No Exile: Crossing the Border with Sebald and Améry

Sebald’s position as an author who moved abroad raises the question of how the repeated border crossings performed by narrators such as the one in “Il ritorno in patria”, the last part of Vertigo, should be read. Are narrative travels like these supposed to parallel in some fashion the experience of Jewish characters like Austerlitz, or of Jewish writers like Améry, whose struggles as occasional visitors of post-war Germany Sebald chronicles elsewhere? Joining each of these narrators on their trips, we discover that their respective spatial and temporal disorientation exhibits structural similarities, but that these do not add up to what one might be tempted to call a shared experience of “exile”.

Man muß bedenken, daß eine poetische Herstellung unter den heutigen Umständen – und wenn selbst die zum Urteilen und danach zum Handeln aufgerufenen Personen über gründlichere literarische Kenntnisse verfügen als umgetane Kunsthändler aus Düsseldorf sie besitzen – qualitativ so leicht nicht bewertet werden kann.

Jean Améry, Lefeu oder Der Abbruch

W.G. Sebald’s biographical coordinates, his 35-year career as a scholar and writer abroad in particular, have suggested to a number of his readers that the literary travel documents assembled by Sebald’s narrators in their restless wanderings across the European continent and beyond should be considered as works of an author in exile.1 This suggests that the crossing of borders, which emerges as so prevalent a motif in Sebald’s writings, would appear to apply equally to Sebald himself, someone who crossed borders first into Switzerland and then into Great Britain, where he remained a resident for the majority of his life, though he certainly did not give up travelling once he got there. Only an authorial position that was firmly removed in space from the land of the author’s birth and the linguistic sphere associated with it, one might think, would provide the impetus for a literary work marked on practically every page by its outsider quality. Only an exile from the Hauptstraße along which the flow of German post-war culture and its language in general, and literary discourse more particularly, ran its course from the late 1960s through the 1990s, it might be argued, could have occasioned the Sebaldian lexicon and syntax, which has reminded more than a few readers (primarily those less inclined to acknowledge Sebald’s formal inventiveness) of the nineteenth century.

While we should not assume that the author will necessarily be in a position to speak the truth about his own work, I nevertheless propose to hear out Sebald himself, as interviewee, on the point of exile. Sigrid Löffler’s short 1993 interview with Sebald begins with the following exchange:

**SL:** Sie sind vor einem Vierteljahrhundert aus Deutschland ausgewandert. Ist England ihr Exil?

**WGS:** Von Exil kann man nicht reden, weil dieses Europa ja so ein winzig kleines Land geworden ist. Man ist ja immer sofort in Düsseldorf.

**SL:** You emigrated from Germany a quarter of a century ago. Is England your exile?

**WGS:** One cannot speak of exile, because the Europe we live in has become such a tiny little country. One is always in Düsseldorf right away.²

With this remark, Sebald may or may not have been anticipating just how immediate the link would turn out to be between his relocation to another part of Europe on the one hand, and his eventual trip to the city that would award him the Heinrich Heine Prize a year and a day before his death (Fig. 1).

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