights; who, at each step toward the gas chamber, believed – because anything else was beyond belief – that this was as far as it would go. It is to their innocence – an innocence which rejects objectivity as literally incredible – that judgment – both artistic and philosophical – owes its allegiance.

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