

On the Natural History of Destruction, by W. G. Sebald

reviewed by [Stephen H. Webb](#) in the [November 1, 2003](#) issue

Once you get hooked on W. G. Sebald's work it is hard not to regard most other literature as frivolous. He is, however, an acquired taste, like single-malt scotch. The first words of his complex and heavy prose are hard to swallow, but even if you have to grimace as the words go down, you will find that nothing else tastes quite the same. Moreover, if you read too many of his novels at a time, rich in language but deficient in plot, they may leave you a bit disoriented. They will also leave a very lasting impression.

Sebald is the great anti-Proust of the 20th century. Proust paid tribute to the aristocrats who had been erased from history by World War I. As a young man he had wanted to join their world, and as a writer he knew he had to reconstruct that world in order to have any chance for self-understanding. Because he does not idealize the past, his aesthetic pursuit of memory is not nostalgic. He knows that the past can never be repeated, but he also knows that, as a general rule, the person we once were is infinitely more interesting than the person we have become.

For Sebald, who was born in Germany but spent all of his professional life teaching in England, the past is a burden, not a calling. Proust memorializes a lost world of aristocrats whose charms come from the graceful way they dissipate their fortunes. Sebald is haunted by a nation that set about systematically destroying much of the world, including itself. While Proust both loves and ridicules the aristocracy, Sebald's somber tone leaves you with no doubt about his essentially moral perspective. Sebald's characters are lost in the present because they have had their pasts taken from them. His books are full of long monologues by narrators steeped in sadness and estrangement. Writing before the Holocaust, Proust thought that if we could only recover the past, it could redeem us. Sebald's characters live in a past that is still with us, even though it is far beyond redemption.

For Proust, memory promises a realized eschatology. Sebald's prose, by contrast, sustains a realized apocalypse. The destructive forces of the past have made us survivors, and the only way to keep living is by clinging to the very past that has almost destroyed us. The way Sebald's stories move toward loss almost seems to

anticipate his own tragic death in a car crash in December 2001. Four of his novels had been translated into English when he died. He was 57.

In 1997 Sebald presented a series of lectures in Zurich on World War II air raids against Germany. The lectures were published in Germany in 1999, but Sebald did not live to guide the English edition into print. His absence does not make his voice any less powerful. Born in 1944 and growing up in a village in the Alps, Sebald had no personal experience of the fire bombings. Nevertheless, his exile's sense of being denied a past is ready-made for reflecting on the destruction of Germany's cities. In his novels Sebald shows no sympathy for the willed amnesia many Germans affected after the war. In this book he wonders why the raids made such a scant impact on the German literary imagination. Germans look away when confronted by their past. Why hasn't their national humiliation found a voice?

That his question is primarily aesthetic does not mean that it lacks a moral dimension. Sebald admits that Germans could not question the bombing campaign after the war, since they had killed millions more themselves. He also acknowledges the desperation of the situation in England. Nevertheless, he portrays the bombings as a madness prolonged by its own momentum. Meant to break the morale of the Germans, the bombings, Sebald suspects, accomplished nothing except to lift the spirits of the English. For Sebald, indiscriminately dropping 1 million tons of bombs on enemy territory, "on a scale without historical precedent," was a high price to pay for a much needed propaganda victory.

The Germans faced the bombing campaign with silent fascination. Sebald is drawn to the way language fails in the few written accounts from survivors and the few attempts at artistic representation by novelists. His own depiction of the horrors is respectful and economical, but his graphic images are enough to suggest the paralyzing damage done to the memories of the survivors. Only a writer this sensitive to the entanglements of memory could begin to do justice to this immemorial event.

Sebald is attentive to the irony that the postwar economic miracle was made possible by the capacity of Germans to avert their gaze. Many Germans interpreted the destruction as a just punishment, an act of God, and it is true that by cutting the Germans off from their past the Allies forced them to rebuild for a better future. It is a further irony that it took the American war against Iraq to give the Germans a reason for retrieving their memories of the Allied campaign. The ease with which

those memories were used to promote a politicized antiwar agenda--the American bombing of Iraq was, after all, nothing like the Allied bombing of Germany--suggests that Germany might still be a long way from coming to terms with its past.

America has its own problem with memory, of course. Perhaps nowhere is that made more painfully clear than in James Dickey's 1965 poem "The Firebombing." The narrator reflects on his inability to feel guilty about participating in the napalming of Tokyo 20 years earlier. Surveying his suburban existence, he tries to imagine the destruction he triggered. He imagines one of his bombs that "finds a home and clings to it like a child." Yet try as he might, he is "still 20 years overweight, still unable / To get down there to see / What really happened." He would like to extend an invitation to his victims--"As though to the neighbor / I borrowed the hedge-clippers from"--to come into his home, but he can't. The deed is done, and he does not really regret it.

Although the poem is about Tokyo, it could just as well be about any German city. America could not celebrate this fateful deed any more than the Germans could mourn it. Unlike the German literature that Sebald analyzes, however, this poem does not flinch from demonstrating both the horror of war and the usefulness of amnesia.