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## On Misunderstanding W.G. Sebald

ON 6 SEPTEMBER, 2001, eight days before his death, W.G. Sebald publicly confirmed what had been a popular interpretation of his work since his meteoric rise to fame in the late 1990s. In an interview with the California radio station KCRW, Sebald admitted that he had made the Holocaust the central focus of his novels by describing its negative space: “The only way in which one can approach these things”, he said, “is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation”.<sup>1</sup> In his work, the Holocaust functioned as a kind of formal black hole, drawing in characters and narratives by the force of its gravity, but remaining detectable only indirectly: “I’ve always felt that it was necessary above all to write about the history of persecution, of vilification of minorities, the attempt, well-nigh achieved, to eradicate a whole people”, he said. “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”.<sup>2</sup> It was precisely this “oblique” treatment of the Holocaust that had, by century’s end, made Sebald so popular in Britain and the United States; a glowing 1997 review of *The Emigrants* in the *London Review of Books*, for example, was simply entitled ‘Tact’.<sup>3</sup> Academics—again, largely in Britain and the United States—flocked to his novels, which, as one put it, seemed “tailor-made for the scholarly debates that have animated the study of German literature and history since reunification of the two Germanys”.<sup>4</sup> Almost overnight, Sebald became a fixture of the German literary canon, and was credited with discovering a new voice for Germany’s on-going process of coming to terms with

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1 Michael Silverblatt, ‘A Poem of an Invisible Subject,’ in Lynne Sharon Schwartz (ed.) *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), p. 80.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Jonathan Coe, ‘Tact,’ *London Review of Books*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (March, 1997), pp. 24-5.

4 Mark Anderson, ‘Introduction,’ *The Germanic Review*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (2004), p. 155.

the Nazi past. Some in the press lauded him as the most original and insightful writer on the Holocaust since Primo Levi. By 2009—only eight years after his death—over 25 books and edited volumes and 500 articles had been published on his life and works.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of his life, Sebald the novelist was an international literary celebrity. But his earlier career as scholar and literary critic remains a mystery to most, treated only in a handful of specialist academic volumes. The themes and topics of Sebald's early scholarly work were close to those of his fictional writing. But this work shows a very different Sebald than the 'tactful' and reserved novelist now almost universally acclaimed. Sebald's critical work was fiercely polemical and largely Marxist in emphasis, and was panned by other scholars for its excessively judgmental tone and jargon-laden prose. He was a fire-brand critic, and held fierce—and idiosyncratic—opinions about the history of modern European Jewry. While Sebald the novelist spoke only indirectly of the origins of the Holocaust, Sebald the critic insisted he had found them: the persecution of European Jews in the twentieth century represented the culmination of a centuries-long process of their assimilation to non-Jewish, bourgeois society. Given the gentle and melancholy prose for which he became so famous, Sebald's early career as polemical critic may seem surprising—but far more so are the origin stories that he found: the Holocaust of his scholarship is not the unspoken absence of his novels, but the endpoint of a long history of oppression tied to the rise of capitalism and the modern European bourgeoisie. Just how different Sebald's understanding of the Holocaust was from that of writers like Levi, to whom he is so often compared, is clearest in the writings that few have ever read.

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5 See Jo Catling, Richard Hibbitt and Lynn Wolf, 'W.G. Sebald: Secondary Bibliography,' <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/french/documents/W%20%20G%20%20Sebald%20-%20Secondary%20Bibliography%2017%20Dec%2009.pdf>

BETWEEN THE LATE 1960S and his death in 2001, Sebald produced a large body of scholarly work, much of which has not yet been translated. Sebald's earliest critical work was his *mémoire de licence* on the German expressionist playwright Carl Sternheim, which he wrote during his student years (1965-6) at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland and which formed the kernel of the master's thesis he wrote two years later at Manchester University, 'Carl Sternheim and his Work in Relation to the Ideology of the Late-Bourgeois Era.' This work was published as a book in slightly modified form under the title *Carl Sternheim: Critic and Victim of the Wilhelmine Era* in 1969. After joining the faculty of the University of East Anglia in 1970 as assistant lecturer, Sebald immediately began work on a PHD dissertation on Döblin, 'The Revival of Myth: A Study of Alfred Döblin's Novels,' which he completed in 1973. Over the following years, Sebald published two articles on Döblin derived from this dissertation and, in 1980, *The Myth of Destruction in Döblin's Work*. While at East Anglia, he published over sixty additional academic papers, reviews, and essays, and three collections of non-fiction writing. His major areas of interest were German and Austrian high modernism, postwar literature and film, and the literature of European Jewry. His criticism tended to focus on the biographical and psychological backgrounds of the writers he studied, and drew heavily on the canon of twentieth-century Marxist thought, including works from Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Georg Lukács. Like Adorno, perhaps his greatest theoretical influence, Sebald was often intensely judgmental, even dismissive, of the writers he analysed. In the earliest reviews he published in the *Journal of European Studies*, for example, he described the "irritation" or "weariness" that he felt upon reading nearly every book he was assigned.<sup>6</sup>

Sebald's early work on Sternheim and Döblin, in which he first

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6 See Richard Sheppard, 'The Sternheim Years: W.G. Sebald's *Lebrjahre* and *Theatralische Sendung 1963-1970*,' in Jo Catling and Richard Hibbit (eds.), *Saturn's Moons: W.G. Sebald: A Handbook*, (London: Legenda, 2011), and 'W.G. Sebald's Reception of Alfred Döblin,' in Steffan Davies and Ernest Schonfeld (eds.), *Alfred Döblin: Paradigms of Modernism*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

addressed the history of German-Jewish relations, reflected both his youthful commitment to Marxist literary criticism and his haste to castigate writers whose work he found ethically or politically suspect. His writings on Sternheim offered an exaggerated—and rather opaque—thesis about how Sternheim’s assimilation, as half-Jew, to the non-Jewish German bourgeoisie left him with a set of psychological disorders that reflected, in miniature, the larger social and political pathologies of the ‘late-bourgeois’ era in Germany. The story of Sternheim’s assimilation gave Sebald the opportunity to analyse what he saw as the link between Jewish emancipation and persecution in European history since the Enlightenment. By the end of the nineteenth century, he wrote, the processes of Jewish emancipation—which had begun in the eighteenth century under Frederick II in Prussia and Joseph II in Austria—had culminated in a “terrible *folie circulaire* of assimilation and anti-Semitism”. He continued: “the Jews reacted to this development with an unconditional, mimicking adaptation to the moral principles and behaviour of the late bourgeoisie”.<sup>7</sup> Jewish assimilation was inherently inauthentic, as the bourgeoisie, aggressively hostile to outsiders, accepted the Jewish outsider only after she completely renounced her specific Jewish identity. This was a process that caused long-lasting psychological trauma. On Sebald’s reading, Sternheim’s neuroses, irrationalism, and over-identification with the authoritarian bourgeoisie arose from his inability to resist this enormous bourgeois pressure to conform. Sebald’s later work on Döblin applied a similar critical model: assimilation led to conformism, which had immense psychological costs. While Döblin’s contemporaries—Freud, Kafka, Benjamin—all chose to suffer “the risky dialectic of a Jewish-German existence”, Döblin belonged “to the majority of Jews that believed it was necessary to deny Jewish tradition”, he wrote.<sup>8</sup> From the standpoint of the Jews, this was a “suicidal undertaking”.<sup>9</sup> Like Sternheim, Döblin overcompensated in his identification with the bourgeoisie by

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7 W.G. Sebald, *Carl Sternheim: Kritiker und Opfer der Wilhelmschen Ära*, (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1969), p. 49.

8 W.G. Sebald, *Der Mythos der Zerstörung*, (Stuttgart: Kleg, 1980), p. 74.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

aping its reactionary authoritarianism and even its anti-Semitism. This failed attempt to appease his gentile bourgeois superiors left Döblin with a variety of psychological problems, including proto-fascist longings. Sebald's conclusion was condemnatory: the experience of assimilation to the gentile bourgeoisie had transformed both Sternheim and Döblin into willing collaborators with an authoritarian system.

Sebald's work on Sternheim and Döblin was received very poorly by his academic colleagues. One reviewer of his book on Sternheim remarked that it had "some of the weakness of a consciously iconoclastic approach, notably a marked tendency to 'overkill'".<sup>10</sup> A 1983 review of Sebald's work on Döblin made a similar observation: "[Sebald's] abundant use of pseudo-Marxist jargon implies a critical stance which blames Döblin for being the inhabitant of a certain space in history, but since Sebald never defines his use of this vocabulary (he uses it in a clichéd manner which is most irritating), the reader is left wondering if his/her inferences correspond to the author's intention".<sup>11</sup> Even his hero Adorno kept his distance. In a 1967 letter to Adorno, Sebald wrote that reading Sternheim's work had cost him "a lot of conscious effort... it's an enormous amount of phoneyess".<sup>12</sup> When Adorno responded, he conceded that some of Sebald's thoughts about Sternheim were compelling, but stressed that his harsh judgment of the playwright was off the mark. No matter to Sebald, who included Adorno's comments in his book on Sternheim by re-writing them to better fit his argument.

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THE INTENSITY OF SEBALD'S attacks on assimilated Jewish writers eased over time as his focus turned away from the early targets

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<sup>10</sup> John Osborne, review of Winfried Georg Sebald, *Carl Sternheim: Kritiker und Oper der Wilhelminischen Ära* and Carl Sternheim, *Scenes from the Heroic Life of the Middle Classes: Five Plays*. *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Apr., 1972), p. 471.

<sup>11</sup> Marilyn Sibley Fries, review of W.G. Sebald, *Der Mythos der Zerstörung*, by, *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (1983), p. 343.

<sup>12</sup> Theodor Adorno to W.G. Sebald, 28 April 1967, in Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai (eds.), *Sebald Lektüren* (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 2005).

of his scholarship. But his pursuit of the modern bourgeoisie—and his insistence that they had decided the fate of modern Jewry—remained a constant feature of his academic work until he left it aside to write fiction. In his essays from the 1980s, for example, Sebald continued to trace the origins of the Holocaust in the history of Jewish assimilation. In a 1984 essay entitled ‘The Equivocalities of Tolerance: Observations on the Interests of the Enlightenment Regarding Jewish Emancipation’, Sebald argued that the phenomena of tolerance and persecution were closely linked in modern European history. The sudden increase in persecution in the decades after the Enlightenment caught Germany’s Jews off-guard, as the celebration of religious tolerance and emancipation in the public sphere had lulled them into a false sense of complacency and masked growing tensions. For Sebald, however, this new persecution was the logical outgrowth of the form that religious toleration had taken during the Enlightenment: “the Enlightenment stood at the beginning of a societal development”, he wrote, “which, as the result of its own dialectic, increasingly undermined the idea of emancipation and of tolerance and brought about the organized persecution and extermination of European Jewry”.<sup>13</sup> The Enlightenment conception of toleration did not call for a genuine appreciation of otherness, he argued, but instead only for a forbearance of outsiders who conformed to bourgeois norms. The Western liberal tradition was poisoned at its root. Locke, for example, had made clear that toleration was not to be extended to those who could not guarantee their oaths and covenants, i.e. non-believers. Believers of any sect, on the other hand, could be trusted to respect contracts and obey the ground rules of business relations, and would thus be free to partake in, enrich, and enjoy the benefits of bourgeois society. The limited scope of this concept of toleration, Sebald argued, explained its rootedness in class interests.

The economic and political interests motivating Enlightenment reform, he continued, could be clearly seen in various other Enlightenment-era

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<sup>13</sup> Sebald, ‘Die Zweideutigkeit der Toleranz: Anmerkungen zum Interesse der Aufklärung an der Emanzipation der Juden,’ *Der Deutschunterricht*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1984), p. 28.

plans for the betterment of German Jewry. Christian Wilhelm von Dohm's famous 1781 tract 'On the Civil Improvement of the Jews', for example—while perhaps reflecting an honest sympathy for the plight of the Jews—was ultimately informed by material concerns. By granting the Jews certain fundamental rights, Dohm argued, their economic potential could be tapped: "Philanthropic plans for the removal of the so-called Jewish problem are attended by sinister associations", Sebald wrote, "and a sober *raison d'État* calculation—in many respects still the most sincere way of looking at things—is ultimately only concerned with eliminating the Jews and enlarging bourgeois enterprise".<sup>14</sup> Sebald paid particular attention in his essay to the figure of Moses Mendelssohn, to whom he referred as "the living paradigm of emancipation embodied".<sup>15</sup> While having earned fame and the respect of Germany's non-Jewish population, Mendelssohn remained sceptical about the promises of emancipation. He was convinced that it would serve the interests of the state more than those of the Jews and that their fate ultimately depended on the degree of their economic potential.<sup>16</sup> He was also aware that the emancipated Jews would not be fully accepted before they abandoned their religious and cultural traditions. Even the works of Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, the "patron saint of the history of emancipation", were not free of the bourgeois distortions of true toleration.<sup>17</sup> Lessing's play *The Jew* called for toleration of the Jew not as Jew *tout court*, Sebald wrote, but of the Jew only insofar as she behaved as respectable bourgeoisie. Lessing embodied a form of tolerance that directed itself "less towards the Jew than towards his potential to grow out of himself and, in a wondrous metamorphosis, become bourgeois".<sup>18</sup> As long as Jews composed themselves like the beloved Mendelssohn, Sebald wrote, the German bourgeoisie would continue to believe that true tolerance simply meant acceptance of the well-behaved. And it would pride itself on its ability to turn Jews into good citizens; in other words, he concluded, to educate the

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

uncivilized.<sup>19</sup> The coercive pressure that arose from this kind of tolerance was itself a form of persecution. Sebald echoed Goethe: “Tolerance as a form of persecution—this thought contains an exact insight into the dynamic of a society for which even the most brilliant ideas had disastrous effects”.<sup>20</sup>

Sebald’s complex thesis about the relationship between toleration and persecution drew on the writings of several twentieth-century German-Jewish authors, including Adorno and Horkheimer, Hannah Arendt, and Gershom Scholem. First and foremost, he took from Adorno and Horkheimer the idea that the Enlightenment project was, at heart, programmed by a violent distrust of the non-identical and a coercive desire to eliminate otherness. Sebald was particularly interested in the final chapter of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which opened with a passage he took to heart:

The dialectical link between enlightenment and domination, and the dual relationship of progress to cruelty and liberation... are reflected in the very essence of those assimilated. The enlightened self-control... led them straight from their own, long-suffering community into the modern bourgeoisie, which was moving inexorably toward reversion to cold repression and reorganization as a pure ‘race’.<sup>21</sup>

The Jews, driven into the hands of the bourgeoisie through the enlightened processes of assimilation, were then turned over by these same bourgeoisie to their doom.

Sebald seems to have taken the motivating question of his 1984

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29. Goethe’s quote is: “Tolerance should really only be a passing attitude: it should lead to appreciation. To tolerate is to offend. [Dulden heißt beleidigen.]” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, trans. Elisabeth Stopp (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), 169.

essay—why did anti-Semitism consolidate itself as an organized political phenomenon only in the wake of emancipation?—from the first volume of Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. He cited the 1955 German translation of the book in the first paragraph of his essay, and it is one of only a small handful of secondary sources that he credited throughout. The similarities between Sebald’s and Arendt’s notions of the precarious and paradoxical status of the Jews during the Enlightenment are evident. From the beginning of emancipation, Arendt wrote, Europe’s Jews had faced an ambiguous welcome from their non-Jewish compatriots: celebrated for their exoticism and foreign appeal, they were also expected to appear and behave as non-Jews. These dual pressures forced the Jews into remaining a distinct social and religious group and into conforming to the norms of non-Jewish society. Sebald was also likely drawn to Arendt’s analysis of the economic factors at work in the emancipation of European Jewry. According to Arendt, nineteenth-century Jews were granted legal equality and provided with certain privileges by the state in order to preserve the special financial relationship they had developed with the state over the preceding centuries. This created a situation in which Europe’s Jews gained extraordinary wealth and financial influence but remained without political power—a glaring contradiction that gave rise to the widespread anti-Semitism of *fin-de-siècle* Europe.

The most significant influence on Sebald’s anti-assimilatory outlook, however, was the German-Jewish religious scholar Gershom Scholem, who was a fierce critic of the Frankfurt School’s analysis of modern Jewish history. For Sebald, it was Scholem who had most clearly pointed out that “the struggle for emancipation could not be distinguished from coercive assimilation under the conditions of the Enlightenment”.<sup>22</sup> Sebald drew closely from Scholem’s 1966 lecture ‘Jews and Germans’, in which Scholem examined the deterioration of German-Jewish relations from the eighteenth century through the Holocaust. Until the Enlightenment, Scholem argued, German Jews had lived like their co-religionists everywhere else: clearly recognizable

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22 Sebald, “Die Zweideutigkeit der Toleranz,” p. 28.

as a separate group with a separate history and a strong religious and cultural identity. There had long been a process of osmosis between Jewish and Christian cultures, but there had been little conscious adaptation of the former to the latter. Only during the Enlightenment did the German Jewish community begin its process of assimilation to Gentile society and its gradual denial and rejection of its own traditions and distinct identity. Scholem claimed that the ultimate tragedy of the Emancipation movement was that the Jews led their struggle not in the name of their rights as a people, but in the name of their assimilation into German society—a process that only opened new sources of misery. Non-Jewish reformers, like Wilhelm von Humboldt, counted on the disappearance of the Jew as Jew. And the Jewish avant-garde and socialists were equally to blame: the “shameful and grotesque invective” of Karl Marx’s ‘On the Jewish Question’, Scholem wrote, which called for the Jews’ abandonment of Judaism as a precondition of their social liberation, laid the groundwork for the “dissolution of the Jewish people and their historical consciousness”.<sup>23</sup> Busily occupied in bourgeois society, German Jews were unaware of their growing alienation from their non-Jewish neighbours: “The unending desire to arrive at home”, Scholem wrote, “soon transformed itself into the ecstatic illusion of already being there”.<sup>24</sup>

Scholem’s portrait of the *longue durée* of German-Jewish relations was directed against the view that continued assimilation in the twentieth century would have ironed out the tensions between these two communities and that Nazi ideology was an aberration, not a logical culmination, of this process. For Scholem, there was an inner logic to the assimilatory process that pointed towards its development in much more dangerous directions. Sebald agreed, but—unlike Scholem—he saw assimilation more as a consequence of non-Jewish bourgeois demands for social conformity. Sebald split the difference between Scholem and the Frankfurt School: from the former, he took the idea of Jewish assimilation as a process of cultural self-denial; from the

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<sup>23</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

latter, the idea that this process reflected a broader logic of capitalism working itself out over time. But the Frankfurt School and Scholem took firmly divergent approaches to understanding modern Jewish history. Scholem read Marxist thinking on the Jewish question as reducing the specificity of Jewish oppression to an instance of broader capitalist injustice. According to Scholem, Horkheimer's essay 'The Jews and Europe' simply recapitulated Marx's "pernicious" thesis: "the Jews interest him [Horkheimer] not as Jews", Scholem wrote in a letter to Walter Benjamin, "but only from the standpoint of the fate of the economic category that they represent for him".<sup>25</sup> There was an undeniable tendency in Marxist writing on Jewish persecution that alienated Scholem: as the historian Martin Jay has described it, "the more radical the Marxist, the less interested in the specificity of the Jewish question".<sup>26</sup> By positioning himself in between these two camps, Sebald carried this tension over into his own work: was the history of German Jewry to be approached via a broader critique of capitalism and the responsibility of modern bourgeois society for Jewish persecution and, eventually, the Holocaust, or through an attention to the historical specificity of this persecution and its particularity as a Jewish problem? Sebald never tried to reconcile these divergent interpretations. He cast a very wide net over the bourgeoisie—a class he saw as uniform, unchanging, and by nature opposed to "every foreign body".<sup>27</sup> The Enlightenment did more to preserve this class and its economic interests than it did to liberate the Jews, and it set into motion a process that would eventually culminate in their outright massacre.

There was a common theme, however, that ran through Sebald's use of the Frankfurt School and Scholem: his interest in the Jew as the radically other in the face of the homogenizing forces of modern society. For Horkheimer, the un-assimilated Jew represented a challenge to the uniform, administered world of late-capitalism, his or her otherness

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25 Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (London: Faber, 1982), p. 223.

26 Martin Jay, 'The Jews and the Frankfurt School: Critical Theory's Analysis of Anti-Semitism,' *New German Critique*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1980), p. 138.

27 Sebald, *Carl Sternheim*, p. 50.

possessing a revolutionary potential in the face of the bourgeoisie's forceful exclusion of the non-identical.<sup>28</sup> Sebald agreed: the Jews, as outsiders, possessed a power of negation that was sapped during the process of assimilation. Sebald saw in Scholem's writings on Jewish mysticism a similar conception of the Jew as the radically other. In his writings on Kafka from the 1970s, for example, Sebald worked closely with Scholem's texts in analysing the revolutionary and mystical prowess of Kafka's characters. In his 1976 essay, 'The Law of Ignominy: Authority, Messianism, and Exile in *The Castle*' (1976), Sebald argued that the character K., as messiah figure, carried an emancipatory power against the oppressive rule of the castle authorities. K. was unable to complete his historical mission against the castle, however, as he had become enervated by the processes of assimilation: "The difficulties facing K. are in fact a paradigm of those encountered in the process of Jewish assimilation", Sebald wrote.<sup>29</sup> The emancipatory promise and revolutionary potential of K.'s messianic Judaism had been diluted by accommodation to the castle's rules. Though Scholem was less interested in the supposedly revolutionary power the Jew as outsider possessed, he described what was lost in the process of assimilation in a way that resonated with Sebald. Borrowing a term from Max Brod, Scholem argued that Germany's Jews had lacked an appreciation for "love from a distance": "the consciousness of distance prevents too crude an intimacy" he wrote, "while at the same time the hope arises out of the feeling of distance... of realizing a reconciliation".<sup>30</sup> Sebald was clearly inspired by this vision: the Jews would have been better served by an arrangement with the non-Jewish majority by which each side preserved its unique identity than by assimilation. "Being elsewhere", Scholem quoted the French writer Charles Péguy, "[was] the great vice of this race—the great secret, the great vocation of this people".<sup>31</sup>

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28 Jay, 'The Jews and the Frankfurt School,' p. 148.

29 Sebald, 'The Law of Ignominy: Authority, Messianism and Exile in *The Castle*,' in Franz Kuna (ed.), *On Kafka: Semi-Centenary Perspectives*, (London: Elek, 1976), p. 51.

30 Scholem, *Judaica* 2, p. 42.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

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Sebald underwent a significant intellectual transformation between the time he wrote his early scholarly work and when he began to publish fiction. The condemnatory and polemical tone of his early critical writings, and his insistence on evaluating authors according to rigid moral and political categories, gave way to the subtle, sympathetic, and playful prose of his novels. And his earlier, schematic characterization of the history of modern Europe—the ‘late-bourgeois era’ and the Enlightenment—was replaced by the complex interplay of personal, political, and natural histories of his novels. His condemnation of Sternheim for blindly attempting to assimilate to the Prussian high-bourgeoisie seems worlds apart from his sympathetic treatment in *The Emigrants*, for example, of assimilated Jewish families in Europe.

But Sebald’s emphasis on the non-identity of the Jew with society at large was also present in his fictional work. Most of the Jewish characters in his novels actively cultivated their separateness from society as a source of authenticity and resistance. Sebald’s preoccupation with German Jews and assimilation in the stories of the principal characters of several of his novels can all be viewed in terms of a larger intellectual and theoretical framework—his pessimism about the assimilatory process, its origins in the distortions of bourgeois domination, and the psychological and social consequences that it had on those upon whom it worked. This is evident with several of the characters from *The Emigrants*, for example. The desolation and alienation of Max Aurach/Ferber in Manchester is linked to the long history of his family’s assimilation in southern Germany and its tragic conclusion. And the story of Paul Bereyter’s exclusion and eventual suicide in Sonthofen can be read as one of failed—or doomed—assimilation. Sebald explicitly linked Bereyter’s story to that of a longer history of Jewish assimilation in Germany in an interview in 1997:

the relationship between the Jewish minority in Germany and the larger population is one of the most central and most important chapters of German cultural history from the eighteenth century to

the present day in one form or another. And if you have a wish to understand, as I did have quite early on, the cultural environment in which you're brought up, with all its flaws and terrible aspects, then there is no way past this issue.<sup>32</sup>

For Sebald, coming to grips with the petit bourgeois milieu of his own upbringing in Bavaria meant understanding its responsibility for the destruction of minorities like Bereyter. And breaking through the “conspiracy of silence”<sup>33</sup> that he saw as having defined his youth in postwar Germany required understanding the history of the destruction of German Jewry—a task to which he dedicated himself as a young academic. The Frankfurt School, he admitted, had provided him with the tools to do so:

I have asked myself since then [the beginning of his studies in Freiburg in 1963] how murky and untruthful our understanding of literature would have remained if the gradually appearing writings of Benjamin and the Frankfurt School—which constituted, after all, a Jewish School for the research of bourgeois social and intellectual history—had not opened other perspectives.<sup>34</sup>

But Sebald's interest in the history of Jews for what it could elucidate about the history of Germany did not necessarily equate with an interest in the history of the Jews for their own sake. To what extent did he use the stories of German Jewry as vehicles for a more general critique of German society and, more broadly, European modernity? His linking of Jewish assimilation to a broader set of ‘late-bourgeois’ cultural and societal distortions in his critical writing suggests that his fictional accounts of the Jewish experience were also gesturing at a much larger story. As he once admitted in an interview, “I have an interest in [the Jewish people] not for any philo-Semitic reasons...

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<sup>32</sup> Eleanor Wachtel, ‘Ghost Hunter,’ in Schwartz, p. 47.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> W.G. Sebald, ‘Es Steht ein Komet am Himmel: Kalenderbeitrag zu Ehren des rheinischen Hausfreunds,’ in *Logis in einem Landhaus* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2000), p. 12.

but because they are part of a social history that was obliterated in Germany and I wanted to know what happened.”<sup>35</sup> Sebald understood himself as performing a task different to that for which he became famous: he was less the literary guardian of Holocaust memory than a critic of a bourgeois modernity that had taken a particularly disastrous turn in twentieth-century Germany.

So what, then, to make of Sebald’s own statement that the direct treatment of “the history of persecution” and the “vilification of minorities” was “practically impossible”? While Sebald did not treat the horrors of the Holocaust in any real detail in his fictional works, his academic writing was devoted, in great part, to describing their social and cultural prerequisites. The Germans had called for the liquidation of Judaism in Germany long before the advent of the Third Reich. And the organized anti-Semitism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was merely a further development of the dangerous political and social dynamics at work since early modern German society. For the young Sebald, the Germans’ unremitting pressure on the Jews to abandon their cultural singularity was but one short step away from the concentration camp. Assimilation, though, had made the Jews blind to these threats. Describing the interwar Jewish population in Austria, he wrote, “despite the acute threat from their neighbours, the Jews, almost without exception, stay put. ‘Their patriotic foolishness’”, Sebald quoted the Austrian writer Jean Améry, “is without limit.”<sup>36</sup> While victims and survivors populate Sebald’s novels, and their narrative is dominated by the consequences and the ‘after effects’ of the Holocaust, they never provide an account of why and how the Nazi genocide occurred. But this was not because Sebald lacked a strong opinion on this topic: his scholarly work shows how deeply he believed the Holocaust to be the endpoint of a much longer history of bourgeois persecution.

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35 Arthur Lubow, ‘Crossing Boundaries,’ in Schwartz, p. 167.

36 Sebald, ‘Verlorenes Land – Jean Améry und Österreich,’ in *Unheimliche Heimat* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1991), p. 135.

But if Sebald's appreciation of the history of Jewry in modern Europe was much less subtle, after all, than what most have given him credit for, should this change our appreciation of him as novelist? Perhaps. How you interpret the tensions between Sebald's different projects depends on how urgently you see the tying of loose ends. When describing in 1973 what he saw as a point of friction in Döblin's work, Sebald inadvertently described what would, until the end, remain one in his own: "the problems arising from the ill-fated dream", he wrote, "that a Jewish-German synthesis might be possible".<sup>37</sup> Looking for consistency in a writer is a fool's errand, but neglecting the full range of their writings makes for a shallow understanding of their thought. The celebration of Sebald as Holocaust writer has taken into account only a small portion of what he wrote about the subject. We appoint representatives too quickly.

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Sheppard, 'W.G. Sebald's Reception of Alfred Döblin,' p. 366.

## Author Info

James R. Martin is a fourth-year graduate student in the Department of History, Harvard University, focusing on the history of international thought and, in particular, on ideas about global economic governance and international law. His current research looks at the origins of plans to govern the world economy in early twentieth-century Europe and America, and at how the politics of liberal internationalism transformed during the interwar and immediate postwar years in light of the emergence of international economic expertise. His academic articles have appeared in *Modern Intellectual History* (forthcoming), *The Journal of European Studies*, and *Thesis Eleven*, and his other writing and reviews in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The New York Observer*, *The New Republic*, *The Guardian*, and elsewhere.

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