

Searching for Sebald

PHOTOGRAPHY AFTER W. G. SEBALD

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with Christel Dillbohner

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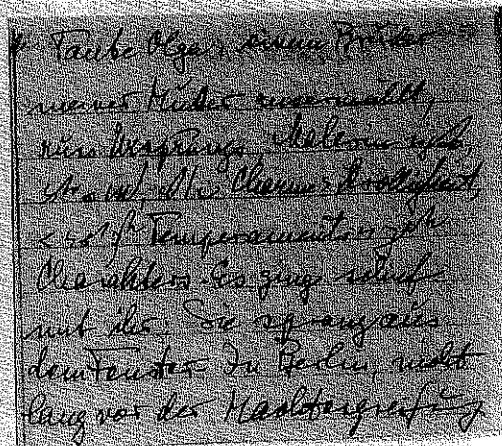
Gathering Evidence of Ghosts: W.G. Sebald's Practices of Witnessing

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In one of the four portraits that make up W.G. Sebald's novel *The Emigrants*, the German schoolteacher Paul Bereyter is described as reading into the small hours of the night, despite his failing vision. A friend of Bereyter's, Mme. Landau, tells the story to Sebald's narrator, who in turn relays the story to us. Sebald's narrator provides a long list of some of the writers Bereyter read, and he notes that 'almost all of them [were] writers who had taken their own lives or had been close to doing so.'¹ According to Mme. Landau, Bereyter compulsively copied passages in shorthand from his wide reading into his notebooks. Sebald's text supplies a photographic sampling from one of Bereyter's notebooks (or so we are led to believe from the juxtaposition of text about Bereyter's notebooks with an image of a notebook with notes in German shorthand: fig. 48). Mme. Landau tells the narrator that it seemed to her that 'Paul had been gathering evidence, the mounting weight of which, as his investigations proceeded, finally convinced him that

FIG. 48 *The Emigrants*,
New Directions, 58.

nor have been able to write fast enough, and time and again one comes across stories of suicide. It seemed to me, said



◇ 58 ◇

he belonged to the exiles and not to the people of S,' the German town where he had taught school for many years before and after World War II.²

This short vignette about Paul Bereyter's method for gathering evidence describes, it seems to me, many of the elements of Sebald's own historical and literary methods, or what I call his practices of witnessing. Bereyter's notebooks, like Sebald's own texts, are haunted by stories of death and survival, exile and (be)longing. In the spirit of sociologist Avery Gordon,³ in this essay I will explore the ways in which Sebald might be considered a ghost writer, or one who investigates the ghost as a social and historical figure. For Gordon, 'haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. The confrontation requires (and produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production.'⁴ Sebald's work problematizes the mode of production of historical knowledge and confronts the ghostly aspects of history, the absences that are covered over but still felt and transmitted in the historical unconscious. In doing so, Sebald demonstrates the multiple positions from which one witnesses historical events and the multiple forms in which one records those events. He is concerned as much with the how of history and memory as with the *what*, as much with the practices of gathering evidence as with the evidence gathered.⁵

In all of Sebald's texts, including his literary criticism, ghosts matter. Ghosts become material to be investigated and traced. His evidence (both pictorial and narrative) is ghostly, and his methodology attempts to materialize such ghostly evidence, at least fleetingly, by collecting and scavenging, by combining and juxtaposing historical events, words, and images. Sebald's historical and literary methods of gathering evidence of ghosts can be separated, rather artificially, into five practices: witnessing from above; from among; witnessing in words; in images; and, finally, witnessing that accounts for ghosts. Sebald deploys these strategies individually and in relation to each other; he presents witnessing not as a single practice, but as a multiplicity of practices.

STRUCTURE: SEBALD'S QUINCUNX

Two of Sebald's texts, *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, are organized in a four-part structure, which Susan Sontag, in her essay on Sebald called 'A Mind in Mourning,' describes as a 'four-part musical structure, in which the fourth narrative is longest and most powerful.'⁶ Sontag's emphasis on the musical structure of Sebald's work provides a useful framework with which to read him, but I want to think of these four parts not—or not only—in terms of a sequential or temporal structure, but, more importantly, as establishing a spatial and visual organization to the texts. At the beginning of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald gives us an organizational template for reading his works when he describes Thomas Browne's attempts to record the 'patterns which recur in the seemingly infinite diversity of forms.'⁷ We learn from Sebald's narrator that in one of Browne's seventeenth-century texts, *The Garden of Cyrus*, one of the structures Browne identifies everywhere in nature is the quincunx, 'which is composed by using the corners of a regular quadrilateral and the point at which its diagonals intersect' (fig. 49).⁸ In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a

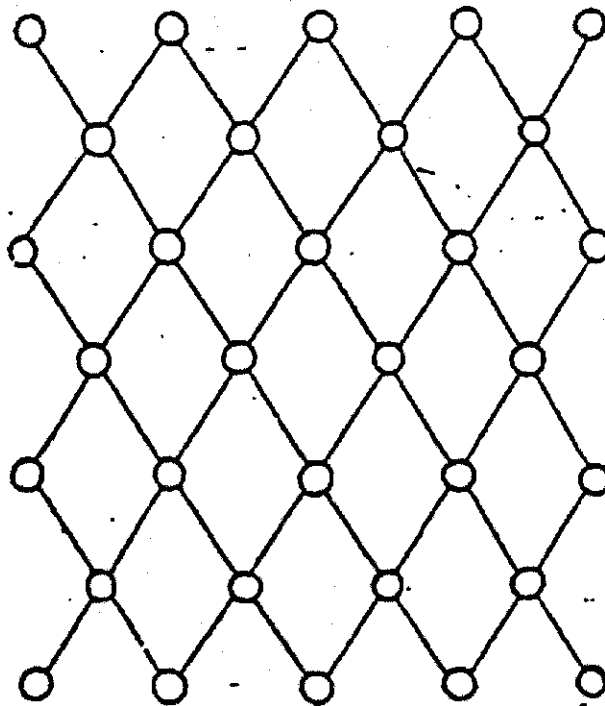
FIG. 49 (OPPOSITE) *The Rings of Saturn*, New Directions, 20.

quincunx is an 'arrangement or disposition of five objects so placed that four occupy the corners, and the fifth the centre, of a square or other rectangle; a set of five things arranged in this manner.' Below this definition is a quotation from Thomas Browne's *Garden of Cyrus*. Another definition (first used less than twenty years after the publication of Browne's text in 1658) presents the quincunx as a 'cruciform reliquary having five equal parts, which can be closed up by folding the outer parts over the central one.'⁹ This is a compelling structure through which to read Sebald because it provides an organization for inquiry that suggests all history is fundamentally a burial. Sebald's narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* explains that Browne 'was often distracted from his investigations into the isomorphic line of the quincunx by singular phenomenon that fired his curiosity, and by work on a comprehensive pathology.'¹⁰ What does it take to distract us from the 'isomorphic line of the quincunx'—its beautiful structure—in order to see what it contains? What does the box—a structure of civilization itself—prevent us from seeing?

Sebald's historical and literary investigations can be arranged in a quincunx, with four outer parts arranged around a center.¹¹ The four outer parts can be understood as four particular practices of witnessing: two having to do with vantage point of the witness—from above an event and from among or within it—and two having to do with the form of evidence, in words and in images.¹² The fifth part is at the center, and like the cruciform reliquary, it contains ghostly traces of the dead, and signifies that which is buried in and by history. Like Browne, we must investigate the quincunx structure, and we must also be distracted from it in order to see and account for 'the shadow of annihilation'¹³ at the very heart of civilization. For Sebald, as for Freud, civilization does not eliminate destruction, but contains it and is even structured by it.¹⁴ Like Gordon's theory of ghosts, Sebald's practices of witnessing show that although these ghostly traces are difficult to see and record, they nonetheless structure our ways of seeing and recording. In keeping with this quincunx order, four scenes from Sebald's writings will demonstrate his practices of witnessing and his methods for gathering evidence of ghosts. These scenes connect disparate places and people and times and ideas—just as the quincunx order repeats itself across time and space, and across Sebald's texts. At the center of each of these scenes are the nameless dead, destructive fire, lost desire, and also—and this is crucial in Sebald—our memories of the dead, fire, and desire.¹⁵

PRACTICE OF WITNESSING 1: FROM ABOVE, OR OFF THE MAP

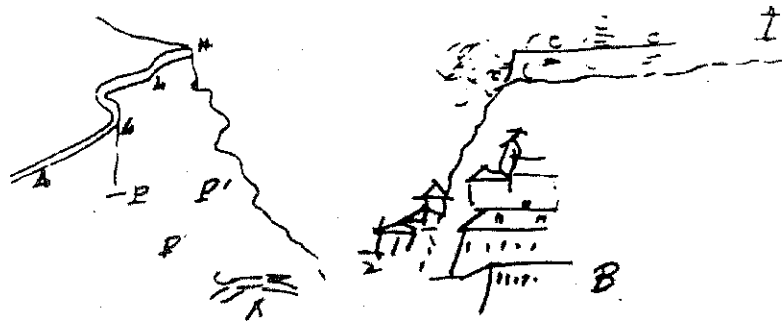
In the opening pages of the chapter titled 'Beyle, or Love Is a Madness Most Discreet,' the first of the four parts of *Vertigo*, we are shown a crudely drawn sketch resembling a map (fig. 50). This sketch, Sebald's narrator explains, is a memory aid used by the 53-year-old Marie-Henri Beyle (better known by his pen name, Stendahl) to recall and represent spatially his participation in a transalpine march undertaken by Napoleon's army in 1800, when Beyle was 17. Because Beyle records his memory of the events of that historic march, he is not one of the many 'lost in nameless oblivion.'¹⁶ Yet Sebald's narrator recognizes that, despite Beyle's record, his perspective on the events that took place that day are from a position at a distance from the events, both in time and, as we see from his sketch, in space. The narrator explains that Beyle's recollections 'afford eloquent proof,' not of the events themselves, but 'of the various difficulties entailed in the



*Quid Quincunce Speciosius, qui, ut
quam cumq; partem Spectaueris,
rectus est: Quintilian: //*

which is composed by using the corners of a regular quadrilateral and the point at which its diagonals intersect. Browne identifies this structure everywhere, in animate and inanimate matter: in certain crystalline forms, in starfish and sea urchins, in the vertebrae of mammals and the backbones of birds and fish, in the skins of various species of snake, in the crosswise prints left by quadrupeds, in the physical shapes of caterpillars, butterflies,

found himself came under fire near the village and fortress of Bard. *B* is the village of Bard. The three *C*s on the heights



to the right signify the fortress cannon, firing at the points marked with *L*s on the track that led across the steep slope, *P*.

act of recollection.¹⁷ Indeed Sebald's narrator uses Beyle's recollections to reveal something about how memory works. The narrator demonstrates that our clearest memories are often inaccurate, or are obscured by what we know and see later. The narrator writes of Beyle's recollections:

FIG. 50 *Vertigo*, New Directions, 6.

At times his view of the past consists of nothing but grey patches, then at others images appear of such extraordinary clarity he feels he can scarce credit them—such as that of General Marmont, whom he believes he saw at Martigny to the left of the track along which the column was moving, clad in the royal- and sky-blue robes of a Councillor of State, an image which he still beholds precisely thus, Beyle assures us, whenever he closes his eyes and pictures that scene, although he is well aware that at that time Marmont must have been wearing his general's uniform and not the blue robes of state.¹⁸

By closing his eyes and picturing the scene, Beyle witnesses precisely. The image that he 'beholds precisely' is not the scene as he saw it in the past, as it was then and as he experienced it in that earlier moment. Rather, the image he beholds is an image of the practice of witnessing itself, which requires opening his eyes and seeing what is before him as well as closing his eyes and seeing memories.¹⁹ In her book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver understands witnessing as two paradoxical practices suggested by the 'double meaning' of the word 'witnessing.' Witnessing is 'eye-witness testimony based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and bearing witness to something beyond recognition that can't be seen, on the other.'²⁰ For Oliver, witnessing 'is at the heart of subjectivity,'²¹ although not because it is a process that reveals the self to the self in any simplistic way. As a practice, witnessing must account for more than we

can see, hear, and know; it must also account for 'the unseen in vision and the unspoken in speech.'²² Sebald's works demonstrate this paradoxical aspect of witnessing by emphasizing how witnessing is enacted in practices—literally, by opening and closing the eyes, and metaphorically, by seeing and not seeing—and how these practices of witnessing are central to subjectivity.

Like Beyle, one often attempts to position oneself above the events, to see them at a distance, above in space and beyond in time. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, historian Michel de Certeau describes this position as that of the 'voyeur-god' with his 'totalizing eye.'²³ For de Certeau, there is the possibility of experiencing 'voluptuous pleasure' in "seeing the whole," of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts,' which in de Certeau's text is New York City viewed from atop the World Trade Center.²⁴ In Beyle's case, we learn that, on the particular day he is remembering, 'he was so affected by the large number of dead horses lying by the wayside, and the other detritus of war the army left in its wake as it moved in a long-drawn-out file up the mountains, that he now has no clear idea whatsoever of the things he found so horrifying then. It seemed to him that his impressions had been erased by the very violence of their impact.'²⁵ Beyle seems to know that he has witnessed terrible violence, but can't recall an image of that violence except through its ghostly effects: the memory of dead horses and the other detritus of war. For Beyle, the dead horses become a screen for the violence of war; they both signify and cover over the violence that he witnessed. On the day in the past he is remembering, his open eyes *saw* the terrible violence, and on the day he recalls the earlier day, he closes his eyes and *sees* dead horses. He presents what he sees in memory when he closes his eyes as if it could not be the real violence of war, because to remember that would be too much to bear. In this moment Beyle witnesses both to remember and to forget what he has seen.

Beyle knows that he is not a good witness, and he is anxious to witness better, to see the whole. And so he makes a map. His sketch is an attempt to locate his traumatic memories in time and space. As the map's cartographer, he is in a position to draw the events of that day from above. By positioning these events spatially, he hopes he can fix them in his memory and for the future. Importantly, his drawing situates himself on the map, not only stating, 'I was there,' but more precisely, 'I was *here*,' 'I was H.' But the map itself is proof of the precariousness of saying 'I was there' and 'I was here.' As the narrator explains,

H stands for Henri and marks the narrator's own position. Yet, of course, when Beyle was in actual fact standing at that spot, he will not have been viewing the scene in this precise way, for in reality, as we know, everything is always quite different.

Beyle adds that even when the images supplied by memory are true to life, one can place little confidence in them.²⁶

To experience this scene in the moment it happens is qualitatively different from witnessing to it later in words and in a diagram. The map itself seems to capture this disjuncture between the event itself and the witnessing of the event. Beyle's position as designated by the 'H' on the map is essentially off the map; he is suspended above the events documented, looking down at the devastation. Beyle's map doesn't document what happened during the treacherous transalpine crossing of Napoleon's army, but it

might be said to document what happens to the person who witnesses trauma. The map shows not the trauma itself, but one possible position of the witness: dissociated from reality, and, Sebald seems to be saying, suffering from vertigo as a result.

PRACTICE OF WITNESSING 2: FROM DOWN BELOW AND AMONG, WALKING

In the second section of *Vertigo*, entitled 'All'estero,' the story shifts from Beyle's recollections from the early 19th century to the narrator's own recollection of a trip from England to Vienna in October 1980. The narrator hopes that 'a change of place would help me get over a particularly difficult period in my life.'²⁷ Although he sets out looking for something new as he explores the city on foot, he discovers later when he looks at a map that he has followed practically the same paths each day, never venturing beyond a certain point. Although he doesn't sketch a map on paper as Beyle did, he does imagine what a map of his routes would look like, and he describes that map for us:

If the paths I had followed had been inked in, it would have seemed as though a man had kept trying out new tracks and connections over and over, only to be thwarted each time by the limitations of his reason, imagination or will-power, and obliged to turn back again. My traversing of the city, often continuing for hours, thus had very clear bounds, and yet at no point did my incomprehensible behaviour become apparent to me: that is to say, my continual walking and my reluctance to cross certain lines which were both invisible and, I presume, wholly arbitrary.²⁸

Here again Sebald seems to be making a comment not so much about what we see, but about how we see, and the relationship between our manner of seeing, our memory of a particular traumatic experience, and our documentation of that memory. His narrator's wanderings are not guided by a conscious motive to see the sights of the city or to end up anywhere in particular, but rather represent a compulsion to repeat his wanderings anew each day. Walking, as de Certeau has theorized, is 'a space of enunciation,' a signifying practice that doesn't just visit but invents spaces.²⁹ In Sebald's work, however, this practice is imbued not with possibility but with anxiety. The narrator seems desperate to invent a new space, to find a new track—to get off the old track, to forget his past. But he is always 'obliged to turn back again' into the past. These wanderings exhaust him, and, in a hallucinatory state, he thinks he sees people he knows, also walking. Those who visit him on his wanderings are people he 'had not thought of for years, or who had long since departed.'³⁰ They are ghosts, and his aimless yet compulsive walking allows him to encounter them.

In her explication of how and why certain authors write ghost stories, Avery Gordon presents a theory of ghosts and of writing that resonates with Sebald's practices of witnessing. Sebald's narrator's aimless yet compulsive wanderings are an attempt to find a new track, yet what they succeed most in doing is bringing ghosts into view. In her discussion of the ways in which Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison might be understood as ghost writers, Gordon asserts that Ellison demonstrates the 'need to conceptualize visibility as a *complex system of permission and prohibition, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness*,' while Morrison 'encourages the complementary gesture of investigating how that which appears absent can indeed be a seething presence.'³¹ Like Ellison

and Morrison, Sebald demonstrates in his work that what comes into view is the result of a 'complex system of permission and prohibition,' but despite, or indeed because of, this complex system, we must be prepared to encounter ghosts. Moreover, he also shows that in order to account for ghosts, we must recognize that what is not there or isn't seen, is often still powerfully felt. Walking becomes a way for Sebald to conceptualize the visible and the invisible, that which we can and cannot see. As with Ellison, Sebald's narrator's movements are not free, but are structured by very clear boundaries, of which he is not for the most part conscious. He cannot see anew, which would be a seeing without history and memory, but he can encounter apparitions, which the walking makes visible.

Yet, in Gordon's reading, the important aspect of ghost writing is that it reveals 'the political status and function of systematic hauntings.'³² It isn't clear at this point in Sebald's text that this story of a man walking so compulsively that his shoes fall apart is such an analysis. We never really know what explicitly haunts Sebald's narrator as he walks the streets of Vienna, though we begin to sense it is history itself, a history of burial to which he is connected, or, more precisely, of which he is a part. This sense of being haunted by a history of burial is not grasped immediately in the practice of reading Sebald, but this hauntedness builds in his work (throughout the stories in *Vertigo*, but also across all of his texts) with the links and juxtapositions he produces. In the final section of *Vertigo*, 'Il ritorno in patria,' Sebald's narrator documents his return to his hometown of W. in the German Alps. He is 'obliged to turn back again' to the history of this region, which is haunted by the ghosts of World War II: Jews and others who were killed and incinerated in the Holocaust and civilians on both sides of the war who were killed in the firebombing of cities in the United Kingdom and Germany. But in *Vertigo* and all of his work, Sebald doesn't tell the story of the Holocaust with a capital H or World War II with a capital W. Rather, his account tries to capture 'the constellation of connections that charges any "time of the now"...with the debts of the past and the expense of the present.'³³

Staying in the Engelwirt, an inn in W. where he had lived as a child, Sebald's narrator explores the familiar countryside on foot, attracted by a series of paintings seen as a child that had made 'a devastating impression' on him.³⁴ The narrator walks from mountain hamlet to mountain hamlet, along paths, he tells us, 'that I had walked in my childhood at my grandfather's side and which had meant so much to me in my memory, but, as I came to realize, meant nothing to me now.'³⁵ The images from his past lead him to walk the paths of his childhood, excursions from which he 'returned dispirited to the Engelwirt and to the writing of my notes, which had afforded me a degree of comfort of late.'³⁶ Walking, painting, and writing become connected in Sebald's text as practices of witnessing both to childhood memories and to historical events: a mural of a battlefield scene with 'crazed horses' (fig. 51) is linked to the paths of the narrator's childhood and to the limits of what he saw as a child.³⁷ Even as the writing of his notes provides a measure of comfort, the memories of his past and the history of the region don't become clearer but grow more and more incomprehensible. He tells Lukas Seelos, whose family had lived in W. when the narrator's family lived there, 'the more images I gathered from the past, I said, the more unlikely it seemed to me that the past had actually happened in this or that way, for nothing about it could be called normal: most of it was absurd, and if not absurd, then appalling.'³⁸ Sebald's narrator's practices of witnessing are multiple in this scene: walking

old paths, looking at paintings that belong to his personal memory and depict a particular version of history, and writing about the walking and the looking. Sebald makes it clear, however, that these practices don't provide an accurate accounting of the past. What they do reveal is a certainty that the past is not normal and a belief that, in order to witness it, we must not normalize it. Our accounts of the past must somehow capture both the strangeness and horror of history. Sebald's texts ask compulsively, how do we capture this strangeness and horror? And what would this attempt to capture the past look like?

PRACTICE OF WITNESSING 3: IN WORDS

The opening example of Paul Bereyter's notebooks, along with the references to Henri-Marie Beyle's memoirs, shows that Sebald frequently reads and quotes liberally from personal notebooks, diaries, journals, and memoirs—published and unpublished, real and invented. As Beyle's memoir indicates, to put one's past into words will inevitably fail to capture the experience and event itself, or even the memory of it. But if we begin to think of memory as a practice, not a thing, then we can better understand Sebald's frequent reference to the act and art of memoir- and journal-writing in his texts. One of many possible examples of this particular practice of witnessing in Sebald's work is the portrait of Ambros Adelwarth, presented in the third sketch in *The Emigrants*. The narrator learns about his great-uncle Ambros through the stories that others tell about him, through the narrator's own research into Ambros's past and retracing of his footsteps, through photos of him, and through a diary that Ambros kept of his travels in 1913 as valet and traveling companion to the wealthy and mentally unstable Cosmo Solomon. Sebald's narrator recounts the stories from his various sources—Aunt Fini, Uncle Kasimir, and Dr. Abramsky—who knew Ambros when he was at the mental hospital, Samaria Sanatorium, near Ithaca, New York, at the end of his life. As Sebald does throughout his works, these speakers are not so much quoted as ventriloquized; the narrator, in a sense, merges with these speakers as he listens and notes in writing their exact words. No quotation marks are used, and detailed recollections are broken up with occasional reminders of who is speaking: for example, 'as you may know, said Aunt Fini' or 'I do not think, said Dr Abramsky.'³⁹

The sketch begins with a larger history of Ambros Adelwarth and the narrator's family, who left Germany and came to America before World War II. Ambros is remembered as an important part of this family, but also as independent from it, supporting himself from a very early age working in hotels. Aunt Fini describes him as 'a man of rare distinction.'⁴⁰ Uncle Kasimir tells the narrator, 'he was of the other persuasion, as anyone could see, even if the family always ignored or glossed over the fact. Perhaps some of them never realized.'⁴¹ There are several other hints about Ambros Adelwarth's sexuality, but his desire remains oblique throughout. Sebald's ghosts are not just exiles from war and those who never escaped war or other violence, but sexual exiles, whose stories of desire are ignored, glossed over, never realized, or actively destroyed. At the end of his life, Adelwarth literally becomes a ghostly trace of his former self. According to Uncle Kasimir, 'the older Uncle Adelwarth grew, the more hollowed-out he seemed to me, and the last time I saw him, in the house at Mamaroneck that the Solomons had left him, so finely furnished, it was as if his clothes were holding him together.'⁴²



on the surrounding mountainsides and hills. I made my way up to Bichl and walked on to the Adelharz, to Enthalb der Ach, to Bärenwinkel and Jungholz, into the Vordere

Although the textual portrait the narrator stitches together through his interviews into people's memories of Ambros Adelwarth and through his translation and transcription of Adelwarth's journal, give substance to this ghostly figure, Sebald also wants to confront us with how one becomes hollowed-out and ghostly even before one's actual death. While Ambros's astute social mannerisms make him a brilliant butler to the Solomon family, who in the end reward him well for his services, these mannerisms cannot cover over his own social death. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say, that his skill at social mannerisms was itself a kind of social death.⁴³ As concerned as Sebald is with how memory is made, he is equally concerned with how it is unmade. The unmaking

FIG. 51 *Vertigo*, New Directions, 209.

of memory is not forgetting; it is *disremembering*, an active, though not necessarily conscious, annihilation of the memory of individuals and whole peoples that often happens, paradoxically, in the writing of history. In the particular case of Ambros Adelwarth, we learn that he had witnessed things so improbable, 'such as beheadings in Japan,' that Aunt Fini, '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.'⁴⁴ According to Aunt Fini, 'telling stories was as much a torment to him as an attempt at self-liberation.'⁴⁵

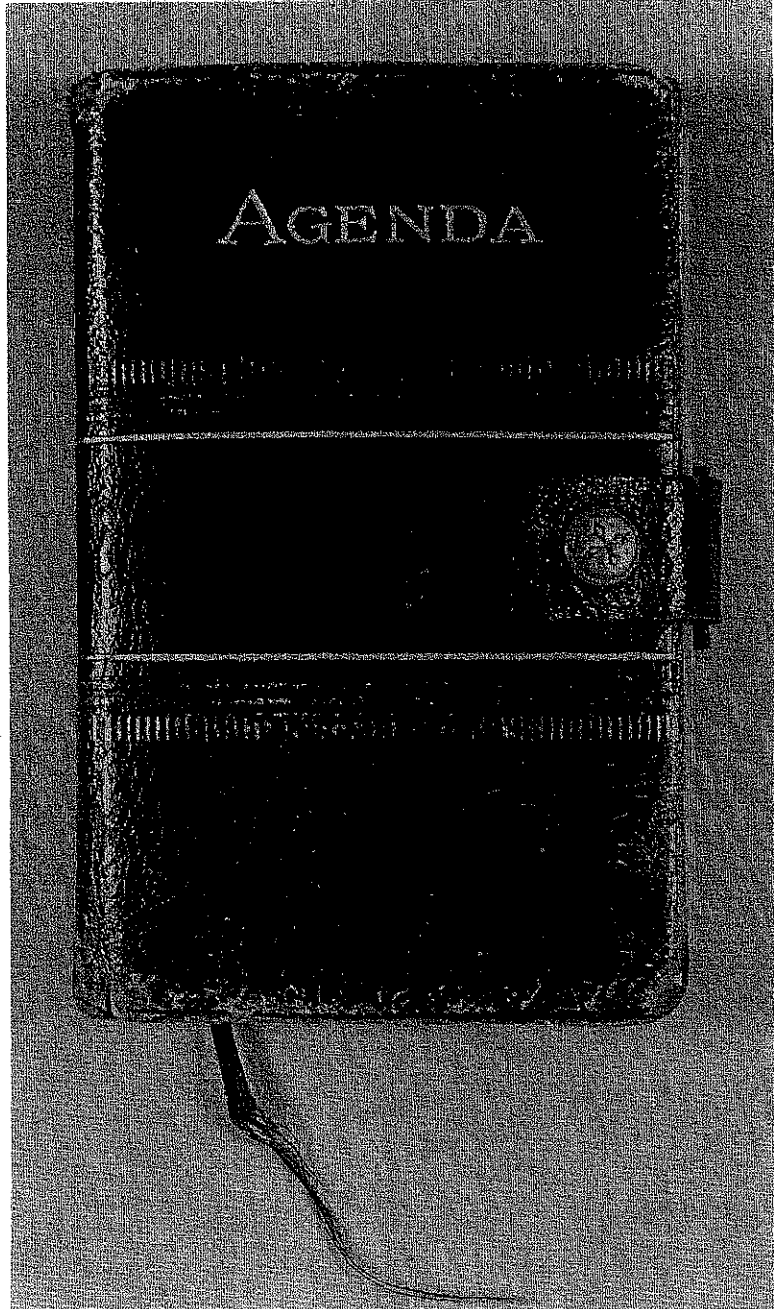
It is his stories and their torment that lead Adelwarth to Samaria Sanatorium and Professor Fahnstock for shock therapy. Sebald's narrator interviews Dr. Abramsky, who had worked with and eventually become disillusioned and appalled by Professor Fahnstock's treatments at Samaria. Abramsky, too, suggests there was something ghostly about Adelwarth:

I do not think, said Dr Abramsky, that I have ever met a more melancholy person than your great-uncle; every casual utterance, every gesture, his entire deportment (he held himself erect until the end), was tantamount to a constant pleading for leave of absence. At meals — to which he always came, since he remained absolute in matters of courtesy even in his darkest times — he still helped himself, but what he actually ate was no more than the symbolic offerings that were once placed on the graves of the dead.⁴⁶

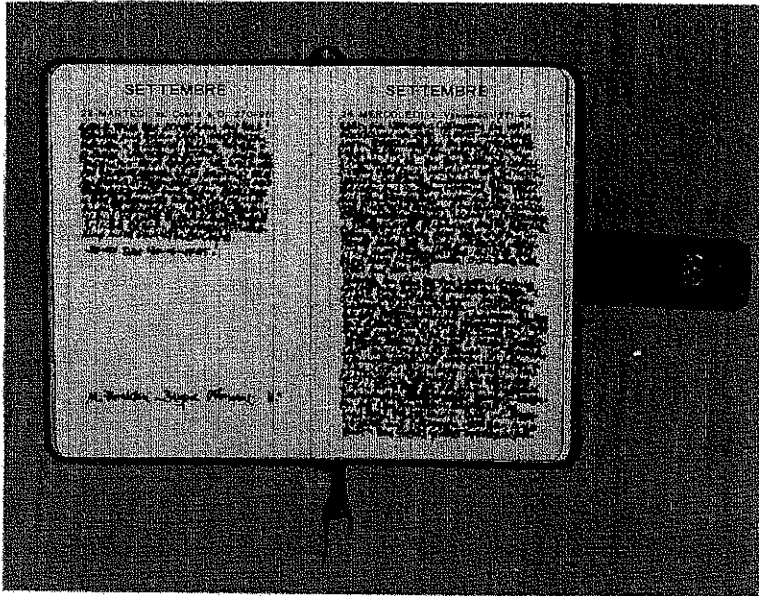
The treatment Adelwarth undergoes is called 'the block or annihilation method,' and it appears to have been most successful in annihilating the minds and voices—the very selves—of patients who were forced to endure it. According to Abramsky, Adelwarth longed for just such an annihilation of 'his capacity to think and remember.'⁴⁷ In this picture of Adelwarth, we have an image of a man who desired self-annihilation, though not necessarily death itself. What would make one long for death in life, a ghostly existence? And how can we, and why must we, account for such a longing?

It is only at the end of the portrait of Adelwarth that Sebald's narrator reads from his great-uncle's diary from 1913. Thus, only after the narrator's account of Adelwarth's death at Samaria Sanatorium, only after his account of Adelwarth's death in life, his ghostly existence at the end of his life, only after his account of his remarkable memory and his desire to disremember—only then are we presented with Adelwarth's own words. This account, like all the others, is a partial account, and even putting all of these partial accounts together, as Sebald does, cannot make a complete story. What appears to us, the readers, is a flickering image of a man who was haunted, and this image is meant to haunt us too.

The narrator describes Adelwarth's diary to us: 'On the desk in front of me is the agenda book that belonged to Ambros, which Aunt Fini gave me on my winter visit to Cedar Glen West. It is a pocket diary for the year 1913, bound in soft burgundy leather and measuring about twelve centimeters by eight.'⁴⁸ This diary contains words of Ambros written in his own hand, and it is not just the words in the diary but the object itself—the container of the words—that remain as ghostly traces of Ambros's existence. And so we are presented with an image of the diary on the page facing the text that describes and provides the dimensions of the diary just quoted (fig. 52). There is a hint from Sebald's narrator that all of this could be an invention—the words, the diary, the



The Emigrants



foot, or at best on a beast of burden. As if the wheel had not yet been invented. Or are we no longer a part of time? What

life, death, and ghostly existence of Ambros Adelwarth—as he describes the process of translating and transcribing Adelwarth’s diary:

Deciphering his tiny handwriting, which not infrequently moved to and fro between several languages, was an arduous task, one I should probably never have accomplished if those words committed to paper almost eighty years before had not, as it were, opened up of their own accord.⁴⁹

FIG. 53 *The Emigrants*,
New Directions, 132.

Literally in the midst of this description, there is the image of the closed diary, and by turning the page of *The Emigrants*, we in a sense open the diary and begin to read Sebald’s narrator’s transcription. We read several pages of this transcription before we are presented with an image of the open diary (fig. 53) to confirm, presumably, the tiny handwriting, the arduous task, the existence of the diary, and the existence of Ambros. The words, Ambros’s words ‘committed to paper almost eighty years before,’ open up for us readers, who are now included in the arduous task of witnessing the ghostly presence of Ambros Adelwarth. In the first image of the open diary, we know we are looking at the dates September 23 and 24, but we don’t have confirmation that the year is 1913. On the second line of text directly below the image of the diary, Sebald’s narrator transcribes these words from Adelwarth’s journal: ‘Or are we no longer a part of time? What meaning has a date like the 24th of September??’⁵⁰ Presumably these words were written by Ambros on the 24th of September, but it is impossible to verify this from the

image. As I look closely at the image of the diary page, I look in particular for the two question marks, thinking these will stand out from the other text. But I can't find them. Is this lack of certainty about what I am seeing in fact what I am supposed to see?

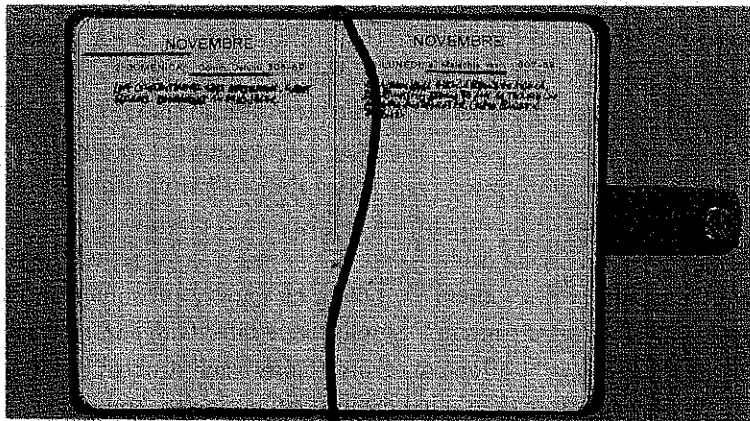
As should be apparent from the discussion thus far, none of these practices of witnessing that I discern in Sebald's work can be analyzed in isolation from all the others. The images of Ambros Adelwarth's diary are juxtaposed next to the translation and transcription of the words into Sebald's text. But the images of the pages we see are not necessarily the pages Sebald transcribes for us in his text. The final image of Ambros's diary is of the dates November 2 and 3, which contain short entries that are not transcribed or even referred to in Sebald's narrator's discussion of the diary (fig. 54). Sebald seems to suggest we should try to read these pages ourselves, and when we do, some of the words appear readable while others do not. Parts of the entry on November 2 seem to read: 'Left Constantinople this afternoon. Great regrets.' This is followed by a short sentence I can't make out, possibly because it is in a language I am less familiar with than English. The entry on November 3, partially obscured by the diary's place marker, is entirely unreadable for me, except for the name 'Cosmo' at the beginning of the last sentence. I believe Sebald juxtaposes these images of the diary with the words in the diary not so much to give substance to the ghostly Ambros, but rather to reveal the ghostly at the center of individual memory and a collective historical consciousness.

In 1913, Ambros and Cosmo travel on foot and horseback from Vienna to Greece to Constantinople to Jerusalem. Ambros writes of exploring Constantinople on foot:

Every walk was full of surprises, and indeed of alarm. The prospects change like the scenes in a play. One street lined with palatial buildings ends at a ravine. You go to a theatre and a door in the foyer opens into a copse; another time, you turn down a gloomy back street that narrows and narrows till you think you are trapped, whereupon you take one last

FIG. 54 *The Emigrants*,
New Directions, 135.

followed fairly closely from the diary notes, despite the fact that they are farther apart now, and at times stop altogether.



desperate turn round a corner and find yourself suddenly gazing from a vantage point across the vastest of panoramas. You climb a bare hillside forever and find yourself once more in a shady valley, enter a house gate and are in the street, drift with the bustle in the bazaar and are suddenly amidst gravestones. For, like Death itself, the cemeteries of Constantinople are in the midst of life.⁵¹

Ambros's writings and practices of witnessing sound coincidentally very much like Sebald's own writings and practices of witnessing. It may be that Sebald mimics Adelwarth, but it seems more likely that Sebald invents Adelwarth to reveal the ghostly aspect of all historical evidence. Is Adelwarth's diary real or an invention? Even by studying closely the words attributed to Ambros and the images of these words in Sebald's text, we cannot know for sure. It is this uncertainty, and our anxiety when we are confronted with it, that Sebald wants us to feel.

Ghosts figure explicitly in Ambros's diary when he and Cosmo rent a house in a peasant village outside Constantinople, and, Ambros notes, 'Cosmo claims we have rented a ghost house.'⁵² Cosmo, it seems, can see ghosts, and the diary affirms an earlier story about Cosmo told to Sebald's narrator by Aunt Fini, who had been told the story by 'one of the Solomon's old gardeners.' With the outset of war in Europe in 1914, Cosmo became melancholic:

Wildly agitated, he would string out words that bore some relation to the fighting, and as he uttered these words of war he would apparently beat his forehead with his hand, as if he were vexed at his own incomprehension or were trying to learn what he said by heart. Frequently he would be so beside himself that he no longer even recognized Ambros. And yet he claimed that he could see clearly, in his own head, what was happening in Europe: the inferno, the dying, the rotting bodies lying in the sun in open fields.⁵³

Cosmo had the capacity to see the inferno and the dying in his own head; he witnessed the external inferno by internalizing it. What gave Cosmo this capacity to see the inferno of war and its ghosts? Sebald hints that he, like Ambros, was a man of rare distinction and of the other persuasion, and that his nonnormative desires gave him a power—a terrible power—to witness what was not normal, but absurd and appalling. Or to witness the normal as absurd and appalling.

Sebald presents Ambros and Cosmo, and their relationship, as queer. I use the word 'queer' rather than 'gay' intentionally, because it suggests 'odd,' 'strange,' and 'not normal' rather than a categorizable sexual identity. Indeed Sebald shows how difficult it is for others to read the nature of their relationship because it doesn't easily fit into categories available for two men to be together at that time. When Sebald's narrator traces Ambros's and Cosmo's path to Deauville, the French resort town where the two summered in 1913, he imagines seeing Ambros and Cosmo together there, and he also imagines the two of them as others saw them. Recalling his ghostly encounters in Deauville, Sebald's narrator explains, 'my dreams in Deauville were filled with constant whisperings of the rumours that were in circulation concerning Cosmo and Ambros.'⁵⁴ He continues his description of what appear to be waking dreams of Cosmo and Ambros:

On one occasion I saw the two young men sitting late in the evening in the Normandy's vast dining hall at a small table of their own, placed especially for them in the centre of the

room, apart from all the rest. On a silver platter between them, occasionally making slow movements, lay a lobster, gleaming a wonderful pink in the muted atmosphere. Ambros was steadily taking the lobster apart, with great skill, placing little morsels before Cosmo, who ate them like a well brought up child. The diners swayed as if there were a light swell, and only the women's glittering earrings and necklaces and the gentlemen's white shirt-fronts were to be seen. Nonetheless, I sensed that everyone kept their eyes on the two lobster eaters, whom I heard variously described as master and man, two friends, relatives, or even brothers.⁵⁵

Master and man, two friends, relatives, or brothers? In Sebald's text, Ambros and Cosmo's relationship doesn't quite fit any of these categories; it queers the categories and causes people to look, but without being able to see. Ambros and Cosmo flicker past the other diners and us; they are queer ghosts that haunt Sebald's text and history more generally. And, Sebald seems to suggest, because they don't fit properly into the world, they see the world differently.

The portrait of Ambros ends with a postscript to Ambros's diary, written, we are told, after the 'last entry,' but exactly when Sebald's narrator doesn't say. The existence of the postscript is another ghostly flickering, made more enigmatic by what it actually says:

Memory...often strikes me as a kind of dumbness. It makes one's head giddy, as if one were not looking back down the receding perspectives of time but rather down on the earth from a great height, from one of those towers whose tops are lost to view in the clouds.⁵⁶

We are back to the position of the witness from above, and to a feeling of vertigo and a sense that things have been lost to view rather than a belief that from this position above, or from the position of Sebald's narrator looking back on Ambros's life, that one can see everything or anything clearly.

PRACTICE OF WITNESSING 4: IN IMAGES OF WORDS

Although some readers find that the photographs in Sebald's texts illustrate the words,⁵⁷ I am struck by how the words and images are not connected in any necessarily obvious way, except for the reader's desire to connect them and the phenomenological experience of moving from text to photograph and back again as one reads, as I myself did in trying to read the words in the images of Adelwarth's diary.⁵⁸ In Sebald's texts the juxtaposition of words and images are not to illustrate or support the one with the other; rather they represent the fragile relationship between word and image, as well as an anxiety about the practice of witnessing itself. The suggestion that the images in Sebald's texts might be 'merely illustrative'⁵⁹ is challenged by looking more closely at one of the historical sketches in *The Rings of Saturn*—the case of Roger Casement described in chapter 5—and particularly at the images that accompany that account. It is also useful to juxtapose Casement with Ambros Adelwarth, and although Sebald does not literally juxtapose or connect the two characters, if we consider his books spatially, the links between the two cases are multiple. One strong connection is the shared possibility of secret homosexual desire. Sebald's narrator describes, but notably does not quote directly from, Casement's own writing, including the so-called Black Diary. This journal was

Casement's infamous private diary in which he recorded in sometimes graphic detail and sometimes coded shorthand his own frequent homosexual activity. We are also presented with an image—perhaps enlarged—from the Black Diary of 1903, and we can determine from this image that reading Casement's own hand is difficult, though perhaps not as difficult as reading Adelwarth's handwriting (fig. 55).

This image covering two full pages in Sebald's text falls in the midst of a discussion about the question of the authenticity of Casement's Black Diary. Irish Republicans alleged that the diaries with their explicit references to homosexual activity were forged by English government officials who wanted to discredit Casement in his position as one of the leaders of the Irish Republican movement. As Sebald's narrator explains:

For the veterans of the Irish freedom movement it was in any case inconceivable that one of their martyrs should have practised the English vice. But since the release to general scrutiny of the diaries in early 1994 there has no longer been any question that they are in Casement's own hand.⁶⁰

FIG. 55 *The Rings of Saturn*,
New Directions, 132–133.

Although Sebald does not transcribe any part of Casement's Black Diary into his text, we do get a more explicit link between Casement's sexuality and his sensitivity to the absurd and appalling in the 'normal' world than we were given in the case of Adelwarth. The

47. 51. *Cairo of Manuel Violetta* 47
 March 29 Sunday 5 in Lent 188-277 3rd day 1903
 Cairo (Greenwich) *amish des Calmes*
 • 10 20m 4v. (Greenwich)

Pope Juan again - Stayed in cabin. Feeling very badly. Bleeding badly, aft gain some. Ran 372 miles from 9 am. Some 39th. Will not get in water about 7 pm. Tomorrow - 10. I will probably be kept all night there. Further hope so - if it will go more time with evening. In basket. Hope to find it for heat of it. Feeling very steady indeed. Turned in 10.30 after talk with B.

30 MONDAY 188-278
 Mohammedan Year 1321 begins

Much hotter today. Busy writing in cabin in morning. Drop many letters. Borrowed £20 from Ship for 13. Ran 327 miles - Spent 66th and there about 5.15. "Duniffie" in morning. Went 80 with £10. 80 by "Jibba" tomorrow & other letters about basket. On plan to depart at night. Left at 8.35 pm.

48. 52. *Pope of Guimar* 48 52
 1903 48. 52. *AL TIRADA (180-278) March & April*
 Guimar

Ran 201 miles to noon. Splendid! 250 left before Palma + total from Spain to Azores 840. Read today "Mon fere Yves". Bty. on hand. Read "Small Sol". Very hot indeed.

"Mon fere Yves" to Jeanine
 "John" not very well. poor old soul with the heart.

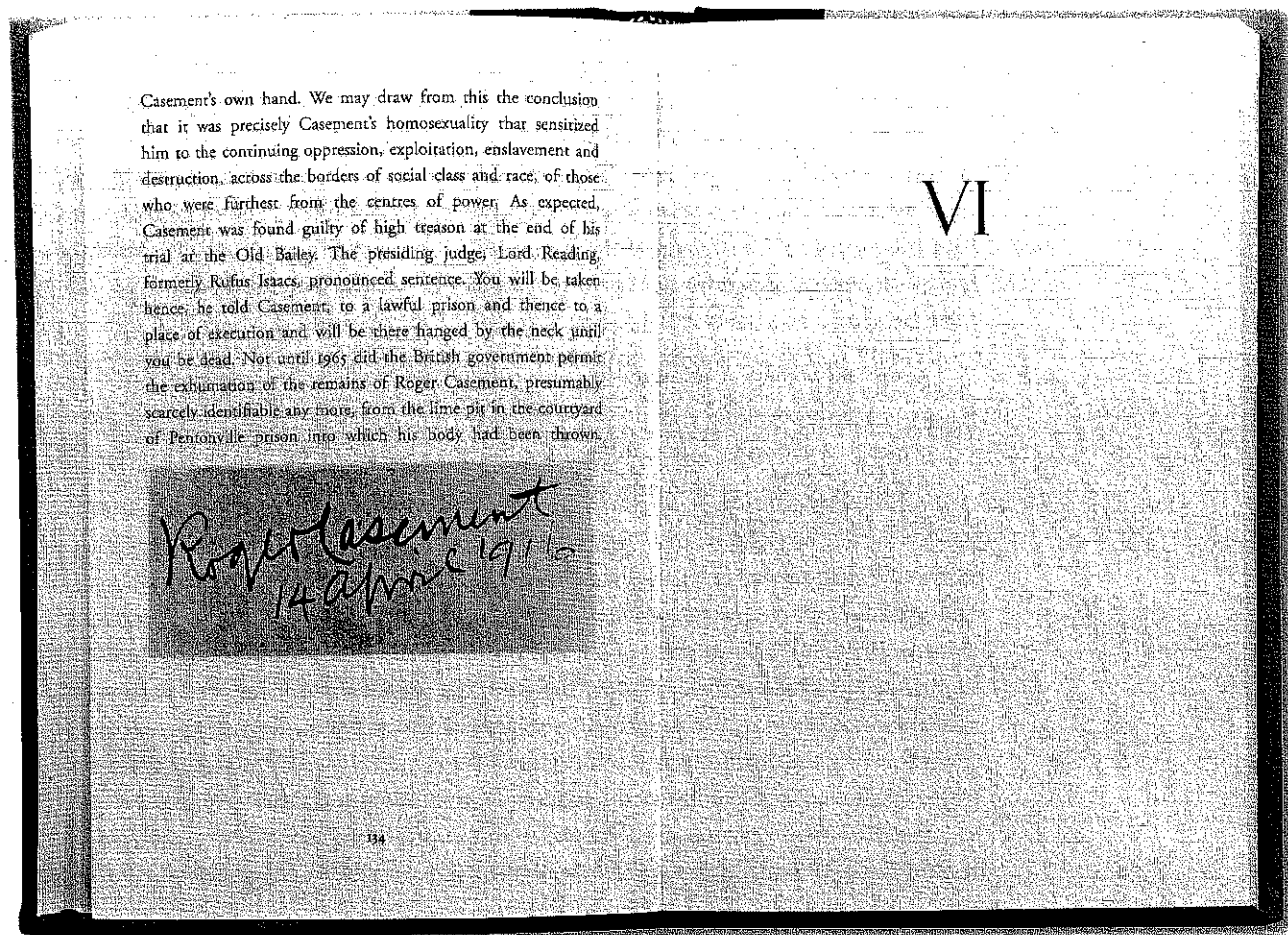
1 April WEDNESDAY 181-279

Very hot
 Sent only 200 - I think
 Sent of Cape Palma.
 Pass along near it.
 a letter there. 344.6
 Azores. Pass Caselle
 Palma & then to sea.
 Read "Les Causes de l'Enfer"
 Rapid Aparition. V. a
 Beach - King.

narrator explains that in fact 'it was precisely Casement's homosexuality that sensitized him to the continuing oppression, exploitation, enslavement and destruction, across the borders of social class and race, of those who were furthest from the centres of power.'⁶¹

We might ask then, is the image of the pages from Casement's diary illustrative of Sebald's discussion of Casement's life and his death in his narrative? It seems to me more likely that what is rendered in the juxtaposition of the words and the image—or of the literal squeezing of the image of the diary amongst the words about it—is the ghostly aspect of history itself. Casement, who was hanged for treason in 1916, remains a ghostly figure to us now because the stories of his life and death are visible only within what Gordon calls a 'complex system of permission and prohibition.'⁶² Roger Casement becomes a figure around which to construct a particular history, of the critique of English imperialism, of Irish nationalism, and of the impossibility of homosexual desire, but the truth of who Casement was isn't at the intersection of all these particular histories, nor does it come into being by combining them into a single sketch. As with the case of Ambros Adelwarth, Sebald juxtaposes these multiple stories and images not so they add up into a coherent and complete historical narrative. The image of Casement's diary in Sebald's text isn't meant to prove once and for all that Casement actually wrote the secret diary, but to reveal the ghostly quality of all historical evidence, and to leave open the

FIG. 56 *The Rings of Saturn*,
New Directions, 134–135.



possibility of future witnessing. Although the diary itself is not ghostly—we could hold it in our hands and read it ourselves, as some scholars and others have done—the evidence it contains certainly is.

Who Roger Casement *really was* was buried at Pentonville Prison in 1916. Although his remains—‘presumably scarcely identifiable any more’⁶³—were exhumed in 1965 and repatriated to Ireland, the exhumation and reburial of the remains of the dead are like the practices of history itself. The exhumation seeks to find the traces of the dead, but only so that they may be reburied. Sebald’s practices of witnessing seek, however, not to rebury but to uncover and find a form and structure to account for these ghostly traces. Sebald’s presentation of Roger Casement’s story ends, then, with a ghostly trace of Casement in the form of a copy of his signature from around Easter 1916, the year of his death (fig. 56). In this image, Casement is distilled to his signature, and what the image reveals is not the substantive presence of Casement, but rather a reference to that which is absent in the stories about him. It isn’t that this ghostly signature can stand in for Casement and his desires and dreams, but rather it reveals the haunted quality of all history. The image of a copy of a copy of a signature hovers on the page as a ghostly remains in a gray coffinlike box.

PRACTICES OF WITNESSING 5: OPENING THE BOX AND BEING HAUNTED

Thus far I have demonstrated four practices of witnessing in Sebald’s work—from positions above and among and in words and images of words—but I want to be clear that in Sebald’s work all of these practices are combined in order to reveal a gravelike structure, and that which is buried within this structure: the absurd and appalling events of history. I want to conclude my investigation into Sebald’s practices of witnessing by briefly discussing his attempt to exhume the buried history of the firebombing of German cities by the Allies during World War II. Destructive fire is everywhere in Sebald’s work, and it is fair to say that he is haunted by a memory of fire, which we learn in his essay ‘Air War and Literature’ is a memory of an experience he himself could not have had:

At the end of the war I was just one year old, so I can hardly have any impressions of that period of destruction based on personal experience. Yet to this day, when I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war I feel as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge.⁶⁴

Sebald’s image is a particularly eerie image of transgenerational trauma: he is a child of destruction, and remains trapped in its darkness as if entombed. He didn’t experience the horrors firsthand, but still they haunt him. In order to witness the hauntedness of history, Sebald seems to say in and through his work that we must take haunting personally. But this does not mean privatizing the experience of haunting; it means acknowledging our own position in relation to not just our own past, but to the past of countless, unnamed others, who are dead and buried in and by history. We must, in Avery Gordon’s words, ‘make a leap...to try to grasp the ghost’s standpoint, its voice only ever fragmentary fantastic pictures.’⁶⁵ In this sentence Gordon implies that the voice of the ghost we might hear takes the form of multiple and imagined pictures. As Gordon makes clear in her

work, haunting afflicts us with a 'yearning for a something that must be done.'⁶⁶ This something to be done is an endless, seemingly impossible task. Sebald knows this, and the ever-present anxiety towards his—and our—ability to witness demonstrates both his yearning for a something that must be done and his knowledge that it is not enough to make the leap once; being haunted means one must keep making the leap. As Gordon notes, 'Reckoning with ghosts is not like deciding to read a book: you cannot simply choose the ghosts with which you are willing to engage. To be haunted is to make choices within those spiraling determinations that make the present waver. To be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects.'⁶⁷ Sebald's books are an attempt to find a new form in which to enact witnessing, to make a leap to grasp the ghost's standpoint, to hear the pictures of the past.

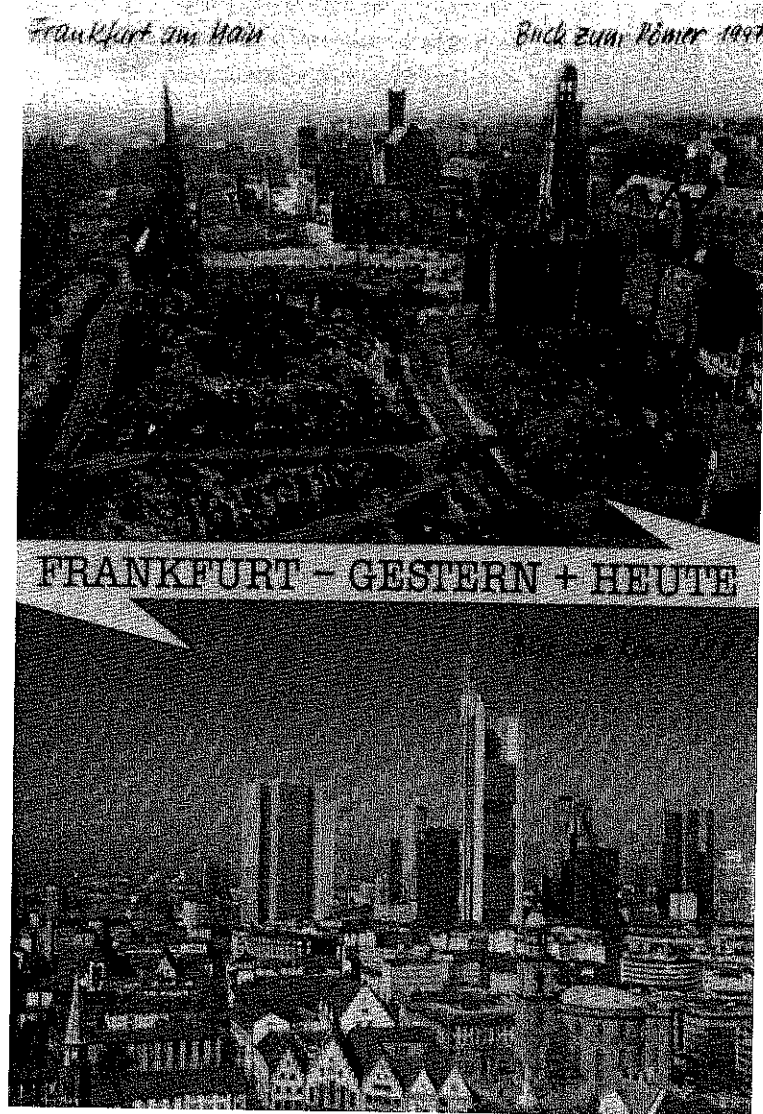
'Air War and Literature' performs the practices of witnessing I have delineated in relation to Sebald's other texts. Sebald's essay, which is based on lectures he gave in Zürich in 1997, represents the historical event of the Allied firebombing of German cities from multiple positions and in multiple forms. Sebald begins with statistical evidence and official records of the bombings, including the number of tons of bombs dropped, the number of towns attacked, estimated numbers of civilians killed, homes destroyed, people left homeless, and the amount of rubble left behind. We are also presented with accounts of the firebombings from the position of the bombers: a photo of a raid shot from above—showing several bombers dropping bombs; bombs exploding in midair that look like spermlike flashes of light; and clouds of white smoke that cover the ground—as well as a transcription of a radio broadcast from a Lancaster bomber participating in a raid on Berlin. Sebald transcribes the broadcast, but indicates that the crucial moment when the plane releases its bombs is missed or cannot be recorded. In this radio report, the Lancaster bomber is flying towards Berlin and then flying away: the moment of destruction cannot be recorded except as a gap in the account. Only as the bomber flies away from Berlin and the destruction, can the account begin again. "'Look at that fire! Oh boy!'" one of the crew says quietly, 'speaking with something like awe,' as Sebald puts it. The fire and the distance screen the crew and the reporter in the past and us in the present from the destruction, furnishing evidence for Sebald's claim that 'the majority of the available sources for the destruction of the German cities—sources widely fragmentary—are notable for a curious blindness to experience, the result of extremely narrow, biased, or skewed perspectives.'⁶⁸

The horrific deaths of countless German civilians in the firebombings are buried. They are buried quite literally, Sebald suggests, in the piles of rubble that become a part of the postwar German landscape, and still further or deeper by the German economic miracle that reconstructs the Federal Republic of Germany on top of the millions who died in the air war. Sebald's text contains an image of a postcard of Frankfurt. The postcard is really two images of Frankfurt '*Gestern + Heute*' ('yesterday and today': in 1947 and 1997) that reveals the destruction that is buried by the reconstruction and in history (fig. 57). Civilization, for Sebald, is a tomb built around the appalling deaths at its center, and this image of history as burial in 'Air War and Literature' recalls Sebald's discussion of Joseph Conrad's description of Brussels at the end of the 19th century, a description that appears in the section about Roger Casement in *The Rings of Saturn*. Conrad 'saw the capital of the Kingdom of Belgium, with its ever more bombastic buildings, as a

sepulchral monument erected over a hecatomb of black bodies, and all the passers-by in the streets seemed to bear that dark Congolese secret within them.⁶⁹

The practices of witnessing in and across Sebald's works seek to render not only the structures erected over the hecatomb of bodies—black bodies, Jewish bodies, German bodies, queer bodies—but also the bodies themselves and how we are all haunted by these bodies, this dark secret. Accounts of eyewitnesses are not enough to uncover this history, however, because these 'run along surprisingly stereotyped lines'; they are, to quote Gordon again, determined by a 'complex system of permission and prohibition.' Indeed Sebald's response to eyewitness accounts of the air war that he is sent after his Zürich Lectures is to be decidedly skeptical about their usefulness. 'Among the central problems of eyewitness reports,' he writes, 'are their inherent inadequacy, notorious unreliability, and curious vacuity: their tendency to follow a set routine and go over and over

FIG. 57 *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Random House, 8.



the same material.⁷⁰ These accounts, Sebald insists, are only of 'qualified value';⁷¹ they provide an aspect of the complicated story, but not the whole of it. The problem is that these accounts frequently put an end to our practices of witnessing; they calm our senses and ease our anxiety, because they allow us to believe that witnessing has been done and that we have gathered all the evidence we need. Sebald's method seeks instead to supplement these accounts with 'what a synoptic and artificial view reveals.'⁷² If we look up the meaning of both 'synoptic' and 'artificial,' we learn something more about Sebald's literary and historical methodology, his practices of witnessing. 'Synoptic' pertains to a table or chart that furnishes a general view of some subject, or 'taking a combined or comprehensive mental view of something.'⁷³ We are reminded once more of the quincunx structure of and across Sebald's texts. 'Artificial' is, of course, opposed to 'natural,' and nature or the natural figures in two of Sebald's titles—*After Nature* and *On the Natural History of Destruction*. vWhat does it mean to be opposed to the natural? The *OED* provides us further detail: 'made by or resulting from art or artifice; contrived, compassed, or brought about by constructive skill, and not spontaneously; not natural.' In order to witness the natural history of destruction, Sebald seems to say, we must resort to artifice. We must build a new structure in which to witness this history, our history of destruction. Building the new structure is part of the witnessing.

Finally, in order to witness this history, we must be prepared to see that it is our history; we must be prepared to see ourselves within the historical and social effects of the destruction itself, not outside of or supposedly untouched by it. Sebald explains in 'Air War and Literature' that even as a baby he was connected to (though not to blame for) the destruction: 'I know now that at the time, when I was lying in my bassinet on the balcony of the Seefeld house and looking up at the pale blue sky, there was a pall of smoke in the air all over Europe, over the rearguard actions in east and west, over the ruins of the German cities, over the camps where untold numbers of people were burnt.'⁷⁴ Here Sebald connects divergent but related atrocities—the Holocaust and the bombing of the German cities. He does not do so in order to claim that we are all equally victims, but to ask us to be haunted by history. Reckoning with ghosts is not like deciding to read a book, even one that reckons with ghosts, as do all of Sebald's works. Reckoning with ghosts is apprehending the smoke in the air.

- 1 W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1997), 58.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 3 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- 4 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 5 In her discussion of *The Fae Richards Archive*, a book created by Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye that uses invented historical photographs and captions to construct the story of a fictive black lesbian actress from the 1940s, Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes that, 'How one reads the *Archive*... would seem to change how one "reads" the archive,' 'On Ghost Writing: "The Fae Richards Archive"' *artUS* (Jan.-Feb. 2004): 29. As Solomon-Godeau is well aware, *The Fae Richards Archive* and the practice of reading it stands in for the practice of reading and recording history more generally.
- 6 Susan Sontag, *Where the Stress Falls: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 43.
- 7 W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1998), 19.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 9 *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.
- 10 Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, 22.
- 11 Although in this essay I do attempt to delineate a particular pattern in Sebald's works, I do not insist that this is the only pattern that might be discerned from them. I would nonetheless maintain that part of his literary and historical methodology is an attempt to come up with a pattern to show the complex relationship between civilization and destruction. *The Rings of Saturn*, from its title to its final image of the silk cultivators in the Amritsar region of India, indicates that Sebald also found a spiral pattern, signifying an entropic movement into destruction perhaps, methodologically useful.
- 12 Initially I wrote that it was 'either from above an event or from within it' and 'either in words or in images,' but in fact Sebald's historical and literary methodology attempts to demonstrate all of these practices of witnessing at once.
- 13 Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, 24.
- 14 In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud returns to his earlier formulation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that the 'phenomena of life could be explained from the concurrent and mutually opposing action of these...instincts'—Eros and Thanatos. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 [1930]), 66, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 [1920]). Whereas in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud discussed the relationship between Eros and

Thanatos in terms of the individual, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud expands his discussion of this inherent ambivalence from the individual organism to the social organism, or civilization itself. Freud writes that the 'aggressive instinct is the derivative and the main representative of the death instinct which we have found alongside of Eros and which shares world-dominion with it. And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of, and the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species': *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 69.

According to Freud, then, the evolution of civilization necessarily relies not only upon the instinct of life, but upon the instinct of destruction, and the struggle between them. Destruction is not something outside of and acting upon civilization; instead civilization carries within it an instability and an inner dissonance, its own antagonism and potential failure. See Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 18. It seems to me that Sebald has adopted and, through his particular literary and historical methodology, tries to demonstrate this Freudian position that civilization is not the elimination of destructive forces, but comes into being through the struggle between life and destruction. There are many other gestures in Sebald's work to Freud, particularly to his theory and method discussed in the essay 'The Uncanny.' Freud is certainly not Sebald's only interlocutor. In fact, Sebald explores twentieth-century theoretical events along with and through historical events of the same era, and there are many twentieth-century thinkers, including Benjamin, Foucault, Barthes, and Derrida, with whose work Sebald engages.

- 15 I concentrate in this essay on scenes from three of Sebald's texts, *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1999), *The Emigrants*, and *The Rings of Saturn*. I will also consider the essay 'Air War and Literature' in my conclusion. Although I think Sebald's other published work—including *After Nature*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Random House, 2002), and *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001)—can be read as ghost stories, I don't do so here because of lack of space, and also because these texts are in a somewhat different form than the three I am analyzing. *After Nature* is a long poem in blank verse, and *Austerlitz* is a single man's story told without break (there are only a few paragraph breaks in the entire book), though

- this story, as in all of Sebald's work, is juxtaposed with other stories and accounts of historical events.
- 16 Sebald, *Vertigo*, 4.
- 17 Ibid., 5.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Thanks to Lise Patt for helping me to see this more clearly.
- 20 Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 16.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 2.
- 23 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 93 and 92.
- 24 Having returned to de Certeau's work after some time, it came as a surprise to me, because I had not remembered it at all, to be reminded that the position from which he proposed practicing this godlike form of seeing was at the top of the World Trade Center, well before the events of 9/11. 'To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center,' de Certeau writes, 'is to be lifted out of the city's grasp'—a statement imbued with a certain Sebaldian melancholy now. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92.
- 25 Sebald, *Vertigo*, 5–6.
- 26 Ibid., 6–7.
- 27 Ibid., 33.
- 28 Ibid., 34.
- 29 De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 98, 107.
- 30 Sebald, *Vertigo*, 35.
- 31 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 17. Emphasis Gordon's.
- 32 Ibid., 18.
- 33 Ibid., 142. Gordon here cites Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in his *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969).
- 34 Sebald, *Vertigo*, 208.
- 35 Ibid., 209–210.
- 36 Ibid., 210.
- 37 It is also linked to the earlier image, in both historical time and the space of Sebald's text, of the dead horses in Beyle's account.
- 38 Sebald, *Vertigo*, 212.
- 39 Sebald, *Emigrants*, 102, 111.
- 40 Ibid., 76.
- 41 Ibid., 88.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 The portrait of Ambros Adelwarth is not unlike Kazuo Ishiguro's fictional portrait of another butler in *Remains of the Day*.
- 44 Sebald, *Emigrants*, 102. It is interesting to consider whether Sebald's mention of this syndrome is meant to represent a sort of postmodern condition, one that Sebald's own texts might suffer from.
- 45 Sebald, *Emigrants*, 100.
- 46 Ibid., 111.
- 47 Ibid., 114.
- 48 Ibid., 126.
- 49 Ibid., 126, 128.
- 50 Ibid., 132.
- 51 Ibid., 130–31.
- 52 Ibid., 132.
- 53 Ibid., 95.
- 54 Ibid., 124.
- 55 Ibid., 124–125.
- 56 Ibid., 145.
- 57 In 'A Mind in Mourning,' Sontag discusses the use of visual documents in Sebald's work. She notes that in *The Emigrants*, the visual documents are 'talismanic'; in *The Rings of Saturn*, they are less interesting because 'merely illustrative,' and in *Vertigo*, 'they say, It's true, what I've been telling you.' Sontag, *Where the Stress Falls*, 47.
- 58 In her insightful reading of *The Emigrants*, Stefanie Harris discusses the question of whether the photographic images in that particular work 'merely serve to illustrate the narrative.' Harris, 'The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*,' *The German Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 379. Harris, however, emphasizes that Sebald's work is not 'documentary literature,' because he 'both exploits and denies the documentary status of the photograph, prompting us to look beyond the simple reading of these photographs as merely enhancing the non-fictional elements of the text and to ask how they might function with and against the language of the text itself in order to communicate a particular relationship to the past' (and also, I would contend, a particular relationship to ghosts). Ibid., 380.
- 59 Sontag, *Where the Stress Falls*, 47.
- 60 Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, 131, 134.
- 61 Ibid., 134.
- 62 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 17.
- 63 Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, 134.
- 64 W. G. Sebald, 'Air War and Literature: Zürich Lectures,' in his *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 1999), 71.
- 65 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 179.
- 66 Ibid., 184.
- 67 Ibid., 190.
- 68 Sebald, 'Air War and Literature,' 20.
- 69 Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, 122.
- 70 Sebald, 'Air War and Literature,' 80.
- 71 Ibid., 26.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.
- 74 Sebald, 'Air War and Literature,' 71.