Literary Historiography: W.G. Sebald’s Fiction

Although a sense of the historical pervades his prose, W.G. Sebald insists on the legitimacy and independent status of a specifically literary discourse. Sebald goes beyond defending literature’s autonomy, troubling the fundamental distinction between literature and historiography as described in Aristotle’s Poetics, ultimately fusing these two disparate sides to reveal an inter-discursive vision of literature. This essay discusses the problem of representation, in particular historical representation, in Austerlitz. By examining the aesthetic and thematic ways in which Sebald not only reconstructs Austerlitz’s individual history but also circuitously presents the history of the Holocaust and confronts the very problematic issue of its representability, the essay sheds light on a new inter-discursive mode of writing that fuses aspects of historiography and the literary discourse.

“A quoi bon la littérature?” (CS, 247; CS, 213). What is literature good for? W.G. Sebald posed this question in his speech at the opening of the Stuttgarter Literaturhaus, but it is a question implicit in all of his literary and scholarly works, for Sebald was an author deeply devoted to the ethical responsibilities and aesthetic possibilities of the literary discourse. To his question, Sebald offers this response: “Einzig vielleicht dazu, daß wir uns erinnern und daß wir begreifen lernen, daß es sonderbare, von keiner Kausallogik zu ergründende Zusammenhänge gibt” (“Perhaps only to help us to remember, and teach us to understand that some strange connections cannot be explained by causal logic”) [CS, 247; CS, 213]. Sebald’s narratives reconceptualise boundaries of time, space, and memory, though not necessarily according to a rationally explicable system. His narratives are ones of conjecture; attempts at explanation are prefaced with a provisional “perhaps”, a tentative “it seems to me”, or a suggestive “it might be”. Through what appear to be coincidences, the individual finds insights into his identity and connections to a greater historical framework. Moreover, it is through literature, in particular in the form of non-linear narratives, that such non-rational insights or even epiphanies can be made. Sebald reveals such connections by way of his narrators, who traverse varied landscapes across countless countries, speak multiple languages, and often merge with their subjects. They explore and observe artefacts that range from massive architectural structures such as war fortresses to delicate, forgotten photographs, found by chance between the pages of a well-worn book. Official representations of history presented in museum dioramas, classical paintings of famous battles, or personal accounts of the past, like a journal or a childhood photograph – all of these traces are considered and contemplated
by Sebald's narrators and characters. But it is often the most incidental detail that captures one's attention, while the historical artefacts, traditionally accepted as "authentic", are sceptically questioned.

So then, why does Sebald choose to write literature? This question stands as particularly relevant in the light of Sebald's education and occupation as a literary scholar before beginning to write literature himself. He offers this succinct answer: "Es gibt viele Formen des Schreibens; einzig aber in der literarischen geht es, über die Registrierung der Tatsachen und über die Wissenschaft hinaus, um einen Versuch der Restitution" ("There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship") [CS, 248; CS, 215]. This assertion alludes to an essential tension in Sebald's writing: the relationship between history and literature, documentation and imagination, rational explanations and defiantly non-rational insights. The complex constellation of historical event, individual experience, and the poetic presentation of such events and experiences imbricate questions of memory and representation as well, all of which form a core constellation of questions present throughout Sebald's works.\(^1\) Here, I shall examine how Sebald translates these core questions into what can be seen as a new form of "literary historiography":\(^2\) a rewriting of history that incorporates certain heretofore unconsidered or

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\(^2\) The term "literary historiography" has been used by James E. Young to express the interrelated concerns of both literary and historical interpretation. That the study of the Holocaust is by nature an interdisciplinary endeavour is a starting point for Young and the basis for his assertion that these two separate disciplines (literary and historical) conjoin to form one field of study: "literary historiography". Young's book is rooted in narratological and socio-historical approaches to literary texts, films, and monuments. Sebald's project, in contrast, is a distinctly literary one. See James E. Young: Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust. Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation. Bloomington – Indianapolis, IN 1988.