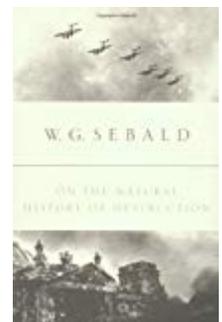




Winfried G. Sebald. *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2001. x + 205 pp.
EUR 9.90, paper, ISBN 978-3-596-14863-9.



Winfried G. Sebald. *On the Natural History of Destruction*. New York: Random House, 2003. x + 202 pp. \$23.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-375-50484-6.



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Regardless of the perspectives that various commentators, both in Germany and in the Anglo-American realm, have expressed regarding Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (published under that title in 1999 in Germany and as *On the Natural History of Destruction* in 2003 in the U.S.),[1] most of them have acknowledged that Sebald was virtually the first to assert that German writers (and historians) have been remarkably silent since the end of World War II about the air war waged against German cities and, perhaps more significantly, about the impact of that massive destruction on the German people, their consciousness, and their culture. In this review essay, I want to explore and reflect on Sebald's main theses regarding this perceived "gap" in German lit-

erature and historical writing, on his intentions in voicing his related assertions and discussing the observations that led to and emanated from them, and on the numerous responses to those assertions that, taken together, constitute a large part of the lively debate that he ignited and that has continued right up to this online forum: about the air war, the resulting destruction of German cities, the military and moral questions all of that raises, and the alleged lack of a cultural response by Germans to that collective experience.

It should be pointed out up front that Sebald's work *Luftkrieg und Literatur* has been somewhat less than a stable target for critics and commentators. His occupation with the themes that eventually made their way into the book of that title be-

gan in a literature seminar Sebald was teaching at the University of East Anglia. His thinking about this topic took a step forward when he used it as the focus for the Lectures on Poetics which he was invited to deliver in Zurich, Switzerland, in the fall of 1997. Taking some of the commentaries that appeared subsequent to those lectures into account, and on the urging of his German publisher, Sebald then reworked his lectures, added a piece in response to the commentators as well as an entirely new chapter on the postwar German writer Alfred Andersch, and then published the German text, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, in 1999. At the time of his unfortunate and tragic death late in 2001, he had also completed most of his work in conjunction with the English edition, translated by Anthea Bell with Sebald's input, that was subsequently published earlier this year (2003) in both the U.K. and U.S., under the title indicated above, *On the Natural History of Destruction*. But this English/American "version" is also not a mere translation of the German edition, since it includes additional material as well, namely: an essay on Jean Amery ("Against the Irreversible") and one on Peter Weiss ("The Remorse of the Heart: On Memory and Cruelty in the Work of Peter Weiss").

I mention these various iterations of Sebald's work on this topic to underscore the fact that his thinking about these and related matters was clearly--right up to his death--a "work in progress," an exploration, rather than any absolute set of unassailable assertions. As he states himself in the text *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, as a postscript to the responses to his lectures, [I] [...] "had intended what I said in Zurich as merely a rough-and-ready collection of various observations, materials, and theses, and I suspected that in many respects it needed to be complemented and corrected" (*Luftkrieg*, 81; *On the Natural History*, 69). One of my points of departure, then, in the comments that follow is to agree with Wolfram Schuette (*Frankfurter Rundschau*) who described *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as a "Sammlung

vielfacher Probebohrungen im literarischen Gelaende[...]"[2]

>From my reading of Sebald's texts, it seems to me that he presents the following major theses or assertions: (1) post-1945 German literature (and historical writing), with very few exceptions, displays a remarkable "gap" or blank space in its failure to confront and deal in any extensive way with both the destruction of German cities by Allied bombing and its implications for those who suffered through it; (2) several reasons exist for this "silence," for a suppression of these negative and devastating experiences on the part of Germans (and Sebald is concerned primarily, but not exclusively, with the silence of writers of literary and historical texts), some of which are quite understandable under the circumstances, some condemnable; (3) the literary works that commentators have cited in mounting counter-arguments to Sebald's assertion about that "literary silence," again with few exceptions, often remained superficial and both morally and artistically inadequate in their treatments of this calamity; and (4) the few writers and texts that constitute the "exceptions to the rule" (Hans Erich Nossack, Alexander Kluge, and Gert Ledig) succeed because they freed themselves from literary-artistic conventions, from stereotypical linguistic constraints, and from the fear of looking directly into the eye of the (fire-)storm and its disturbing ramifications.

Near the beginning of his text *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Sebald articulates most clearly his first thesis and, thereby, ignites the productive debate that followed. He stated: "The destruction, on a scale without historical precedent, entered the annals of the nation, as it set about rebuilding itself, only in the form of vague generalizations. It seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness, it has been largely obliterated from the retrospective understanding of those affected, and it never played any appreciable part in the discussion of the internal constitution of our country." [3] From that starting point,

Sebald succeeds, I am convinced, in making a strong case for his main contention that at least in the public forms of literature and historical writing a general silence about the air war and its repercussions prevailed until very recently. He discusses a relatively small number of individual writers and works that did attempt to address the topic in a serious way, but he asserts that only two or three among them (a) confronted the topic in a commensurate and effective fashion and (b) achieved a response among the public that was other than very short-lived. The two initial exceptions for Sebald are Hans Erich Nossack's story "Der Untergang," a "Zeugenprotokol," and Alexander Kluge's prose montage *Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945* (1970). In a section of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* that Sebald wrote subsequent to the Zurich lectures and in response to comments he received in the form of reviews and letters, he added one more "exception" to his main thesis, namely: Gert Ledig's novel *Die Vergeltung* (1956).[4] He does not count Heinrich Boell's novel *Der Engel schwieg*, although he has generally positive things to say about it, since it was not published until 1992, almost forty years after it was written, and therefore not able to contribute to awakening the public's consciousness regarding the air war.

Regarding the second assertion mentioned above, Sebald posits a number of conjectures about the reasons for the silence he is alleging. He observes, for instance, that to his mind one of the most important causes of the "inability of a whole generation of German authors to describe what they had seen, and to convey it to our minds" was their "preoccupation with retrospective improvement of the self-image they wished to hand down" (*On the Natural History*, x; *Luftkrieg*, 8). His discussion of Alfred Andersch in the essay added to the Zurich lectures in the published texts provides an individual example, at least in Sebald's view, of such a strategy in action. Sebald's harsh treatment of Andersch in that essay is perhaps idiosyncratically cranky, and his negative evaluations of An-

dersch's novels such as *Kirschen der Freiheit*, *Sansibar oder der letzte Grund*, and *Efraim*, might have been excessively influenced by his low regard for Andersch's moral character, but Andersch does appear to exemplify Sebald's point here in that he indisputably re-wrote himself in his autobiographical and semi-autobiographical texts in a fashion that showed him and his actions during the Third Reich in a more positive light than was deserved. It should be pointed out, though, that many critics and readers do not share Sebald's negative regard for Andersch's works, and there are reasons not to accept wholesale Sebald's evaluation of them, even though he is an astute reader of literary texts, including those by Andersch, and his evaluations require consideration.

Sebald also suggests that several additional factors played a role in creating the "gap" that he claims to have discovered. He cites, for instance, the (convenient?) work of reconstruction, especially in West Germany, that pushed present and future concerns ahead of those tied to the past, providing a kind of excuse or distraction from confronting recent negative experiences. This, of course, is an assertion put forward frequently about Germans, especially West Germans, in discussions of the immediate postwar years. Sebald discusses as well the likelihood that remembering and putting down to paper the terrible experiences one had gone through and survived were for some, at least initially, simply too horrific to deal with. He finds it quite plausible even that many suffered from a kind of post-traumatic inability to remember, mourn, and confront their experiences. One can find here echoes of assertions made by the Mitscherlichs in their influential study *Die Unfaehigkeit zu trauern* (1967).[5] In this regard, Sebald stated in an interview with Volker Hage, in obvious reference to the fate of Lot's wife in the *Genesis* story, who turns into a pillar of salt when she looks back toward Sodom and Gemorrah: "Es ist diese Furcht zu versteinern, wenn man ueber die eigene Schulter zurueck in die Vergangenheit schaut." [6] Referring to yet

another factor, Sebald writes about the incredible difficulty of finding an appropriate language in which to talk about horrific events, claiming rightly that many of those who made an attempt to write about the air war and destruction of German cities were not able to free themselves from clichés and stereotypes. The poet Charles Simic, in a commentary on *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, lends support to the idea by claiming that after such cataclysmic experiences it is nearly impossible to figure out "how to speak of the unspeakable and make sense of the senseless." [7] Or, as the critic Christian Schulte observes about the writer's challenge here: "Wie beschreiben, was sich der Vorstellungskraft entzieht." [8]

Finally, I want to point out perhaps one of the most powerful reasons Sebald cites for the silence, namely: the hesitation, that became a veritable taboo, of Germans to lay claim to their own suffering in the context of all the suffering they had caused for others, especially once the atrocities associated with the Holocaust became broadly known. Volker Hage commented to Sebald during their interview in 2000: "Es rueckten die Verbrechen der Deutschen in den Vordergrund- die Leidensgeschichten der Deutschen, der Taeter, konnten nun erst recht nicht mehr erzaehlt werden [...]." And Sebald responded with the admission: "Nein, die konnten nicht erzaehlt werden." [9] Clearly, as the *Historikerstreit* demonstrated, there was good reason for Germans both to be wary of unintentionally relativizing the Holocaust and to fear the charge of doing so intentionally by focusing on their own suffering, by suggesting that they were not only perpetrators, but victims as well. Even though Sebald occasionally dishes out very harsh criticism for German writers and historians for failing to break through the silence he alleges, for allowing what he terms a "scandalous deficiency" [10] to continue for over fifty years, he clearly, and somewhat paradoxically and inconsistently comprehends some very

compelling reasons for their reluctance, even their inability to do otherwise.

A major part of the main essay in the book concentrates on Sebald's discussion of why most of the few literary texts that do, in fact, deal with the air war, are not successful as literature and do not and did not contribute significantly to any serious discussion of this neglected topic. His critical evaluations of works by Hermann Kasack, Arno Schmidt, Peter de Mendelssohn, and even some by Hans Erich Nossack, provide at least one side, *ex negativo*, of what one might regard as Sebald's own poetics. In those works, most explicitly in Kasack's novel *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom*, Schmidt's novel *Aus dem Leben eines Fauns*, de Mendelssohn's novel *Die Kathedrale*, and Nossack's novel *Nekyia*, Sebald finds to varying degrees a lack of genuine and appropriate realism, too much allegorical and symbolic abstraction, questionable attempts to construct transcendent meaning out of the catastrophe, an overabundance of pathos, and language that displays too great an indebtedness to the often (self-)defensive style of the so-called "inner emigration" works, that is, works by authors who claimed to have resisted quietly while remaining in Germany during the Third Reich.

When Sebald discusses the works by Nossack (*Der Untergang*), Alexander Kluge (*Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945*), or Gert Ledig's *Die Vergeltung*, the last of which he had not mentioned in the original Zurich lectures, he provides indications of the other, positive side of his poetics. Here, as Hage, Schulte, and other commentators have already pointed out, extensive similarities with Sebald's own writing are evident. Sebald finds laudable in their works a willingness to confront this historical catastrophe in various ways, always realistically, but often elliptically, and in the fragmented fashion which it seems to demand; their refusal to seek allegorical sense in the tragic ruins of the destruction; and their commitment to letting the documents, incomplete and

puzzling visions, and even horrific artifacts speak for themselves without feeling the need to falsify them through philosophical or theological explanations and transfigurations. Readers of Sebald's own fictional works will recognize in his affirming discussion of this small group of writers essential features from those works, including his archaeological strategies, his sober narration, his use of documents, and his Benjaminian melancholic view of history.

In conclusion, I would simply like to add that the several iterations of Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* works, from the Zurich lectures and the German edition bearing that title to the expanded English-language version, have provided us all with important food for thought about a topic that had not been given sufficient attention either in German literary texts or historical writing. As the German dramatist and novelist Dieter Forte, who has made his own contribution to this discussion in the form of a recent novel, *In der Erinnerung*, asserts in his own review of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, despite several criticisms worth pondering: "Sebalds These ist nicht falsch, seine Bemuehungen sind richtig. Es gibt kaum etwas ueber den Luftkrieg gegen die Zivilbevoelkerung." [11] And on the dust jacket of Joerg Friedrich's imposing historical study *Der Brand* (2003), about which we will hear much in this forum, one can read a further substantiation of Sebald's basic thesis: "Bis heute existiert keine umfassende zeitgeschichtliche Darstellung, die die tatsaechliche Dimension des Geschehens und das Schicksal der Betroffenen erfasst." [12]

There is a lot more that one could say about Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* works than I have been able to do in this review essay, including some discussion of the two essays on Jean Amery and Peter Weiss that were added to the English-language edition. Additionally, numerous significant questions remain open for further scholarly investigation, such as the extent to which there is any merit in the claims of some

critics that Sebald failed to do justice to numerous writers and their literary works by leaving them off of his list of successful, even adequate attempts to deal with this admittedly difficult topic (Koeppen, Hochhuth, Zimmering, Panitz, Kiesel, von le Fort, Remarque, and Kempowski, for instance), or the relationship between this "gap" in German literature and a similar one regarding the complex of topics related to the expulsion of Germans from the east at the end of and immediately following the war. In that regard, of course, Guenter Grass' recent novel, *Im Krebsgang*, broke new ground.

Sebald's work in this context has clearly provoked an ever-growing number of responses, some of which have attempted to counter his basic premise about a deafening silence by offering titles, if not yet substantial discussions, of those literary works in German that Sebald disregarded; and some of which have sought to modify or elaborate on certain assertions made by Sebald while agreeing with the basic thrust of his arguments and observations. All of that should provide ample fodder for further reflection and analysis. In any case, I will close by voicing my contention, through which I express agreement with many if certainly not all commentators on Sebald's final work, that without the taboo-breaking insights and provocations which that work has generated, few of us would have had our attention drawn to this entire debate. In fact, there would most likely be no debate, and no forum in H-German on this topic. We have much to learn from one another, so let the discussion continue.

Notes:

[1]. W. G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur. Mit einem Essay zu Alfred Andersch*. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999; W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, translated by Anthea Bell. New York: Random House, 2003 (simultaneously in London: Penguin Books, 2003).

[2]. Wolfram Schuette, "Unterlassene Zeugenschaft. W. G. Sebalds Ueberlegungen zu 'Luftkrieg

und Literatur,' *Frankfurter Rundschau*, March 27, 1999. These quotes read in English as follows: "a collection of diverse exploratory probings in the field of literature."

[3]. *On the Natural History of Destruction*, 4. In the original *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, 12.

[4]. Hans Erich Nossack, "Der Untergang," in: H.E.N., *Interview mit dem Tode*. Frankfurt a.M.: 1972; Alexander Kluge, *Neue Geschichten. Hefte 1-18* "Unheimlichkeit der Zeit," Frankfurt a.M.: 1977; and Gert Ledig, *Die Vergeltung*, originally 1956, now available again: Frankfurt a.M.: 1999.

[5]. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfaehigkeit zu trauern*. Munich: Piper Verlag, 1967.

[6]. Sebald to Hage, in: Volker Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstoerung. Die Literaten und der Luftkrieg. Essays und Gespraechе*. Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 2003: 268. The quote reads in English: "It is this fear of turning into stone when one looks back over one's own shoulder into the past."

[7]. Charles Simic, "Conspiracy of Silence. Review of W. G. Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction*," in *The New York Review of Books*, February 27, 2003: 10.

[8]. Christian Schulte, "Die Naturgeschichte der Zerstoerung. W.G. Sebalds Thesen zu 'Luftkrieg und Literatur,'" in: *Text + Kritik* 158 (W.G. Sebald), ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold, IV/2003: 86.

[9]. Hage, 62. The quotes read in English as follows: Hage: "The crimes of the Germans moved into the foreground -- the stories of German suffering, that of the perpetrators, were now even less able to be told than before." Sebald: "No, they couldn't be told."

[10]. Sebald, *On the Natural History*, 70; *Luftkrieg*, 82.

[11]. Dieter Forte, "Menschen werden zu Herdentieren. Dieter Forte ueber W. G. Sebalds 'Luftkrieg'-Thesen und eigene Erinnerungen an die Bomben," *Der Spiegel*, April 5, 1999: 223. The

quote in English reads: "Sebald's thesis is not false, his efforts are correct. Practically nothing exists about the air war against the civilian population."

[12]. Joerg Friedrich, *Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*. Munich: Propylaeen Verlag, 2002. In English: "Until today there has not existed a through, historical portrayal which provides a complete discussion of the factual dimension of these events and of the fate of the affected people."

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