The Tactics Of Confrontation: Documentary Epistemology In The Fiction Of W.G. Sebald

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The Tactics of Confrontation
Documentary Epistemology in the Fiction of W. G. Sebald

A Thesis in English
by
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Abbreviations

Title abbreviations are used in citations for the following works:

Works by W. G. Sebald:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{A} \textit{Austerlitz}
\item “BHNH” “Between History and Natural History: On the Literary Description of Total Destruction”
\item \textit{E} \textit{The Emigrants}
\item \textit{RS} \textit{The Rings of Saturn}
\item \textit{V} \textit{Vertigo}
\end{itemize}

Works by Saul Friedländer:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Extermination} \textit{Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Extermination, 1939–1945}
\item \textit{Persecution} \textit{Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939}
\item “Trauma” “Trauma, Transference and "Working through" in Writing the History of the Shoah”
\end{itemize}
1. Introduction

In the relatively short time since the publication of the work of W. G. Sebald, it has represented a conundrum in several dimensions. For one, although the works seem to span across multiple genres, including fiction, history, travelogue and essay, they commit themselves to none. Compositionally, the texts feel wholly postmodern in their assemblage of disparate sources and yet feature an authorial voice reminiscent of the nineteenth century. It becomes difficult at times to characterize the works as fictional or nonfictional and indeed to pin down the author’s intention in this regard. Not insignificant in this context is Sebald’s innovative yet understated use of photographic imagery, the role of which is often difficult to determine. While always thematically relevant, neither caption nor explicit reference indicate whether a given image is meant, for instance, to confirm by reference the facticity of the events recounted by the framing narrative, to unsettle the relationship of fact and fiction, or merely to illustrate. Perhaps most perplexing is Sebald’s uncanny ability to have a subject in mind, and to put the reader in mind of that subject, but seemingly without ever saying very much in explicit reference to that subject. This is especially true in regard to the Holocaust, the thematic presence of which is undeniable when considering the patterns that emerge over the course of the texts, but which is rarely referenced in terms or structures typical of common or even academic understandings of the Nazi era.

In an attempt to gain insight into what these features of Sebald’s texts reveal about its relation to those events, the discussion below will consider his fiction in context of the work of historian Saul Friedländer. Known for its assiduously documented, direct and unflinching treatment of the Nazi era, Friedländer’s work might at first seem an unlikely comparison. On closer inspection, however, I demonstrate that Sebald’s and Friedlander’s texts are undergirded
by similar ethical and epistemological positions, which in turn help explain their significant rhetorical differences. Indeed, the stark contrast of those differences speaks to the continuing potency of the events to impose a disjunctive effect (despite ethical affinities of the authors) on Holocaust representation.

Of course, questions about how the historian should represent the Nazi era given the scope and extremity of the events have already long concerned Friedländer. In his 1992 essay, “Trauma, Transference and ‘Working through’ in Writing the History of the Shoah,” he takes up the problem of what he saw then as “the growing fragmentation of the history of the Nazi period” (52). In attendance to the problem, Friedländer maps out possible reasons for this fragmentation1 and offers a way to begin to improve historiographical practice. He argues that historians “seem to be at a loss to produce an overall history of the extermination of the Jews in Europe” (50), that the trauma of the Shoah represents an “excess” which interferes with the writing of its history. Quoting Jean-Francois Lyotard, Friedländer characterizes this excess as “‘a sign that something remains to be phrased which is not, something which is not determined’”

1. Considered among the reasons are the difficulty of fitting the extremity of the Shoah into “the basic redemptive paradigm” (Friedländer, “Trauma” 42) into which, over the course of history, catastrophes traditionally have been integrated in Jewish collective memory; the prevalence of strategies of avoidance, repression and denial by both Jewish and non-Jewish historians (44–46); the fragmentation of historical studies of the Nazi era, which effectively “split[s] off” and isolates the experiences and fates of victims, “understat[ing] the ‘already well-known’ facts of mass extermination and atrocity” (47); and the widespread outward reticence of the Jewish survivor and intellectual communities due to shame and pain (48–49).
Without a change in historiographical methods, “the passage of time will erase the ‘excess’” (54), and “ritualized form[s] of commemoration” will bring about a “closure without resolution” (54). In response to this exigency, Friedländer draws upon psychoanalytic theory in offering a process of “working through” (51). Central to this process are, among other elements, the faithful representation of documents and testimony and the inclusion of ever-questioning commentary by the historian. As will be described, Friedländer provides much more detail about the process of “working through” in regard to Holocaust history. But he offers an additional suggestion in the essay’s “Tentative Summation” on which he does not elaborate:

And there is a growing sensitivity in literature and art. The voices of the second generation are as powerful as the best work produced by contemporaries of the Nazi epoch. This sensitization is not limited to the community of the victims. Sometimes it appears in unexpected cultural contexts, as in the case of an Indian novelist who related to me that at this very time he is addressing himself to the Shoah. It may well be that for some the trauma, the insuperable moral outrage, the riddle whose decoding never seems to surrender a fully comprehensible text, may present an ongoing emotional and intellectual challenge. (55)

Friedländer concedes that the emotional aftershock of the Shoah, without comparable reference points to its seismic trauma, may be in excess of the ability of current practices of historical representation to contain it. Yet he leaves an optimism for other forms, even artistic and literary, to confront what cannot at present be reflected. Sebald’s work not only seems to rise to the occasion but to do so in ways that having striking affinity with Friedländer’s revisionary suggestions for historiographic practice. Using Friedländer’s suggestions as an analytical departure point, this essay will interrogate to what extent Sebald’s compositional techniques
could be taken as a response to the exigency in Holocaust remembrance described by Friedländer. Specifically, the discussion below will consider the following aspects of Sebald’s work: the chronological structure of the narratives; the use of documents and testimony; and the narrators’ explicit commentary on their processes of composition.

As it proceeds, this analysis will raise questions regarding the following: the ethical implications of Sebald’s mixture of fictional and documentary elements; Sebald’s subjective position as a self-exiled non-Jewish German author writing as a member of the generation following the Nazi era; Sebald’s political positions with respect to the novel as a generic form; and the differences in rhetorical positioning of Sebald's and Friedländer’s work. This analysis will culminate in an assertion that similar epistemological positions and ethical concerns undergird the work of both Friedländer and Sebald.

I will first briefly outline Friedländer’s method in regard to “working through” and then analyze examples from Sebald’s work that support the comparison. The analysis will focus primarily on Sebald’s four major literary works, *Vertigo, The Emigrants, The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*. This discussion will rely on Friedländer’s historiographical work as a theoretical point of reference for Sebald’s compositional methods, but will also draw upon other theoretical work and criticism (including Sebald’s own) and interviews with Sebald himself. Some points of comparison will also be made between Sebald’s work and Friedländer’s major historical study, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, especially in regard to how the authors impose their own voices into the narratives.
2. Linear Structures

In his introduction to *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939*, Saul Friedländer comments on the rationale for the work’s structure: “At the most basic level, [. . .] the narration follows the chronological sequence of the events,” which makes it possible to shift the narration within a stable chronological span. Such changes result from the changes in perspective my approach demands, but they also stem from another choice: to juxtapose entirely different levels of reality—for example, high-level anti-Jewish policy debates and decisions next to routine scenes of persecution—with the aim of creating a sense of estrangement counteracting our tendency to “domesticate” that particular past and blunt its impact by means of seamless explanations and standardized renditions. That sense of estrangement seems to me to reflect the perception of the hapless victims of the regime, at least during the thirties, of a reality both absurd and ominous, of a world altogether grotesque and chilling under the veneer of an even more chilling normality. (5)

Friedländer has for the most part structured his history along a straight temporal vector as a means of keeping the reader grounded in anticipation of perspectival shifts. In other words, the adherence to a linear chronology allows Friedländer to increase his work’s complexity by adding to it a multitude of voices from witnesses occupying a diverse range of social realities. This strategy reveals a conscious preference to represent an elaborate array of viewpoints at the expense of narrative, thematic, and even analytical complexity. The work’s chronology is even more conspicuous in the second volume, *The Years of Extermination, 1939–1945*, in which chapters are titled by a range of dates (e.g., “September 1939–May 1940”), rather than thematically as is the case in the first volume (e.g., “Into the Third Reich”). This approach is
effective not only because it keeps the text cohesive but also because it allows for the
“estrangement counteracting our tendency to ‘domesticate’” the history of the Shoah.

Friedländer develops the benefit of estrangement by marking the sensation of “disbelief”
(Extermination xxvi) readers are likely to have in reactions to the documents and first-hand
accounts incorporated into the narrative. Disbelief, according to Friedländer, occurs before the
process of interpretation and understanding. To illustrate this reaction, Friedländer turns the
reader’s attention to a photograph of a Dr. David Moffie and in particular to
the star sewed to his coat, with its repulsive inscription, and to its meaning: The new MD,
like all the carriers of this sign was to be wiped off the face of the earth. Once its portent
is understood this photograph triggers disbelief. Such disbelief is a quasivisceral reaction,
one that occurs before knowledge rushes in to smother it. “Disbelief” here means
something that arises from the depth of one’s immediate perception of the world, of what
is ordinary and what remains “unbelievable.” The goal of historical knowledge is to
domesticate disbelief, to explain it away. In this book I wish to offer a thorough historical
study of the extermination of the Jews of Europe, without eliminating or domesticating
that initial sense of disbelief. (xxvi)

Given the esteem Friedländer holds for this image’s capacity to provoke the reader, it is unclear
why he does not reproduce it in his text. For the curious reader, I have done so in Figure 1 below.
Nevertheless, Friedländer’s statement expresses a remarkable intention: to produce a text that represents a “thorough historical study” and yet, to a certain extent, remains inexplicable, remains opaque, perhaps preserves some portion of the Shoah’s excess. The achievement of this effect is due to a careful balance of historical interpretation and the reproduction of the voices of witnesses. No small part of this undertaking is the inclusion of individual voices from diarists written contemporaneously with the events. As Friedländer explains,

[t]hese diaries and letters were written by Jews of all European countries, all walks of life, all age groups, either living under direct German domination or within the wider sphere of persecution. [. . . H]undreds, probably thousands of witnesses confided their observations to the secrecy of their private writings. Major events and much of the daily incidents, attitudes, and reactions of the surrounding worlds—which these diarists recorded—merged into an increasingly comprehensive albeit at times contradictory picture. (Extermination xxiv–xxv)
The project Friedländer describes is one that both promotes understanding and attenuates the false confidence in knowing in its totality the past of the Nazi era. These accounts, in their detail and even in their contradiction, “warn us against the ease of vague generalizations” (xxv). Of particular value to Friedländer are the “expressions of hope and illusions [and] fantastic interpretations of events” because these “glimpses into the attitudes” (xxv) of everyday people and government officials alike provide invaluable insight into the actions (or inactions) of individuals when they are detached from the retrospective angle of the historian. As such, the voices of witnesses not only “bear[] witness to and confirm[] and illustrate[] their fate” but “tear through seamless interpretation and pierce the (mostly involuntary) smugness of scholarly detachment and ‘objectivity’” (xxv–xxvi). This kind of “disruption” for Friedländer is especially necessary, given the extremity of the events his history recalls, so as not to normalize their extremity.

2.1. The Rings of Saturn: An Endless Odyssey

Analogous to the chronological structure of Friedländer’s histories is the organization of Sebald’s texts around the walker or traveler. As Friedländer, in a sense, walks the reader through history day by day, Sebald’s narrators plot geographical paths. While each of Sebald’s narratives is to a significant extent structured by the geographical route of its respective narrator, this organizational strategy is most prominent in The Rings of Saturn. Sebald’s third major literary work, The Rings of Saturn is organized around a walking tour of Suffolk, England. Over the course of the narrative, the narrator meditates on a vast number and variety of subjects which are evoked by the places and people he encounters along the way, including, to name a relative few, the location of the skull of seventeenth-century polymath Thomas Browne, Rembrandt’s Anatomy Lesson, the British air bombardments of Germany during World War II, a natural
history of the herring, the early life of Joseph Conrad, the slave economy of Belgium, and a history of sericulture (commercial silkworm cultivation and silk production). To be clear, the narrator does recount other times in his life by way of flashback; however, these are, like the historical and biographical meditations, recalled in association with specific peripatetic encounters without clear connection to more typical organizing interests of fictional narratives.

Perhaps even more important to note in this regard, whether or not the narrator goes “off the path” of the basic route of the narrator to recount other parts of the “story,” is that the text does not rely on conventional devices of “plot.” Indeed, in each of the four major works, there are no discernible plot points along a traditional narrative arc (e.g., exposition, conflict, rising action and resolution). The lack of this narrative convention and indeed the paucity of emotional drama altogether are features that make Sebald’s texts difficult to classify as novels, despite the presence of many fictional elements.

In The Rings of Saturn, the departure from conventional progressions of plot organized around a conflict and resolution is thematized in one of the work’s subtexts, Homer’s Odyssey. Throughout the course of the novel, Sebald has laid subtle connections between his and the classic text. Some examples include: a reference in the first entry of the table of contents to the “Odyssey of Thomas Browne’s skull”; allusions to Penelope in the ubiquitous theme of sericulture and in the three Ashbury daughters who each daily take apart what they have sewn (212); the maritime theme evoked by their brother Edmund Asbury’s years of work “on a fat-bellied boat” (211); and the echo of sirens in the nurses’ songs (18) and the name of a pub, the
Mermaid, at which the narrator is to meet Clara (presumably his wife)\(^2\) at the end of his journey (261). However, these hints are nothing but false leads for a reader expecting reunion and homecoming, or indeed any definitive narrative closure. Thomas Browne’s skull is forever lost. The Ashbury’s patriarch is not merely lost but dead and, like the (father)land of the surviving Ashburys (pre-Revolution Ireland), will never return. In the boat upon which Edmund works day in and day out, he “ha[s] no intention of ever going to sea” (211). Finally, while the reunion with Clara is briefly anticipated, it is never recounted.

Most ironic, perhaps, is that the work is in a sense closed, but not with the conventional terminals of a traditional story arc, but in a thematic loop, or possibly a ring, inviting not resolution but perpetual interpretation. This is exemplified by the book’s thematically interlocking images of black draperies, with which the book opens and closes. At the opening of the narrative, the narrator recalls a stay in a hospital where he is suffering from almost total physical and mental paralysis. The recollection is, however, of a time after the “events” of the book but also marks the beginning of its composition, for “it was then that I began in my thoughts to write these pages” (3–4). In his hospital room, the narrator explains that his only view of the outside world is through a single window, “which, for some strange reason, was draped with black netting” (4). The thematic role of this netting however becomes clear with the book’s final image:

And Sir Thomas Browne, who was the son of a silk merchant and may well have had an eye for these things, remarks in a passage of the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* that I can no

2. The relationship is never actually explicitly stated in the text; all that is known for sure is that he is to meet someone named Clara.
longer find that in the Holland of his time it was customary, in a home where there had been a death, to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors and all canvasses depicting landscapes or people or the fruits of the field, so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost forever. (296)

That the hospital room netting is linked to the black mourning ribbons signals that the opening of the book, rather than only marking the inception of the story also marks a kind of funeral ceremony, an interpretation underscored by the opening narration, which frames a journey which has already taken place. Moreover, the fact the final image refers to mirrors and paintings—in contrast to the window in the opening passage—implies that Sebald’s text, the result of an exercise in representation, in the end looks back upon itself, namely back on the opening passage. This reveals that the “real world” upon which window looks out is but an illusion of the text. The recognition of this hidden thematic element, which hinges upon both image and textual structure, is a potentially dizzying experience for a reader given the fact that the narrative is seemingly (and to a great extent actually) organized in a simple manner around the narrator’s wanderings. It is a realization that in effect “opens” the work to discursive analysis (in this case, of the theme of death and mourning). The basic structure of the walking tour allows such conceptual features, once uncovered, to stand out in relief. So, just as Friedländer’s “stable chronological span” allows for shifts in perspective, Sebald’s walking tour provides a foundation to build significant yet subtle thematic patterns.

2.2. Vertigo’s Unsolved Crimes

In Vertigo, Sebald plays with plot conventions of the detective story. As Muriel Pic has argued, Sebald’s works can be read as “investigations into memory” and Sebald himself “is a
detective and a hunter; he follows and reads traces and clues” (82). While traveling in northern
Italy, the narrator becomes anxious that he is being followed by murderers. It becomes apparent
that the murderers are figurative shadows of members of a Neo-Nazi group calling itself
Organizzazione Ludwig which the narrator reads about in an Italian newspaper. On one occasion
at a hotel in Limone, when the proprietress inquires about what he is writing (presumably an
early draft of the text the reader is currently reading), he replies that he “did not know for certain
[. . .], but had a growing suspicion that it might turn into a crime story, set in upper Italy, in
Venice, Verona and Riva. The plot revolved around a series of unsolved murders and the
reappearance of a person who had long been missing” (94–95; emphasis added). Sebald himself
has framed Vertigo “in the nature of crime fiction, in the sense that there are unsolved crimes”
(“A Conversation” 103; emphasis added).

An important point is that both Sebald’s narrator and Sebald himself have characterized
the crimes as “unsolved.” In reality, the two people responsible for the series of murders were
indeed active in the area during the events of the narrative. But Abel and Furan, the two men
responsible for the crimes, were apprehended in 1984. As Sebald’s narrator explains, the two
were “[w]earing clowns’ costumes, they were carrying open petrol canisters in perforated sports
bags through the Melamare disco at Castiglione delle Stiviere, not far from the southern shore of
Lake Garda, where that evening four hundred young people had come together for the carnival”
(V 131). While the arrest of the criminals suggests a resolution of the murders, “[a]part from
providing irrefutable evidence, the investigation produced nothing that might have made it
possible to comprehend” (131) them, “[n]or did the psychiatric reports afford any real insight
into the inner world of the two young men” (131). The narrator goes on to contemplate the high
socioeconomic background, education, intelligence and musical ability of the two criminals,
which he cannot reconcile with the atrocity of their actions and intentions. In this way, Sebald sets expectations for the conventional plot of a detective story (crime, investigation of evidence, solution based on evidence), however the satisfaction of the clean closure is impossible when the narrator’s inquiry is shifted away from cold facts to understanding the motives of the perpetrators. The theme of the detective story is of course a way for Sebald to tangentially reference Nazi crimes against European Jews. He does this thematically and imaginatively but uses real-world documents to assemble the metaphor, a method that allows the narrator to maintain an objective tone in avoidance of sentimentality.

As we shall see, such sentimentality is in direct opposition to Sebald’s ethical position to the events of the Holocaust, which he is compelled to confront. To Sebald, a descendent of non-Jewish Germans who experienced and participated in the war, such pretenses of emotional connection to those who suffered would be an inexcusable trespass. This, and so many other examples, exhibit Sebald’s imminent tact in confronting a painful past to which he is uncomfortably connected. While Friedländer, in his way, confronts that past as directly and plainly as possible, he also does so with a heavy reliance on voices other than his own. As will be argued more fully below, the de-emphasis of the authorial voice is a key element in Sebald’s art of confrontation. In the passage cited above, that confrontation remains inexplicit yet unsettlingly present. Its disruption of the detective story’s conventional solutions can be compared to Friedländer’s desire to incite “estrangement” and “disbelief.” Sebald chooses to do so (not arbitrarily) in ways that do not dramatize or sensationalize the object of his concern.

Aside from these examples of Sebald’s playfulness with (and undermining of) fictional plots, his narratives are primarily organized by geographic travel. Much like Friedländer’s basic chronological structure, which provides a platform for myriad individual accounts, Sebald’s
peregrinatory structure provides a groundwork for the narrator’s numerous digressions. In *Vertigo* a comment on the importance of a text’s structure in provoked while researching newspaper articles: “stories with neither beginning nor end, I reflected, which ought to be looked into more closely” (121). The narrator suggests that the open structure of the raw historical record is an important space in which to reflect, for its potential to raise questions and initiate historical examinations. The document, of course, is constitutive of this space, and its role in this process will be discussed more fully below.

2.3. **Austerlitz’s Layered Voices**

A more deeply embedded rhetorical device in Sebald’s prose is layered vocality. This technique is what Sebald has referred to as periscopic narrative and has credited to Thomas Bernhard, who “invented, as it were, a kind of periscopic form of narrative, so you’re always sure that what he tells you is related at one remove, at two removes, or two or three” (Sebald, Interview with Michael Silverblatt). Sebald’s use of the technique is marked by an assiduous layering of attribution of recounted stories. For instance, in *Austerlitz*, the narrator recounts Austerlitz’s conversation with his childhood nanny, Vera. This account is structured by recursively nested, reported dialogue that is sometimes awkward in its construction. The below passages are just a few examples in which Vera’s dialogue is reported by Austerlitz’s dialogue, which is reported by the narrator:

> It was through an interest in every aspect of French civilization, she added, something which as an enthusiastic student of Romance culture I shared with both Agáta and Maximilian, that a friendship began to develop between us immediately after our first conversation on the day when they moved in, a friendship which led as if quite naturally, so Vera told me, said Austerlitz, to her offering, since unlike Agáta and Maximilian she
had her time largely at her own disposal, to assume the duties of nanny for the few years until I started nursery school. (154)

[. . .]

And I remember, Vera told me, said Austerlitz, that it was Aunt Otýlie who taught you to count at the age of three and a half, using a row of small, shiny black malachite buttons sewn to an elbow-length velvet glove which you particularly liked—*jeden, dvě, tři*, counted Vera, and I, said Austerlitz, went on counting—*čtyři, pět, šest, sedm*—feeling like someone taking uncertain steps out on to the ice. (160)

[. . .]

At first glance, said Austerlitz, Vera said she had thought the two figures in the bottom left-hand corner were Agáta and Maximilian (181)

Angeleki Tseti suggests that “the enunciation of the traumatic experience in multivocality bears the potential to compensate for the mnemonic inaccuracy and factual distortion inherent in the narration of a ‘limit event’ and, with reference to the event’s fictional rendition, facilitates an exploration of the indescribable experience that would foster the attempt to delineate it” (Tseti 106–107). While this is a tempting notion, it seems safer to interpret this narratorial strategy as an element of Sebald’s tonal tact, employed not to get closer to the “truth” of an event or an individual’s experience, even by analogy, but to integrate into the narrator’s discourse a literary and ethical distance between the subject matter and its representation. Indeed, Sebald’s sacrifice of literary clarity in such examples underscores the importance of this ethical concern. In any case, Sebald’s periscopic technique, in remarkable resemblance to Friedländer’s method, is also aided by the stable structure of the framing narrative.
Finally, it is important to note that while the lack of a conventional story arc, together with meditations on numerous historical and cultural topics, might seem to fix Sebald’s work in the genre of the informative essay, this is not necessarily the case.\textsuperscript{3} Although at many points the writing does take on the conventions of nonfiction, a reader is not presented with an obvious argumentative tack. Moreover, the connections between Sebald’s topics and sources seem, at first blush, primarily associative. Analogous to Friedländer’s use of a chronological narrative to allow for the incorporation of a multiplicity of vantage points, Sebald’s works are structured around travel, which likewise allows for myriad digressions in time, space, subject matter and voice. Yet deeper analytical and interpretative work is required by the reader to discern larger thematic connections that take shape across the text.

3. Documents and Testimony

Of the many sources Sebald draws upon, one of the most distinguishing and at times ethically problematic is testimony and other types of documentary evidence. This is especially true with respect to \textit{Vertigo} and \textit{The Emigrants}. The latter consists of four long chapters, each focusing on a character based on a real person whom Sebald knew and for whom emigration has shaped his or her life and identity in profound and often unsettling ways. In each chapter, the narrator seeks out information on the life of the person he has known or has come to know. Documents and testimony play a central role in this process. As the title suggests, each has been

\textsuperscript{3} Michael Hofmann has vividly characterized Sebald’s work as “introverted lectures, suites of digression, their form given them by the knowledge they contained; like water, finding its own levels everywhere, pooling and dribbling, with excurses on such things as silk, herrings, architecture, battles” (87).
displaced from their German homeland, their emigration in large part influenced by historical events and cultural forces beyond their control.

Sebald’s method is ethically problematic when the boundary between fiction and nonfiction becomes fluid. In interviews Sebald has confirmed that the figures in *The Emigrants* are based on real people; yet Sebald also superimposes fictional elements onto their lives. He told Eleanor Wachtel, for instance, that the “stories as they appear in *The Emigrants* follow pretty much the lines or the trajectories of these four lives as they were in reality” (“Ghost Hunter” 38). This raises questions about what should be considered empathy and what should be considered unjustified trespass into the memories of real people. One way in which Sebald blurs the line of fiction and nonfiction is with his use of photographs. In an interview with James Wood, he claimed that

[a] very large percentage of those photographs [included in *The Emigrants*] are what you would describe as authentic, i.e., they really did come out of the photo albums of the people described in those texts and are a direct testimony of the fact that these people did exist in that particular shape and form. A small number—I imagine it must be in the region of ten percent—are pictures, photographs, postcards, travel documents, that kind of thing, which I had used from other sources. They are, I think, to a very large extent documentary” (“An Interview” 25).

While Sebald here is emphasizing that most of the photographs in the text are “documentary,” he is also pointing out that some are, in effect, fictional. The use of pseudo-documentary photographs in this way begs the question of whether, in addition to these images, other elements of the text are also fabricated. On one level, Sebald expresses a “mistrust of the literary
imagination” (Lutz 152), as when his narrator in the story of Paul Bereyter in *The Emigrants* comments that

> Such endeavours to imagine his life and death did not, as I had to admit, bring me any closer to Paul, except at best for brief emotional moments of the kind that seemed presumptuous to me. It is in order to avoid this sort of wrongful trespass that I have written down what I know of Paul Bereyter. (29)

The narrator seems to privilege a kind of factual writing that does not flirt with imagined fictional elements, even if those elements are inspired by empathic concern for the other. This, taken with Sebald’s assertion that he finds “all cheap forms of fictionalization horrific” (Wolff, *W. G. Sebald’s Hybrid Poetics* 98), raises at least two opposing questions. First, is it acceptable, in the context of Sebald’s stated ethics in regard to aesthetic representation, to project fictional elements upon the lives of real people, to project, moreover, images that are neither confirmed nor contradicted by the written portion of the text as being in reference to those people? Second, does Sebald, despite the mixture of documentary and fictional elements, somehow avoid the kind of fictionalization he treats with such disdain? To attempt answers, we need to consider Sebald’s position on the politics of the novel.

When Sebald remarked that his “medium is prose, not the novel” (98), he was distancing himself from a genre he associated with “cheap forms of fictionalization,” which use aesthetic means to represent the suffering of others, proffering a pretense of knowledge of that experience. Yet to Sebald it is “in the process of metaphorization” (98), which is also often associated with the novel, “that history becomes empathetically accessible” (98). Sebald is attempting to draw a fine line of distinction between his documentary fiction and the traditional “realistic” novel. In contrast to the latter, Sebald lends to his work an epistemological rather than an experiential
realism, in which the narrator problematizes the notion that one could ever truly know another’s experience. This is especially important when dealing with subjects of such extreme and widespread suffering as the Shoah.

Sebald discussed at length his aversion to the traditional novel as an instrument to represent the Holocaust in his essay “Between History and Natural Destruction” in which he asserts that “a literary account of collective catastrophes” must “break[] out of the novel form that owes its allegiance to bourgeois concepts” (84). Sebald’s chief foil in calling for a new approach to a literature of catastrophe is Hermann Kasack’s 1947 novel, *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom* (*The City beyond the River*). According to Sebald, Kasack’s novel mythologizes the violence Europe experienced during the war in styles unsuitable for “the new historical factor of total destruction” (67) and contends that Kasack “attempt[s] to make sense of the senseless” (70) via “the most dubious aspects of Expressionist fantasy” (70). As Sebald describes it, this aspect of Kasack’s novel seems to be a grotesque literary exemplar of the kind of “collective redemption” (Friedländer, “Trauma” 40) myth that Friedländer argues has become unlikely, if not impossible, given the traumatic excess left by the Shoah. Sebald reads in Kasack’s work an inherent colonialism: “The choice of words and terminology in such passages, speaking of the opening up ‘of the region of Asia, so long cut off,’ for the benefit of ‘European ideas,’ and of ‘living space [Lebensraum] previously inaccessible’ shows with alarming clarity the degree to which philosophical speculation bound to the style of the time subverts its good intentions”

4. Kasack’s novel suggests that the masses of people who died in the war were merely making room for a “Master Mage” to complete a global program of spiritual human rebirth in the West that had already been underway in Asia.
In this way, the language of the novel genre is often merely “a distortion of the bourgeois ideal of an association of the elect operating outside and above the state, an ideal which found its ultimate corruption and perfection in the officially ordained Fascist elites” (71).

Yet Sebald’s caution with the category of the novel does not mean that his work is not fiction. Indeed, when asked by Wachtel to characterize *The Emigrants*, Sebald replied,

It’s a form of prose fiction. I imagine it exists more frequently on the European continent than in the Anglo-Saxon world, i.e., dialogue plays hardly any part in it at all. Everything is related round various corners in a periscopic sort of way. In that sense it doesn’t conform to the patterns that standard fiction has established. There isn’t an authorial narrator. And there are various limitations of this kind that seem to push the book into a special category. But what exactly to call it, I don’t know (“Ghost Hunter” 37).

If we view Sebald’s work as a literary project whose author is (to a certain extent) consciously resisting certain conventions of the form of the novel and the conceits of fiction, the question of authenticity becomes less important than the reasoning behind such rhetorical choices. This reasoning is evident in his interview with Michael Silverblatt, in which Sebald expressed that

I’ve always felt that it was necessary above all to write about the history of persecution, vilification of minorities, the attempt, well-nigh achieved, to eradicate a whole people. And I was, in pursuing these ideas, at the same time conscious that it’s practically impossible to do this; to write about concentration camps in my view is practically impossible. So you need to find ways of convincing the reader that this is something that is on your mind, but that you do not necessarily roll out on every other page. The reader needs to be prompted that the narrator has a conscience and that he is and has been perhaps for a long time engaged with these questions. And this is why the main scenes of
horror are never directly addressed. I think it is sufficient to remind people, because we’ve all seen images, but these images militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things, and also paralyze, as it were, our moral capacity. So the only way in which one can approach these things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially, by reference, rather than by direct confrontation. (Interview with Michael Silverblatt)

It becomes clear in this context that Sebald’s use of testimony and documents is primarily a literary device. It is a necessary distancing technique between the identity of the author and his subject matter: a self-exiled post-conflict non-Jewish German confronting the persecution and extermination of European Jews. Given this concern, disruptions of the conventions of the novel and fiction by this technique are mere collateral damage, the demise of which warrants little mourning.

Dominick LaCapra suggests that the perceived social identity of a writer in relation to the Holocaust impacts the receipt of that writer’s text:

Whether the historian or analyst is a survivor, a relative of survivors, a former collaborator, a relative of former Nazi collaborators, a younger Jew or German distanced from more immediate contact with survival, participation, or collaboration, or a relative “outsider” to these problems will make a difference even in the meaning of statements that may be identical. (Friedländer, “Trauma” 45)

Of course, as Friedländer points out, “[t]here are any number of possible psychological aspects linked to each of the subject positions,” including “shame, guilt, self-hatred and all the shades of

5. Quoted by Friedländer.
ambivalence[. . .] For German contemporaries of the Nazi epoch, particularly those who were adolescents or young adults at the end of the war, the whole range of internal conflicts may be as daunting in the variety of its results as it is for the victims” (45). Sebald, born in May 1944, was barely one year old at the end of the war, yet there can be no doubt that, in response to its political, social and human reverberations, he internalized many of the psychological conflicts Friedländer identifies. This is evidenced in Sebald’s interview response cited above and also by his voluntary emigration to Manchester, England, early in his academic career. According to Lynne Sharon Schwartz, Sebald “studied German language and literature first at the University of Freiburg and then in Switzerland, but dissatisfaction, particularly with his ex-Nazi professors who never alluded to the immediate past, soon compelled him to leave the continent at twenty-one” (10). After earning a doctorate in England, Sebald considered a post with the Goethe-Institut in Munich but ultimately was uncomfortable “representing, however obliquely, Germany in a public sort of way abroad” (Sebald, “Ghost Hunter” 50). Nevertheless, Sebald expressed an obligation to accept some level of penitent affiliation with his home country,

because of its peculiar history and the bad dive that history took in this century or, to be more precise, from about 1870 onwards [. . .], I feel you can’t simply abdicate and say, well, it’s nothing to do with me. I have inherited that backpack and I have to carry it whether I like it or not. (50)

The sense that history, especially, the history of a place, is carried along through time and remains a burden attached to that place (and to its citizens), is one that underpins the melancholy-tinged transgressions in Sebald’s work. In particular, the obligation Sebald feels to carry and “work through” the decades leading up to and through the Nazi era—ironically
understated as a “bad dive”—is indicative of his particular social relation to that history and in turn steers the rhetorical moves he will use to confront it.

Friedländer has observed that “the burden of the past . . . weighed and weighs as much on the historical discourse in Germany as among the community of the victims.” “‘[F]ascism’ as an overall tag . . . shielded many of them from the specificity of the Nazi past, and such ideological generalizations became deeply embedded in subsequent historical discourse about Nazism” (“Trauma” 46). Indeed, self-protective terminology extends insidiously to the word Nazi itself, which loses its impact over repeated use. Even more so, the continuous reproduction of photographic evidence of dehumanized bodies, both living and dead, in Nazi camps shifts the semiotic value of such images as symbols of evil rather than indexes to individual suffering. Those images of bodies are too rarely accompanied by names. Friedländer replaces such images with those like David Moffie’s doctoral degree ceremony, conveying in one stroke the difficulty of understanding the social dynamics that would even allow such an event to take place, as well as the individual loss that was imminent soon after it. More to the point: Friedländer’s revoicing of firsthand accounts of contemporaries of the Nazi era willingly sacrifices easy generalizations and historical cohesion for demonstrations of its human toll rather than the use of morally analgesic but emotionally inadequate terms such as “human toll.” Sebald, given his self-identified obligation to confront the crimes of his countryman, and yet the social unacceptability of doing so fictionally in as direct a manner as a Jewish historian might, leaves him a very narrow rhetorical path.

3.1. The “Playing Out” of Identity Crisis in Vertigo

The relationship between the author’s identity and his or her subject matter is illustrated in a passage from Vertigo in which the narrator undergoes a psychological transformation from
one persona (Sebald) to another (historian Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer). In this passage the problematic relation between the two has its interface in the document. Thus, while Sebald shows a deep “mistrust of the literary imagination” he also expresses a caution in regard to the document’s reflection of reality. While traveling in northern Italy, there is a mix up between his and a fellow hotel guest’s passport, leaving the narrator without the required identification for international travel. This triggers a series of events destabilizing the narrator’s identity and affecting his relationship with his geographical location and the history of that location. In Milan, the narrator has a new passport issued at the German consulate. A photo of a passport page (see Figure 2) accompanies the passage and bears Sebald’s signature and a photograph of Sebald himself. In keeping with the theme of identity loss, a thick black line runs vertically through the headshot. After wandering about the streets for some time, the narrator

all of a sudden no longer had any knowledge of where I was. Despite a great effort to account for the last few days and how I had come to be in this place, I was unable even to determine whether I was in the land of the living or already in another place. Nor did this lapse of memory improve in the slightest after I climbed to the topmost gallery of the cathedral and from there, beset by recurring fits of vertigo, gazed out upon the dusky, hazy panorama of a city now altogether alien to me. Where the word “Milan” ought to have appeared in my mind there was nothing but a painful, inane reflex. A menacing reflection of the darkness spreading within me loomed up in the west where an immense bank of cloud covered half the sky and cast its shadow on the seemingly endless sea of houses. (Sebald, V 115–116)
In this scene, not only is the narrator’s identity destabilized, but his environment and very being appear to be in peril, as if all three elements are merging into one. This subjective dissolve appears to be related to a crisis of language, as the word “Milan,” which up until this point carried fixed geopolitical connotations, is now replaced by “reflex” and the bodily sensation of pain, a state the narrator seems to suggest is without language. This idea will appear again in the chapter on Max Ferber in *The Emigrants*, discussed below. However, even more quickly than the narrator is attacked by this sensation, it subsides: “A stiff wind came up, and I had to brace myself so that I could look down to where the people were crossing the piazza, their bodies inclined forwards at an odd angle, as though they were hastening towards their doom” (116). He
is reminded of an epitaph he once read on an Italian tombstone: “Se il vento s’alza, Correte, Correte! Se il vento s’alza, non v’arrestate!” (116), which translates roughly to: “If the wind picks up, run, run! If the wind picks up, don’t stop!”

This memory (of language) immediately reorients him: “so I knew, in that instant, that the figures hurrying over the cobbles below were none other than the men and women of Milan” (116). However, it also becomes clear that while the narrator is no longer in crisis, he is no longer “Sebald” but has quite comfortably assumed a new and highly problematic persona. The first hint that something is amiss is his newfound sense of wellbeing, a feeling uncharacteristic of the narrator (or any of Sebald’s narrators for that matter) up to this point. This is confirmed when he enters his name in the register of his new hotel as “Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer, historian, of Landeck, Tyrol” (117). It is significant to note that, currently, the boundaries of the Tyrol no longer exist because it further accentuates the narrator’s disconnection from place instigated by a loss of memory and a loss of the meaning of the word “Milan.” Fallmerayer, a nineteenth-century historian, is best known for his controversial and discredited idea that called into question the racial purity of the current inhabitants of the Greek peninsula, proclaiming that in the middle ages they were completely supplanted by migrating Slavic peoples (Xygalatas 60). The narrator’s donning of Fallmerayer’s identity is a problematic one, especially given the narrator’s endeavors of historical research, into which he “[c]onfidently” (Sebald, V 117) throws himself the following day at Milan’s Biblioteca Civica.

During his time at the library, as he scrolls through the microfiche of 1913 newspapers, a kind of cinema of history plays out before his eyes in an imaginative recreation of life in Milan.

in the early part of the century. Indeed, the narrator pictures himself within and interacting with this world. To create this experience he focuses, it would seem, exclusively on advertisements. In one case, apparently in response to an advertisement for dental services, he remarks:

And then I witnessed Dr Pesavento, whose practice was in the Via Stella, not far from the Biblioteca Civica, performing one of his painless extractions. The pale countenance of the patient under Dr Pesavento did indeed seem perfectly relaxed, but her body twisted and turned in the dentist’s chair as if she were undergoing the most agonising discomforts. (119; image in original)

In this way, Sebald invokes Fallmerayer’s “deeply ideological” (Xygalatas 60) perspective and the economically motivated bias of the genre of advertisements to problematize the reliability of event-contemporary documents. Using these documents as a representational catalyst, Sebald’s narrator at first indulges a nostalgic recreation of the romanticized doctor. However, this image is quickly undermined by the pain and suffering of the imagined patient. It is also worth noting the placement of the advertisement between the words “painless” and “extraction” in Sebald’s text. Silke Horstkotte has argued that Sebald’s layout of photographs in relation to text is an intentional meaning-making device (72). She claims, however, that the effects of this device are often lost in the translation from German to English where publishers of the English versions did not pay close enough attention to the semiotic value of image-text arrangements (74). Whether
intentional or fortuitous in this case, the image’s placement suggests that the narrator’s extraction of the document from the archive, and its transplantation into his own text, is as effortless and painless as its claims of the dental services it promotes. In a sense, Sebald illustrates the barbarism of historical representation in its tendency to select, exclude and mislead.

The theme of wind, from the tombstone epitaph, is echoed in the name of Pesavento. Pesa, meaning “to weigh,” can also be used in the sense of “to consider,” i.e. “consider the wind.” Pesa can also be used as an adjective meaning “crashing” or “overwhelming.” In the context of the narrator’s historical research (taken together with his lofty position, his recognition of the wind, and his memory of the epitaph) recalls the pitfalls of the historian as sketched in Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophies of History.” In Thesis VII, Benjamin critiques the practice of turning representations of history into “cultural treasures” (256), a practice he attributes to historians aligned with the “victor” (254). Sebald shows the extent to which this process becomes culturally habitual; the advertisement becomes a kind of parody of the cultural treasure. The patient, as a grotesque stand-in for the victims of violence, is presumably too occupied by her bodily pain to record its occurrence. Benjamin writes, “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another” (256). It is difficult to determine Benjamin’s position here. Can the historical materialist overcome such barbaric detachment? Is it a matter of being ever-vigilant in order to minimize such barbarism as much as is possible? Sebald’s text reproduces the paradox of revising the victor’s history while parodying the empathetic trespass on victim experiences. In his later texts, such as The Emigrants, The Rings of Saturn and Austerlitz, Sebald’s rhetorical
caution toward events of mass violence and catastrophic destruction could arguably approach such vigilance toward exorcising representational barbarism.

As mentioned above, the political borders of the Tyrol are but a historical memory in the narrator’s time. So, in taking on the identity of a Tyrolean, the narrator takes the liberty of ignoring his relation to the geopolitical history to place, which he takes as a license to represent that history free from the anxiety carried by that history, an anxiety that has up to this point plagued him with a both physical and discursive paralysis. As we have seen by his own admission, this is a concern that was front and center for Sebald during composition. The author thus allegorizes the practice of the historian and in so doing offers the state of anxiety as a necessary response in the process of research and representation. In signaling a problematic relationship between historian and subject matter, this anxiety underscores the importance of considering the identity of the author in regard to his or her rhetorical choices.

3.2. The Interaction of Testimony and Documents in “Ambros Adelwarth”

In Vertigo, as explained above, the narrator problematizes the role of documentary evidence; in The Emigrants, by contrast, the narrator emphasizes its representational and epistemological potential. Like The Rings of Saturn, The Emigrants is apparently organized by the narrator’s process of discovery rather than a discernible story arc. Additionally, while the narrator’s curiosity about the four people he writes about drives his interrogation, he does not articulate an explicit ideological (or even personal) motive. The narrator’s process of discovery is in large part conducted through a gathering of oral histories. This is particularly true in the case of the book’s longest section, which concerns the narrator’s uncle, Ambros Adelwarth. In this section, the narrator seeks out information about Adelwarth from other family members, especially his Aunt Fini and Uncle Kasimir, both German emigres to the United Sates. While the
testimony of these relatives provide is not without its representational problems, the narrator focuses on the contrast they provide rather than their individual limitations.

Adelwarth, as he appears in *The Emigrants*, is based on a real-life uncle of Sebald’s. As a child, the narrator is as enamored with stories of Adelwarth’s “legendary past” (87) as he is with the mythic form America takes in his imagination. In this way, Sebald establishes a theme of mythic history, which in a local sense resembles the kind of collective history Friedländer describes as “simplistic and self-assured historical narrations and closures” (“Trauma” 53). For Friedländer explicitly, and Sebald implicitly, the antidote for such “naive historical positivism” (53) is a “reintroduction of individual memory into the overall representation” (53). When Sebald’s narrator crosses the Atlantic to seek out further information on Adelwarth, his motive may be to indulge in his mythic past image of Adelwarth, but the addition of his family’s testimony results in an image far more fractured than this initial conception.

The testimonies and documents that Sebald’s narrator curates and assembles into the text of the chapter performs on a familial level what Friedländer attempts on a public one in his “confronting the individual voice in a field dominated by political decisions and administrative decrees which neutralize the concreteness of despair and death” (53). The sound of Adelwarth’s suffering—characterized by a life of quiet persecution and loss—is in effect drowned out by the simple and sparse narrative of his surviving family members. However, the documentary method of representation—largely successful when applied to Adelwarth, a pre-World War II, non-Jewish German—comes up against an ethical obstruction in the final chapter when it is applied to Max Ferber, a Jew displaced and separated from his parents as a child by Nazi actions. As addressed in more detail below, this further illustrates how the social identity of the writer impacts the representation of particular histories. It is also significant that Adelwarth’s life is
The narrator begins the chapter with a childhood memory of a large family gathering in Germany (his only firsthand memory of his uncle). In this “truly memorable appearance,” Adelwarth represents “a most distinguished presence who confirmed and enhanced the self-esteem of all who were there, as the general murmur of approval made clear – even though, as I, at the age of seven, immediately realized (in contrast to the adults, who were caught up in their own preconceptions), they seemed out-classed compared with this man” (E 68). This view of Adelwarth is one that both sets up competing perceptions of him as well as establishes a kind of “genuine” perception of Adelwarth as a quietly superior creature who, in his composure and worldliness, “out-classes” his provenance. This assumption is repeated throughout the chapter, as the reader discovers the narrator is not alone in his detection of something exceptional in Adelwarth’s character. When this “true” interpretation of Adelwarth comes up against testimony and documents that contradict or otherwise change the picture of Adelwarth, the narrator’s knowledge is tested and revised. Because the modes of the sources of this knowledge (oral history, written diary, photographs) are preserved through quotation in Sebald’s text, the friction between the sources and the original picture of Adelwarth are also reproduced for the reader.

In New Jersey the narrator visits his Aunt Fini and Uncle Kasimir, siblings whose mother was Adelwarth’s sister. Both tell the narrator (on separate occasions) of their own emigrations and eventually reveal some details of Adelwarth. These accounts are told from the particular subject positions of Fini and Kasimir in reported speech and unmarked quotation. Both are, like the narrator, reliant on the strong narrative of Adelwarth’s “legendary past” (87) (Kasimir’s phrase), a narrative that seems to have hardened even in its vagueness across the entire family. It
is a narrative that is built on personal memory, familial oral history, and perhaps a lack of information and imagination. It is also a narrative that potentially shields the family from aspects of Adelwarth’s past—particularly his homosexuality—that they find unseemly. This shielding mimics on a more local scale, generalizing “tag[s]” identified by Friedländer which post-war Germans used to avoid painful realities (e.g., “fascism” for “Nazism”) (“Trauma” 46). As should be clear by this point, I am arguing here that it is not only in the one-for-one restoration of so-called “specific” terms for “general” ones that distinguishes a literature of confrontation, but in the replaying of the past from perspectives that democratize its narration. As for Aunt Fini, her story of Adelwarth tends to romanticize the figure in tropes of tragedy, success, adventure and melodrama:

If one thinks now of the circumstances in which Ambros grew up, said Aunt Fini, one inevitably concludes that he never really had a childhood. When he was only thirteen he left home and went to Lindau, where he worked in the kitchens of Bairische Hof till he had enough for the rail fare to Lausanne, the beauties of which he had once heard enthusiastically praised at the inn in Gopprechts by a traveling watchmaker. Why, I shall never know, said Aunt Fini, but in my mind’s eye I always see Ambros crossing Lake Constance from Lindau by steamer, in the moonlight, although that can scarcely have been how it was in reality. (77)

Aunt Fini’s account of Adelwarth clearly demonstrates how her subjectivity shapes her representation of him as well as concedes its unreliability. For example, though Adelwarth “spent all of one afternoon telling me [Aunt Fini] about his time in Japan,” “I no longer remember exactly what he told me. Something about paper walls, I think, about archery, and a good deal about evergreen laurel, myrtle and wild camellia” (79). Fini’s memory appears to
select only details which support her romantic view of the world and discard those that might add
dimension to her uncle’s character. Additionally, her claim that Adelwarth lacked a real
childhood is delivered with apparent empathy for the circumstances of his upbringing but also
serves to perpetuate the one-dimensional image of his character as a reserved gentleman. As will
be demonstrated below, romanticization is utilized even by Adelwarth himself, so that the
perspectives of those other than the author’s are not arbitrarily underwritten as inherently more
reliable but which nevertheless restore to them some representative power.

Uncle Kasimir is more reticent on the subject of his own past as it relates to the emotional
impact of emigration, and even more so of Adelwarth’s, requiring the narrator to “steer the talk
to the subject of emigration” (80). However, Kasimir seems to enjoy telling stories of his past
achievements of metalwork on the tall buildings of New York City (“I put the copper hoods on
the General Electric Building, and from ’29 to ’30 we spent a year on the sheet-steel work on the
summit of the Chrysler Building” [(86)]), a trade he began back in Germany. But talk of the past
makes Kasimir restless, leading to a car ride to the ocean, during which he continues to tell
stories of old times. But it is not until they reach the beach that Kasimir admits to the narrator,
“I’m afraid I don’t know much about Ambros Adelwarth,” and merely repeats the common
familial knowledge of “his legendary past” (87).

However, the narrator’s discussion with Kasimir is not entirely without revelation. For
Kasimir, the most salient aspect of Adelwarth’s identity is his homosexuality, which he refers to
euphemistically as Adelwarth being “of the other persuasion” (88). This comment both reveals
Kasimir’s discomfort with the fact as well as provides essential information will eventually
integrate into the larger vision of Adelwarth that the text constructs.
It remains important to emphasize that Kasimir’s conservative social ideology revealed in his word choice is inextricably linked to the picture of Adelwarth he describes. The “hollowed-out” (88) look of Adelwarth’s later years hints at a moral vacuity that is projected onto Adelwarth by Kasimir. The ideologically potent language is further problematized by the narrator’s repetition of it. He can only repeat what he hears, having no direct access to Adelwarth, and so is implicated in the subjective positions of the sources. This necessitates a diversity of sources “doing justice,” which is compounded by Kasimir’s euphemistic reference to Cosmo Solomon as Adelwarth’s “traveling companion” (88). Solomon is technically Adelwarth’s employer; Adelwarth serves as his servant on his many global excursions. However, subsequent details strongly suggest that the two are devoted lovers. Indeed, Kasimir introduces the narrator to Cosmo through the tragic troping of Aunt Fini—“But I know stories like that only from hearsay. Fini, who became a sort of confidante for Ambrose towards the end, sometimes hinted that there was something tragic about the relationship between Ambrose and the Solomon’s son” (88)—as if to distance himself from the “extravagance” and “escapades” he referred to only a sentence earlier. Ultimately, Kasimir directs the narrator back to Aunt Fini for more information: “She’ll be able to give you a better idea of what he was like” (88).

So, in a later conversation with Aunt Fini the narrator learns more about Cosmo Solomon. In these accounts, the larger-than-life figure of Solomon overshadows the unassuming figure of Adelwarth. Fini remarks that even after Cosmo’s death, “you might say Ambros Adelwarth the private man had ceased to exist, that nothing was left of him but his shell of decorum” (99). It seems an unnecessary comment; up to this point the reader has learned very little of Adelwarth’s private life as it is, only of his supporting role to Solomon. What seems likely is that Fini and Kasimir’s particular strain of oral history, whose primary function is to
maintain familial myths, provides a kind of shield to potentially embarrassing details of the past, while at the same time limiting their ability to know Adelwarth beyond what his outward appearance seems to suggest. In addition, Adelwarth’s cautious privacy (engendered by the same social values driving his nephew and niece) has already enabled the protection of the current myth.

Toward the end of his life, Adelwarth does seemingly open up to Fini, but tells stories not of his emotional life but only of the worldly adventures of which he and Solomon partook. While she recounts many details that at first seem oddly precise, she eventually provides an explanation: “Even the least of his reminiscences, which he fetched up very slowly from depths that were evidently unfathomable, was of astounding precision, so that, listening to him, I gradually became convinced that Uncle Adelwarth had an infallible memory, but that, at the same time, he scarcely allowed himself access to it” (100). So, despite Adelwarth’s apparent transparency, Fini is nevertheless quick to dismiss as unreliable the whole of her uncle’s stories from this particular period of his self-reporting: “At times I thought the things he said he had witnessed, such as beheadings in Japan, were so improbable that I supposed he was suffering from Korsakov’s syndrome: as you may know, said Aunt Fini, it is an illness which causes lost memories to be replaced by fantastic inventions” (102). The reader is never told what else Adelwarth told Fini on these occasions so it is impossible to judge whether she is justified in this suspicion. In addition to her suggestion further problematizing the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, it is also telling that as soon as Adelwarth’s stories take on a more personal character—recounting potentially traumatic experiences—she becomes reluctant to synthesize them into a more complex view of Adelwarth’s identity. Evidently, Fini and Kasimir are
unwilling to do the kind of “working through” that might fracture the closed narrative with which they are comfortable, effectively shielding themselves from pain or guilt.

A shield in this regard is an apt metaphor for the obstruction between these characters and their development of empathy for Adelwarth. This is further supported by Adelwarth’s diary, an artifact which constitutes a major element in the chapter. Fini is unable to decipher the handwriting inside, which leads her to give it to the narrator so that he might “give it a try” (95). While the testimony of his niece and nephew unquestionably add content to the biography of Adelwarth, it will take a careful transcription this very different source to represent Adelwarth as a figure more capable of receiving to the narrator’s (and, in turn, the reader’s) empathy. Along with transcriptions of several of its entries, Sebald visually represents the diary with photographic images of its cover and selections of its inside page spreads. The diary chronicles the European and Near East travels of Adelwarth and Solomon in the years just prior to the First World War. Also included in this section is a photograph purportedly taken by Adelwarth during these travels. The diary, while it makes occasional intimations on its author’s feelings, is primarily made up of unadorned descriptions of places. What new that emerges from it must emerge in the context of the knowledge the narrator (and reader) already have of Adelwarth— including the narrator’s limited memory of him and the common mythic history sustained by his family’s testimony. In other words, producing a more complex picture of Adelwarth is not a matter of finding the “best” source but occurs rather in the interaction of multiple disparate sources.

The way Sebald incorporates the diary parallels something for which Friedländer advocates in Holocaust historiography: the integration of individual voices into narratives, free of “overcritical comments” (“Trauma” 562) of witness accounts. This comparison is not meant to
imply an equivalence between Adelwarth’s rhetorical situation and victims of Nazi atrocities, however, Sebald’s shift in narrative perspective from the oral histories of Fini and Kasimir, as well as from his narrator’s text, function to activate the subjectivity of Adelwarth and his way of seeing similar to how Friedländer’s inclusion of contemporary witness accounts activate subjectivities of the past he interrogates. This compositional method resists authorial identification with the experiencers of past trauma.

In both cases this discourse is realized through the mode of witnessing; in Friedländer’s histories those witnesses are based in historical contingency, and in Sebald’s fictions in imaginative renderings of individuals whose extratextual origins are preserved through photographic exhibits and ostensible textual transcriptions. Through the quotation of individuals contemporary to the Nazi era, Friedländer makes lays bare the knowledge that shaped their world and influenced their behavior. The same is true for the figure of Adelwarth in Sebald’s narrative. While through the eyes of his family, he is a distinguished but apparently empty character, when supplemented with entries from his diary, his reserved demeanor softens, especially in the context of family interactions. For example, in his diary Adelwarth comments that “[f]or one awful heartbeat I imagine myself in Switzerland or at home again” (E 131). This fleeting admission reveals Adelwarth’s tense relationship with the world he struggled to be part of. In this case, Adelwarth is compelled, due to sexual intolerance, toward self-exile long before economic forces make it necessary for the rest of his family to follow suit. Sebald’s method thus enacts a literature in the vein of social justice that resists the normative authority of narrative texts. It is a pattern that repeats in The Rings of Saturn in the passages devoted to British diplomat, activist and Irish revolutionary Roger Casement.
To be clear, the multimodal representation of Adelwarth is not merely a case of two (or more) competing narratives (without the context of the narrator’s conversations with his family, Adelwarth’s diary would be a rather thin collection of pastoral fragments). Rather, when the document of his diary is exhibited and transcribed, it is allowed to interact on its own terms with the reported anecdotes of Fini, Kasimir, the narrator and others (including a psychiatrist who treated Adelwarth at the end of his life). Heterogeneously integrated into Sebald’s text, these parallel sources allow new insights into behaviors that would otherwise be controlled from a single authorial viewpoint. Therefore, when Adelwarth’s outward appearance of reserved decorum is interpreted as personal emptiness by Fini, Kasimir, and even the narrator to a certain extent, comments in his diary, such as the one cited above, reveal his need to put up a protective shield when in the presence of family. These contrasting narratives, in other words, are mutually contextual and, in constituting a representational gestalt, demonstrate the limitations of singular vantage points, even (and perhaps especially) the narrator’s. That is, if the narrator had merely synthesized in his own words a “straight line” narrative reporting these sources, the text would perhaps have been indistinguishable from much realistic fiction narrated from a “pretense of knowledge” (Wood).

By the same token, these key features of Sebald’s compositional method emphasize its resulting picture as a rhetorical illusion. It is impossible to say how much of Adelwarth’s diary is authentic or altered by Sebald. The photographic snapshots apparently document the real physical object belonging to Sebald’s real-life uncle, furthering not only the sense of their facticity but also the conflation of the text with an ontological reality it purports to represent. Additionally, Sebald suggested in an interview with James Wood that Adelwarth’s text draws on the diary of François-René de Chateaubriand (“An Interview” 28), a figure in whom the narrator
of *The Rings of Saturn* becomes explicitly interested. So, while Sebald contends that his text functions as a documentary, he also admits to a reliance on literary predecessors. Hidden allusions such as these could be seen as the games or traps of a cynical author; however, one could also, given knowledge of Sebald’s ethical concerns, also view them as warnings to readers who would otherwise assume objective knowledge of the other through a semiotic filter, a filter which must in the end partake in artifice.

More important to the present discussion is that the activation of Adelwarth’s subjectivity through both his words and his camera lens (in the form of photographs) serves to resist the temptation to appropriate his identity for author-interested purposes. This method of representation of the other’s perspective allows Adelwarth the apparent freedom to contradict or qualify the narratives that would otherwise go unchallenged in their description of him. For example, at one point after stargazing with Cosmo on a Greek island, Adelwarth comments in his diary, “They are the same stars I saw above the Alps as a child and later above the Japanese house in its lake, above the Pacific, and out over Long Island Sound. I can scarcely believe I am the same person, and in Greece” (*E* 129). This brief moment of reflection not only tacitly refutes assertions like Fini’s that Adelwarth “never really had a childhood” but also comments on the irreducibility of the other through the lens of simplistic labels that are easy to repeat but which break down upon closer examination. This irreducibility is underscored by Adelwarth’s inability to make his ever-evolving identity cohere (even for himself).

Indeed, these and many other examples from the diary attest to the fact that Adelwarth indulges in the same kind of romanticization of his past and present as people like Fini, who cannot help but imagine Adelwarth traveling “by steamer, in the moonlight.” Here Sebald’s text reflects the tendency of memory to take on, as a consequence of its intermediate role, a
fictionality akin to novelistic writing, and that even “authentic” documents are not immune to the structures of fiction, culturally imposed. The form of a diary is especially conducive to such fictionalization even without the framework or alterations Sebald may provide, which demonstrates the value of arranging diverse quotations over merely giving voice to the marginal.

Conversely, the voices of Adelwarth’s family are given space to qualify their statements. For instance, while Kasimir shows some discomfort with Adelwarth’s homosexual relationship with Solomon, he also expresses constraint and concedes ignorance: “But I know stories like that only from hearsay” (88); and compassion even in misunderstanding: “As for Uncle Adelwarth, all I can say is that I always felt sorry for him, because he could never, his whole life long, permit anything to ruffle his composure” (88). There is an element of tragedy in the unbridged disconnect between Adelwarth and those who loved him, but also a reassurance that to a certain extent Kasimir is wrong, that in non-familial contexts Adelwarth acknowledged and expressed his own deeply felt emotional responses.

3.3. The Defamiliarization of History in Austerlitz

The multimodal features of Sebald’s texts not only prove to be powerful techniques for representing individuals but can also be applied to broader historical contexts. Lynn Wolff has argued that the “shortcomings and purported failure of language” (“Literary Historiography” 326) experienced by the eponymous character of Austerlitz indicates a “new dimension” of unrepresentability “after the twentieth century atrocity of the Holocaust” (326). According to Wolff, by using documents and images in his fictions, Sebald “reconceptualises memory more as a process (that is, transitive) than as something one possesses (that is, intransitive). One could even argue that Sebald is creating a poetics of transitive memory in order to deconstruct the notion of memory as a thing to be possessed in a subject-object relationship with the individual”
In other words, the kinds of representations that suggest that a history is objectively fixed are exactly the kind of representations of the Holocaust which, according to Sebald, “militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting [. . .] and also paralyze [. . .] our moral capacity” (Interview with Michael Silverblatt). So, not only do photographs and documents included in fictional works “raise the question of their authenticity” and “break[] down” (327) the customary boundary between history and fiction but they also reorganize, defamiliarize and add to the existing canonical elements of that history. Moreover, the readerly “discovery” of these documents (and the connections between them) reflects a relationship with history that resists a reliance on “set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others” (Sebald, A 71).

This potentiality of the document to stir morally engaged historical thought reflects Friedländer’s stated intentions in the second volume of *Nazi Germany and the Jews*: “It is at this microlevel,” according to Friedländer, “that the most basic ongoing Jewish interactions with the forces acting in the implementation of the ‘Final Solution’ took place; it is at this microlevel that it mostly needs to be studied. And it is at this microlevel that documents abound” (*Extermination* xxiv). Friedländer expresses this idea even more forcefully when he states that “an individual voice suddenly arising in the course of an ordinary historical narrative of events [. . .] can tear through seamless interpretation and pierce the (mostly involuntary) smugness of scholarly detachment and ‘objectivity’” (xxv–xxvi). Such voices do not necessarily play a destructive role in a narrative of history but rather pull back the curtain to reveal the handiwork (the seams) of a fallible historian, who is working with as much material as he or she can find.

Using strategies similar to Friedländer’s in *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, Sebald utilizes the form of testimony to achieve similar ends. Of course, such a utilization is less a faithful
application of a generic form than it is a repurposing of witness testimony in the form of actual, altered and fictional accounts in the literary space of Sebald’s texts. While, on the one hand, Friedländer clearly states his goal as “rendering as truthful an account as documents and testimonials will allow,” on the other, the same claim cannot be provided for a work of fiction. As Dominick LaCapra asserts, “a crucial problem for analysis at the intersection of history and literature is how a literary text comes to terms with the pressures of historical events and forces” (29). One aspect of that intersection is the way in which authors like Sebald make rhetorical choices in acknowledgement of the relationship between their social identities and particular histories, such as the use of testimony and documents.

In a recent article in the New Yorker, James Wood puts it succinctly when he compares Sebald’s techniques of characterization to that of a biographer and criticizes the traditional fiction writer’s omniscient approach as anachronistic in a postmodern age, where it clashes with epistemological ideas of truth, which are being called into question ever more frequently in mainstream culture:

Because we are not God, our narration of another’s life is a pretense of knowledge—simultaneously an attempt to know and a confession of how little we know. Most conventional fiction, with its easy, inherited confidence, conceals the epistemological difficulty of this task; the concealment is what we find consoling about even quite demanding fiction. Sebald makes the unreliability of this labor a central element of his writing. (Wood)

What emerges in this discussion is an important insight into an enigma of Sebald’s style. In observation of his responsibility not to trespass presumptuously into the emotional lives of individuals (E 29), Sebald assumes the objective tone of the biographer. Yet, in order to break
the hegemony of generic structures conventionally associated with that tone, he punctures his own voice with the voices and visions of others. It is in the juxtaposition of and the interplay between the undiluted voices of the historian and the individuals whom the historian memorializes that elevates texts like Friedländer’s beyond unresolved testimony and “naive historical positivism” (Friedländer, “Trauma” 53). If this is correct, one theoretical implication is that the democratic vantage point that individual testimony affords problematizes historical texts in productive ways. Likewise, Friedländer’s ideas provide a possible explanation for a rhetorical use of testimony in fictional narratives and a justification to explore the applicability of testimonial modes in narrative more generally.

4. The Author as an Ever-Questioning Voice

As James E. Young has noted, Friedländer incorporates not only the voice of the eye-witness into his histories, but also “the sound of the historian’s voice” (Young 51). Friedländer has referred to this voice as an “ever-questioning commentary” (“Trauma” 52). In Nazi Germany and the Jews Friedländer includes commentary both as an integrated feature of the narrative and as parallel notes. As would be expected, the endnotes in that work primarily cite Friedländer’s sources. On occasion, however, this space is used for what he would characterize as commentary. For example, in a passage on expressions of antisemitism in German academia in 1933, Friedländer makes the claim that “the attitude of the majority of ‘Aryan’ university professors could be defined as ‘cultured Judeophobia,’” (Persecution 56) a term he attributes in a note to historian Donald Niewyk. In the note, following the source, Friedländer continues:

Michael Kater’s evaluation is somewhat clearer-cut: “The number of converts to Nazism, among the professors, often motivated by antisemitism, was growing, especially in 1932, and even if most of them chose to remain outside the party, the evidence suggests that in
their heart of hearts they had switched their allegiance to Hitler.” [citation omitted]

Academic Judeophobia during the empire and even more during the Weimar Republic is too well documented to need much further proof. Yet some notorious incidents can be read in contrary ways. In 1924 the Jewish Nobel laureate in chemistry and professor at the University of Munich, Richard Willstätter, resigned in protest against the decision of the dean and a majority of the faculty not to appoint the geochemist Viktor Goldschmidt on obviously antisemitic grounds. Yet, conversely, a great number of faculty members and students attempted for weeks to persuade Willstätter to take back his resignation, to no avail. (347)

This note is a prime example of ever-questioning commentary because it introduces Kater’s alternative interpretation but neither takes a strong position in relation to it nor makes an attempt to resolve its discrepancy; Friedländer’s interpretation remains ambivalent and effectively questions the ability to draw a firm conclusion given the heterogeneity of the historical record. In short, Friedländer resists hasty closure by allowing historical discourse to reverberate dynamically. Additionally, implicit in the discussion is the difficulty in making a final evaluation even considering extensive documentation of the topic. The reader is alerted to the fact that even relatively small actions and events represent a “convergence of distinct elements” (Extermination xv) making tidy generalizations difficult.

As Friedländer has stated, the form commentary takes is less important than its function: “Whether this commentary is built into the narrative structure of a history or developed as a separate, superimposed text is a matter of choice, but the voice of the commentator must be clearly heard” (“Trauma” 53). Indeed, Friedländer’s voice is embedded into the style of writing in important ways. For instance, in examining the hypocrisy of the Wehrmacht’s ostensibly
conservative position on murdering Jews in the early months of violent conflict, Friedländer employs an acerbic irony:

The Wehrmacht may have considered massacring Jews as something demanding disciplinary action, but torturing them offered welcome enjoyment to both soldiers and SS personnel. The choice victims were Orthodox Jews, given their distinctive looks and attire. They were shot at; they were compelled to smear feces on each other; they had to jump, crawl, sing, clean excrement with prayer shawls, dance around the bonfires of burning Torah scrolls. They were whipped, forced to eat pork, or had Jewish stars carved on their foreheads. The “beard game” was the most popular entertainment of all: Beards and sidelocks were shorn, plucked, torn, set afire, hacked off with or without parts of skin, cheeks, or jaws, to the amusement of a usually large audience of cheering soldiers. On Yom Kippur 1939 such entertainment for the troops was particularly lively.

(Extermination 27–28)

In accurately summarizing the facts of the historical record, Friedländer’s tone also palpably conveys his outrage: balancing objectivity with unobscured scorn and disgust. The darkness of the satire preserves the raw violence of the Nazi crimes against their victims and effectively “punctures” the “normality” (“Trauma” 53) of a conventional academic representation of their experiences.

4.1. Historiography in Austerlitz

The clearest theoretical connection between Friedländer’s ideas on commentary and the work of Sebald can be made with Austerlitz. Much like in Sebald’s other texts, the narrator acts as a kind of surrogate for other voices, primarily for its title character, who in turn quotes others at length in an elaborate layering of narratorial removal. Historiography is thematized early in
the narrative when Austerlitz describes the lessons of one of his school teachers, André Hilary, whose vivid lectures of the battle of Austerlitz help Austerlitz the school boy come to terms with his newly discovered identity. Austerlitz, through the narrator, recalls that in his lectures Hilary brought it all vividly to life for us, partly by recounting the course of these events, often passing from plain narrative to dramatic descriptions and then on to a kind of impromptu performance distributed among several different roles, from one to another of which he switched back and forth with astonishing virtuosity, and partly by studying the gambits of Napoleon and his opponents with the cold intelligence of a nonpartisan strategist, surveying the entire landscape of those years from above with an eagle eye[. . . .] (Sebald, A 69–70)

Hilary’s effectiveness as a historian is due to his ability to integrate the “plain narrative” with situated perspectives. In further similarity to Friedländer’s ideal historian, Hilary breaks into a self-reflexive commentary about historiographic problems of representation:

Hilary could talk for hours about the second of December 1805, but nonetheless it was his opinion that he had to cut his accounts far too short, because, as he several times told us, it would take an endless length of time to describe the events of such a day properly, in some inconceivably complex form recording who had perished, who survived, and exactly where and how, or simply saying what the battlefield was like at nightfall, with

7. Following the death of his foster parents, his headmaster reveals to him his true name is not Dafydd Elias Elias as he had thought but Jacques Austerlitz. He will go on to discover that he was a Jewish refugee of Czechoslovakia who emigrated to England via the so-called Kindertransport during Nazi aggressions.
the screams and groans of the wounded and dying. In the end all anyone could ever do was sum up the unknown factors in the ridiculous phrase, “The fortunes of battle swayed this way and that,” or some similarly feeble and useless cliché. All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce 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 still amidst the turmoil of battle. Our concern with history, so Hilary’s thesis ran, is a concern with preformed 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. (71–72)

In context of the present discussion this lengthy passage almost speaks for itself. Hilary’s pessimism in the historian’s ability to represent the battle as it actually was is reminiscent of the penultimate thought in Friedländer’s essay that “even if new forms of historical narrative were to develop, or new modes of representation, and even if literature and art were to probe the past from unexpected vantage points, the opaqueness of deep memory would probably not be dispelled” (“Trauma” 55). Histories, if they are to be coherent, are in the end narratives; they are not the events or experiences themselves, nor disconnected documents produced during them. Hilary comes up against the limitations of even the most assiduously researched, adeptly composed and keenly felt historical narratives. His confession of this difficulty not only exposes the epistemological difficulties at the core of historical narrative but also checks the authority of
his own discourse, effectively leaving the topic open for further developments and interpretations.

While Hilary’s commentary is far more meditative than anything found in Friedländer, it still speaks to the same imperative: in a representation of a complex traumatic past, history must vigilantly resist simplistic closures. Moreover, the fact that Hilary’s lectures “switched back and forth with astonishing virtuosity” between different roles (subject positions) suggests his ability to arrange the historical record in such a way that it remains both cohesive yet reflective of its complexity, a goal similar to Friedländer’s that “the history of the Holocaust should be both an integrative integrated history” (*Extermination* xv). Finally, Hilary’s contempt for the “ridiculous phrase[s]” and “feeble and useless cliché[s]” of historical writing speaks to the desire of the historian to be ever watchful for new details to emerge from the historical record, which reveal subject positions in unexpected vantage points, as well as for new interpretive language to defamiliarize habituated historiographical moves (what Hilary dubs “set pieces”). For Hilary, the summarized accounts composed and repeated by historians are conspicuously visual. His descriptions of “moment[s] frozen still” are like descriptions of paintings which emphasize in their stasis the drama of historical battles as imagined in the present. Sebald’s interest in visual representation of artists and photographers is of course evident in all four of his major works. In this case, paintings of war function as icons for the “pictures” collectively held by Western culture to represent its violent past. Sebald here, through the (distant) voice of Hilary, suggests the insidious potential of images to act as a kind of aesthetically pleasing historical shorthand standing-in for and softening the details of violent events. However, Sebald elsewhere explores the possibility of using visual art more rigorously to engage the past.
4.2. The Translation of Suffering in “Max Ferber”

Like Hilary, Max Ferber (in The Emigrants) also experiences difficulty in responding to visual representations of violence—specifically, photographed reproductions of a ceiling fresco by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (see Figure 3). Ferber, a painter of portraits, is a German Jew who has long made his home in Manchester. The narrator only very gradually learns (in part due to his own initial unwillingness to confront the fact) that Ferber was forced to leave Germany in the early years of Nazi aggression against the Jewish population. Most of his family members stayed behind and were murdered in the “Final Solution.” Ferber recounts how on one occasion he studied Tiepolo’s paintings reproduced in an art book:

For a whole evening, said Ferber, I sat looking at those pictures with a magnifying glass, trying to see further and further into them. And little by little that summer day in Würzburg came back to me, and the return to Munich, where the general situation and the atmosphere at home were steadily becoming more unbearable, and the silence thickening.

(Sebald, E 185)

Ferber cannot see more actual detail in the painting any more than Hilary can unsee the preformed images that have constructed common understandings of European history. However, the representation in the painting does return Ferber in a sense to repressed memories of his original experience of viewing the painting in Würzburg as a child with his uncle. The experience, “which at that time meant nothing” to him as a child, as an adult, gains new significance despite its retrospective activation through the reproduction.
While the response of a reader (or viewer) of a representation of the past is dependent on that reader’s relation with that past, any representation, be it an eyewitness account or a painting, is ultimately limited in its capacity to recreate pain and suffering. As Friedländer would have it, the excess that the Shoah carries with it is a mute excess. Ferber comes to a similar revelation when viewing a painting by Grünewald (see Figure 4):

The extreme vision of that strange man, which was lodged in every detail, distorted every limb, and infected the colours like an illness, was one I had always felt in tune with, and now I found my feeling confirmed by the direct encounter. The monstrosity of that suffering, which, emanating from the figures depicted, spread to cover the whole of Nature, only to flood back from the lifeless landscape to the humans marked by death, rose and ebbed within me like a tide. Looking at those gashed bodies, and at the witnesses of the execution, doubled up by grief like snapped reeds, I gradually
understood that, beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced—consciousness—and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about this. What is certain, though, is that mental suffering is effectively without end. (170)

Figure 4: A detail of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* by Matthias Grünewald (c. 1512–1516); although not visually represented in Sebald’s text, likely the source text for Ferber’s description.

Ferber tracks a grand path of the suffering represented in the painting—it travels from artist, to the depicted figures, to Nature, to himself. Ferber’s experience of the work in the “direct encounter” with the actual fresco is similar to his experience of viewing it reproduced in the book. If he were expecting to have a more direct experience of the suffering it depicts, that effort seems to have been frustrated. Ferber comes to the tentative conclusion that pain exerts a kind of mercy on the sufferer by relieving him or her from consciousness. There is the suggestion that this unconsciousness is what excludes its transfer to the work. This is a conclusion that if Sebald were to suggest it directly would be inappropriate given his relation to the Shoah as a non-Jewish German, essentially a child of the perpetrator demographic. Instead, Sebald constructs an elaborate, indirect path to that suffering in which the Shoah is never explicitly referenced. Indeed, Ferber is loath to explicitly connect the suffering in the painting (which greatly moves him upon viewing) to the suffering of his murdered parents and other family members. In effect,
the idea that suffering extinguishes pain provides a survivor’s coping tactic. Yet, even though he imagines relief from their bodily pain, he experiences an unending mental pain as a function of his own imagination—not the original bodily pain of the others depicted, which is inaccessible, but a traumatic mental pain arising from imaginative empathy.  

This idea was lucidly dramatized in a scene from Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin*. While this novel is not specifically alluded to in *The Emigrants*, the figure of Nabokov as the “butterfly man” is a recurring theme connecting its four stories (104, 115, 174, 213), and *Pnin* arguably provides an important subtext to the theme of vicarious pain:

8. While it is beyond the scope of the present discussion, it is interesting to note that the two-dimensional “images” of history which stymie both Hilary and Austerlitz are contrasted, respectively, with three-dimensional corollaries of those same images. On the one hand, Ferber, at great personal risk, seeks out the frescoes across geographical space and views them in their presentation on a three-dimensional structure of the altar piece. On the other hand, Hilary’s “frozen” battle images are thawed by Austerlitz’s preoccupation with the architectural structures at those sites as an alternate medium to engage with those same events. It would be a worthwhile project to investigate to what extent Sebald has used the dimensions of visual and physical space as a figurative analogy to comment upon the laziness of “one-dimensional” understandings of history.

9. Specifically, Nabokov appears in a photograph in “Dr Henry Selwyn”; in “Paul Bereyter,” the narrator’s source, Mme. Landau recalls reading Nabokov’s autobiography at the moment she meets Bereyter; the “butterfly man” is an enigmatic amusement of Ambros Adelwarth in his later years, whom he watches for from his window in the sanitarium in Ithaca, New York; and finally
In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin [. . .] because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death were possible. One had to forget—because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one’s lips in the dusk of the past. And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one’s mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower-bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood. (Nabokov, *Pnin* 134–135)

In context of this passage from *Pnin*, the “resurrection” of Christ in Grünewald’s painting becomes merely a repeated image of bodily suffering. Just as Pnin must ever undergo visions of Mira’s death, so must Ferber of his family’s. But the pain of the imaginer is of a different sort than that of the original sufferer. This is not only because the imaginer (in both cases) does not in “Max Ferber,” he appears twice, once as a boy in Luisa’s memoirs and again, to Ferber himself, this time as an old retiree in the hills of Switzerland, still chasing butterflies. See Curtin and Shrayer’s “Netting the Butterfly Man” and Durantaye’s “The Facts of Fiction, or the Figure of Vladimir Nabokov in W. G. Sebald” for detailed discussions of the intertextual role of Nabokov in Sebald’s work.
know the actual circumstances surrounding the others’ fates but also *because* their bodily suffering can never be accessed as it was contingently experienced; such suffering as suggested by Ferber’s discussion of the Tiepolo fresco cannot be testified *as experience* but only described (represented) in the fact of its occurrence and its outward appearance. At the level of commentary, this qualification of knowing distinguishes emotional trespass from responsible empathy.

In addition to its thematization in Sebald’s narratives, ever-questioning commentary is also evident at a higher narratorial level. Sebald’s first-person narrators are ever-present yet rarely overbearing. Yet, on occasion, they express an anxiety over representing the traumatic past, especially pasts experienced by others. It is important to stress that this anxiety is largely *not* present, or at least deemphasized, until it occasionally (yet conspicuously) emerges in the form of self-referential first-person narration. The use of the *I* pronoun opens all four of Sebald’s major works, and all employ it as a departure point from which the storytelling begins, whence forth the subjectivity of the narrator recedes, gradually but quickly, into the background. This consistent pattern of narratorial effacement takes place usually within the space of just a few pages. It both asserts the contingent subjectivity of the storyteller as well as deemphasizes his authorial powers of knowledge, judgment and identification.¹⁰ As Angeliki Tseti puts it, “the

¹⁰ A slight exception to this pattern occurs in *Vertigo*, in which the I-narrator does not appear at all in the first chapter, “Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet,” which is written in the form of a brief biographical sketch of Stendhal. The chapter never refers to the writer by his pen name but instead by his given name, Marie Henri Beyle, a defamiliarizing device which Sebald will employ again more conspicuously in *The Rings of Saturn* in the passages on Joseph Conrad. In
narrator is appointed the role of the listener, collector and disseminator of these stories and assumes the responsibility to bear witness” (105). In other words, Sebald’s narrators for the most part assume a passive role in the story itself. For instance, in each of the four parts of The Emigrants, each of the title characters “steps forward to unfold their own story in monologues that eventually efface the narrator” (106).

However, these narrators sometimes intrude upon the narrative in relatively conspicuous ways. As discussed above, The Emigrants is largely organized by the narrator’s discovery of knowledge through testimony and documents. In the book’s first story, there is the sense that the experiences of Dr. Henry Selwyn’s are stumbled upon rather than examined with any acute motive of the narrator. Rather than requiring the narrator to “dig,” the details emerge, seemingly of their own agency, and on their own terms. Nevertheless, the story of Selwyn begins a series of portraits of three other persons, culminating with the section on Max Ferber. As these stories progress, the narrator’s curiosity gradually (almost imperceptibly) becomes more urgent. At the same time, the narrator’s concern over how these stories are told grows increasingly fraught. In keeping with the work’s peregrinatory structure, the narrator first meets Ferber while he is literally wandering around the streets of Manchester and sees a sign reading “TO THE STUDIOS” (E 160). From this chance encounter, the two develop a lifelong, if intermittent, friendship. Eventually Ferber lends the narrator his mother’s diary for the narrator to write Ferber’s life

the second chapter of Vertigo, “All’estero,” Sebald’s I-narrator enters the text in similar fashion to the three later works, but in a somewhat more prominent role. This pattern is repeated in the third and fourth chapters, with the I-narrator falling away again (almost completely) in the third and returning in the fourth.
story. Like Austerlitz, Ferber escaped from Europe (Munich) to England as a child; his parents remained in Germany and were murdered by the Nazis. As the narrator comments, he encounters great difficulty in writing this account, which to some extent he must have overcome since the text that causes the trouble is the one the reader is reading:

> During the winter of 1990/91, in the little free time I had (in other words, mostly at the so-called weekend and at night), I was working on the account of Max Ferber given above. It was an arduous task. Often I could not get on for hours or days at a time, and not infrequently I unravelled what I had done, continuously tormented by scruples that were taking tighter hold and steadily paralysing me. These scruples concerned not only the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to, no matter what approach I tried, but also the entire questionable business of writing. I had covered hundreds of pages with my scribble, in pencil and ballpoint. By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions. Even what I ultimately salvaged as a “final” version seemed to me a thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched. So I hesitated to send Ferber my cut-down rendering of his life[. . . .] (230–231)

Sebald’s narrator here joins the exchange of quoted voices to address concerns of the text’s very composition. The narrator’s problem here is different from his earlier concern with writing about Paul Bereyter. Instead of being afraid of fabricating beyond the facts of his subject’s life, he is explicitly concerned with doing justice to that life. Where with Bereyter the solution to the narrator’s imaginative trespass is merely to write in a different way, with Ferber, any kind of writing strikes the narrator as problematic. The explicit authorial commentary on compositional and representational struggles subjectifies the role of the author while exposing its barbaric subjection of Ferber and his family.
The narrator remains ostensibly unaware of what features, if any, are successful in his representations of Ferber and the others profiled in earlier chapters. Arguably, however, the anxiety leads him back to testimony in a way similar the section on Ambros Adelwarth. In its defacement of the author, the form of testimony rhetorically releases Ferber’s (and his family’s) story from the tyranny of the author’s representation of it. When the narrator discovers many years later the truth of Ferber’s origin, the narrator returns to Manchester to find Ferber much the same as he left him, despite the global success his artwork has attained in the interim. Ferber is in many ways paralyzed by the trauma of his past, and it requires the narrator’s intrusive questions to provoke Ferber to bear witness to that past, but, again, to do so he represents the interrogation through layers of vocal mediation. By transcribing a lengthy passage from the diary of Ferber’s mother, Luisa Lanzberg, the narrator seems to be testing whether a more “original” document will help him to better understand and to better represent his subject. At the same time, the lengthy and unmarked quotation of the diary forces the voice of the authorial narrator to recede. Further, the pre-war composition of the diary suggests a desire to observe the past as though it were not “organized retrospectively” (Young 53).

In quoted form, Lanzberg’s diary reestablishes a subjective position situated before the events of catastrophe that remains “oblivious to [its] end” (53). The content of the diary is framed by Ferber’s mental suffering, which functions to acknowledge the injustice done to his mother but which does not blur it with paraphrase. In other words, commentary here remains compositionally separate yet emotionally connected to the document. Sebald therefore is walking a fine line of presentation and evaluation in order that the other’s life does not “acquire significance only in light of [its] terrible end” (53). Doing so, according to Young, would “hand[] the Nazis a posthumous victory” (53).
The push and pull between the voice of the narrator and the voice of the other is achieved with the document. However, the document as it appears in Sebald is a potentially problematic one. While Sebald reproduces many that seem to genuinely testify to the extratextual reality of his subjects (e.g., the photographs of Adelwarth’s diary), others have been fictionalized. For instance, Klaus Gasseleder has discovered the primary source for Lanzberg’s diary is the memoir of a Thea Frank-G (Long 25; Horstkotte 53). Moreover, the “diary” contains an unmarked rewriting of a passage from Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* presented as though it were the words of Lanzberg herself. The entry, which recalls her husband’s marriage proposal, converges with a scene in Nabokov’s text in which the author recalls a walk with his father and his father’s colleague Muromtsev in the very same spot at Bad Kissingen. In comparing the passages side by side, the similarities are striking. The following is the passage from Sebald’s text:

But I do remember that that the fields on either side of the path were full of flowers and that I was happy, and oddly enough I also recall that, not far out of town, just where the sign to Bodenlaube is, we overtook two very refined gentlemen, one of whom (who looked particularly majestic) was speaking seriously to a boy of about ten who had been chasing butterflies and had lagged so far behind that they had had to wait for him. This warning can’t have had much effect, though, because whenever we happened to look back we saw the boy running about the meadows with upraised net, exactly as before. Hansen later claimed that he had recognized the elder of the two distinguished Russian gentlemen as Muromzef, the president of the first Russian parliament, who was then staying in Kissingen. (*E* 213)

And the following is from *Speak, Memory*:
Near a sign NACH BODENLAUBE, at Bad Kissingen, Bavaria, just as I was about to join for a long walk my father and majestic old Muromtsev (who, four years before, in 1906, had been President of the first Russian Parliament), the latter turned his marble head toward me, a vulnerable boy of eleven, and said with his famous solemnity: “Come with us by all means, but do not chase butterflies, child. It spoils the rhythm of the walk.” (Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* 130)

For a reader recognizing the crisp echo of Nabokov’s work in Sebald’s text, the authenticity of the document is completely undermined. Moreover, it destabilizes the status of documents elsewhere in the work, such as Adelwarth’s diary. The *Speak, Memory* quotation is an apt example of the intersection between document and literature, *Speak, Memory* itself being a work of autobiographical nonfiction but also containing some of Nabokov’s most beautiful literary art. In Sebald’s text, what appears on the surface to be the transcription of an event-contemporary document is revealed to be an elaborate intertextual pastiche.

But beyond problematizing the document, it is Sebald’s alteration of the quotation that gives the passage its significance in terms of the present argument. While in Nabokov’s text the reader sees the scene from the vantage point of Nabokov himself, in Sebald’s it is from the vantage of Luisa Lanzberg. While clearly describing the same event, her interpretation of it is (however slightly) different than Nabokov’s. She guesses the boy’s age as ten rather than eleven and cannot hear the speech of Muromzev. She also adds the details that the boy continued to lag behind the two adults, something Nabokov does not admit. Of course it only becomes a (potential) admission with the addition of Lanzberg’s account, which is merely a fictional invention of Sebald. This metafictional play not only pays tribute to the art of Nabokov (a renowned literary and literal game player) but also enacts a kind of documentary process similar
to Friedländer’s. New insights begin to emerge from events as additional voices are introduced to represent alternative vantage points. While for Friedländer it is a historiographic technique and in Sebald’s a rhetorical one, both compositional methods arise from an epistemology which balances appreciation with suspicion of the document, whether fictionally or factually sourced.

According to James E. Young, it is impossible to write about the past as if its later stages never happened, that is, to imagine history from the vantage point of those who lived through events who did not know what the future had in store (53). However, to Young it remains important to somehow incorporate personal histories not organized by the fate of catastrophes, something which can only be done by “works written before or during the catastrophe” (53):

(H)ow the survivor has organized this story still reveals a kind of understanding unique to someone who has known events both directly and at some remove. The survivor’s memory includes both experiences of history and of memory: the ways memory has already become part of personal history, the ways misapprehension of events and the silences that come with incomprehension were part of events as they unfolded then and part of memory as it unfolds now. (53)

Lynn Wolff has explained Sebald’s self-imposed distance from the novel form by referencing Sebald’s comment that “it is the junction between document and fiction where the most interesting things happen in literature” (qtd. in Wolff, “Literary Historiography” 322). Wolff further elaborates that this seam joining document and fiction “can be seen as the site of both chronological documentation and creative potentiality, an interface that brings together the two separate endeavours of history and literature, as described in Aristotle’s Poetics” (322). However, as Wolff also points out, “it is not [Sebald’s] main purpose to create a fiction that is historically substantiated through documentation” (320). We can add to this, in light of the above
discussion, that Sebald’s preoccupation with the interface between document and fiction is indicative of a responsibility for a documentary epistemology opposed to the kind of omniscient epistemology associated with novelistic fiction, one which is not so much focused on “telling history” but rather with meditating upon individuals whom the author is ethically compelled to confront but cannot fully know. To be clear, Sebald’s works are undeniably fictions, but their epistemological strategy of building character and story is presented as a documentary process rather than the illusion of an all-knowing narrator who purports to know the souls, minds and experiences of its characters. Sebald, in this way, brings a realism to his work with respect to what we know, the way in which we come to know it and, perhaps most importantly, what we do not know or cannot quite be sure of.

5. Conclusion

From the preceding investigation of Sebald’s work through the lens of Friedländer’s historiographic ideas, several insights can be identified. Clearly, the similarities between the two writers’ compositional strategies are significant. These strategies are essential to the rhetorical approaches appropriate for their respective projects. While they diverge in tone and content, the discourses established by both authors realize an epistemological position that questions the authority of master narratives and fosters a discursive environment conducive to skepticism and revision of retrospectively organized conceptions of the past.

Specifically, each establishes a basic narrative structure which acts as a platform from which richness and complexity can be added in dimensions beyond traditional conventions of narrative fiction and historiographic interpretation. Friedländer’s chronological structures allow his histories to incorporate layers of subject positions from which to view events and understand human behavior. Similarly, the peregrinatory organization of Sebald’s texts provide a stable
foundation from which the narrator can make his many digressions across time and space that add insight into characters and their relationship with history. This is especially evident in *The Rings of Saturn*, which also exemplifies how Sebald’s texts accumulate layers of thematic and conceptual complexity unhindered by an adherence to conventional narrative arcs. Moreover, these structures are reflective of both authors’ disdain for what Friedländer has called “hasty ideological closure (such as the ‘catastrophe and redemption’ theme)” (“Trauma” 51). Where the two depart in content and form can be understood in the context of the social relationship between the authors and their subject matter.

Additionally, the multivocality of both Friedländer and Sebald’s work is realized with the incorporation of documents and testimony via quotation. This technique was illustrated above with examples from *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* and is employed across the entirety of Sebald’s oeuvre. While their uses of documents and testimony appear very similar formally, the rhetorical purposes they serve are very different. Friedländer’s texts use the voices of individuals from all walks of life to disrupt the “smugness” of historical discourse that can too frequently only include official reports and “high profile” perspectives. The practice also avoids disparaging the idea of factual truth while leaving flexibility for further discussion. At the same time that Sebald’s use of documents privileges historical fact, it problematizes the power of documents to misrepresent. Ultimately, the documentary form is a necessary tactic for confronting a historical past with which Sebald (as a non-Jewish German) is at cultural odds. Most significantly for this discussion is that both authors’ reliance on documents (whether authentic, fictional or a mixture of the two) speak to an epistemological position that employs an abundance of caution regarding what can be known and how it comes to be known. For Friedländer, such an approach aids in demonstrating (rather than generalizing about) the cultural and social diversity of European Jews
during the Nazi era; for Sebald it is a technique that distances the author’s subjective position from the experiences of others he feels a responsibility to confront but into whose identities he must not intrude.

Finally, the presence of ever-questioning commentary completes the comparison. Friedländer stresses the importance of the historian’s voice as a means to make explicit what the inclusion of testimony implies: that the historian has a moral interest in persecution, violence and destruction. The expression of authorial self-awareness in the form of commentary, moreover, should “disrupt the facile linear progression of the narration, introduce alternative interpretations, question any partial conclusion, withstand the need for closure” (53). In short, it is the means by which the historian offers up himself or herself for critique and questioning; it is in complete opposition to the tendency to habitually protect the credibility and authority of the historian by any means. Friedländer’s use of the psychoanalytical concept of “working through” trauma to describe this aspect of the discourse is particularly helpful in understanding the anxiety and melancholy of Sebald’s narrators and characters. As shown in Austerlitz and The Emigrants, this aspect of Sebald’s discourse “imposes the sporadic but forceful presence of commentary” (Friedländer, “Trauma” 53) to cast doubt on narrators’ power to adequately represent and do justice to their subject matter.

Sebald’s discomfort with the literary genre of the novel and yet his attraction to certain figurative affordances associated with it has led him to problematize the ways in which readers come to “know” history. To put it simply, history—whether the history of events, individuals or groups—is only the collections of documents and synthesizing texts that have been collected and composed in the interim time since their occurrence. Not only do authors of fiction engage in concealing the inherent difficulty in knowing what they purport to know but also that “a life is an
edifice, which we build partly to hide its foundations” (Wood), an insight that recalls the discussion of Adelwarth above. This hiding is part of a pattern also discernible in social practices of identity formation, expression and receipt. According to Wood, this is why Sebald resembles a biographer rather than a novelist: because he assembles portraits from oral histories, documents and images, even when those figures are wholly or partially fictional. Wolff has also commented “that one could argue that Austerlitz is first and foremost a biography, albeit fictional” (“Literary Historiography” 329), using a documentary technique to construct a story of a life. From this perspective, the ambiguity between documentary and fiction is less important than the epistemology suggested by style and methods of composition.

As early as 1982, some eight years before his first published work of fiction, Sebald was of the belief that “Documents introduce the ideal of historical truth into fiction, and they contain a moral claim on the reader (‘resistance against the human capacity to repress’) that derives from a concrete historical moment” (Lutz 155). Documentary reports, according to Sebald “turn out to be the irrevocable core of literary efforts” (154), in which such information can be used to understand collective catastrophes. However, according to Sebald,

“any valid attempt of a literary description of collective catastrophes” must go beyond the scope of the novel, which, “bound to a bourgeois world view,” that is, the “traditional idea of a creative subject who, sorting the discrepancies in the wide field of reality, arranges them in representation,” inevitably misrepresents the reality of a collective catastrophe. Yet “documents, in their genuine form cannot become literature,” and,
equally importantly, “only the literary form is concerned, above and beyond the registration of facts and scholarship, with an effort of restitution.” (155)¹¹

Sebald’s view of the document as an ideal form of empirical truth as the core of literature perhaps overstates the causal relationship of events and their representations. Any potential representation, or even reception, of an event may be mediated or at least colored by cultural constructs, and this is a qualification that is explored in his fictions. Nevertheless, Sebald’s starker privileging of the document puts into relief a continuum important for understanding his literary work. At one extreme is the notion of real events as they took place, representable by contemporaneous documents but which are not classifiable as literature and cannot by themselves make collective catastrophes morally accessible. At the other extreme are “cheap forms of fictionalization,” which are attempts to represent the contingent thoughts and experiences of witnesses of traumatic pasts, and which are, for their over-identification with victims and potential misrepresentation of them, “horrific.” One must conclude, therefore, that between these two extremes is a delicate balance of historical engagement and representational tact to which Sebald’s work aspires. This balance would, in Lutz’s words “endeavor to represent a collective catastrophe without erasing individual victims and to make the past ‘emphatically accessible’” (155).

Considering Sebald’s work as a potential response to the deficiencies of Holocaust representation (pointed out by Friedländer) raises the following question: What does Sebald’s literature of catastrophe necessary add to Friedländer’s own historiographical revision

¹¹Translations and citations omitted; words in double quotes are Sebald’s, framing words are Lutz’s.
implemented in *Nazi Germany and the Jews*? One potential answer has to do with the distinct cultural purposes of literary and historical discourses. Both projects, Sebald’s and Friedländer’s, question the epistemological conceits of their respective traditions, and each confronts this challenge with innovative practices that break conventions of established genres. While it is well known that Sebald’s work blurs the line between literature and history, certain conventions of composition firmly signal that his texts should be received in the realm of literary fiction. His work lacks the kind of systematic analysis and citation of source material that a reader can expect from discourse grounded in the genres of history. While Friedländer, as has been argued above, includes self-aware commentary throughout his narrative, the tone of that commentary differs in important ways from that of Sebald’s. Sebald’s commentary has a marked focus on a personal anxiety of responsible representation of the past and those who were impacted by its events; Friedländer’s self-awareness, by contrast, aims to disabuse the reader of the illusion of the historian’s pure objectivity or comprehensive knowledge. In addition, Friedländer leaves open room for debate and the unknown on a factual level yet betrays a clear faith that the past *can* in very large part be known objectively through the process of research. Sebald in his critical work also expressed this faith (“BHNH”); however, in his literary work an uncertainty with representation is far more pronounced.

As discussed above, Sebald expressed an aversion to traditional novelistic writing he deemed unsuitable for an era marked by the “total destruction” of modern warfare. Although Sebald saw post-World War II German novelists writing in the years just after the conflict as struggling (and largely failing) to adequately engage (both descriptively and morally) with the violence of the war, he praised the work of Hans Erich Nossack. Sebald explains that Nossack’s narrator, as a spectator of the destruction of German cities, illustrates the importance of an
author’s “familiarity with social and cultural circumstances” (“BHNH” 77) in establishing an acceptable ethical relationship with the subject matter, a relationship which must then be reflected in style, tone and structure of the author’s text. Sebald’s praise for these aspects of Nossack’s writing seems based on an unarticulated premise that Nossack’s right to write about the events comes directly from his status as a witness to them. Accordingly, as a member of the “1.5 generation” (Suleiman 277) of Germans, Sebald seeks out an appropriate tone of narration given his cultural relationship with the events he writes about. To a significant extent, he deals with his epistemic and temporal distance from his subjects by bridging the gap with documents and artifacts—both real and fictional—and always preserving the opacity of their intermediacy.

To Sebald, the tangible traces of the past which have survived into the present are our only connection with the past. Whether those traces be texts, films, objects or oral histories, the awareness of their mediating role is essential in preventing stories of the past from congealing into myth. And whether those traces are real or contrived is less important, especially for Sebald’s literary project, than a preservation of a rhetorical documentary process as a means to establishing a position that resists over-identification with the departed other. It is within the bounds of fiction that readers must suspend their disbelief in order to interpret Sebald’s project primarily as an epistemological meditation on history rather than a document of it. When one’s line to past events is indirect, when a subject can only be described by the detritus in its wake, the object described may remain elusive. Sebald's restraint from imagining the heart of the matter is perhaps his greatest contribution to literary discourse; it is a truly postmodern innovation that is not only ethically conscientious in both content and form, but which provides a model for ever receding generations to determine their own representational relationship with the historical past.
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