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Letters to the End of Love: Writing Holocaust fiction, reading WG Sebald

Abstract:

The contemporary Holocaust novels of German writer WG Sebald represent for some the ultimate literary engagement with Holocaust historiography. Sebald's Holocaust novels, *Austerlitz* (2001) and *The Emigrants* (2002), are highly rhetorical, metaphysical meditations on the terrible impact of the Holocaust on individual lives. At the same time these novels are also a philosophical investigation into the historical and cultural causes of the Holocaust. Eric L Santner, in his book *On Creaturely Life*, argues that Sebald's work is the supreme example of a kind of Benjaminian poetics, within which "the materiality of human artefacts and habitation pulsates with the rhythms of natural history" (xx). In this paper I will discuss the influence of Sebald's work on my own writing practice. My work in progress, *Letters to the end of Love*, is an elegiac, epistolary novel that utilises the art of rhetoric in its philosophical investigations of love and suffering. It is, like Sebald's novels, the work of someone who was 'not there,' someone without the right to speak of the Holocaust from direct experience, but who has had a creative response to the traces of the Holocaust that still exist in the present.

Biographical Note:

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As a writer of a Holocaust novel, I sleep little and I dream less. I experience temporary nervous conditions, self-paralysis and a periodical, almost surgical, loss of happiness. My writer's arsenal of ego, faith and talent has not vaulted me over my boiling sea of doubt. In any Holocaust novel, the characters only exist through the writer's engagement with recollections of the survivors and with the legacy of the millions of victims of National Socialism. Australian historian Inga Clendinnen, in her excellent book *Reading the Holocaust* (1999), questions whether Holocaust fiction can help us understand the Holocaust at all:

Production line killing allows small space for drama, while the huge contextual fact of the death of the multitude must trivialise the fate of the fortunate few. The Jews huddled on Schindler's ark live, Styron's Sophie survives to relive her impossible choice—but can such stories help us grasp how it was like in that place, where everyone lived in the realistic expectation of death, and where nearly everyone died? (Clendinnen 1999: 165)

There is a question I return to again and again as I write: is all Holocaust fiction, no matter how well meaning, a travesty? I find myself hoarding a quote from an interview with Israeli author Dan Grossman, author of the acclaimed novel *See under: Love* (2002):

the real question that is connected to the Shoah is apparently the question that every one must put to himself or herself in his or her own language in the most intimate grammar. And that question is: What would I have done had I been there? As a victim, but also as one of the murderers. What would I have done to maintain my individuality in the face of this total obliteration of me as a human being? What process would I have had to undergo to be transformed into part of the engine of destruction? ... And perhaps because I was not there, I was required to write about it in this fashion, connecting facts and imagination and surrealism. I knew all along I was not writing a documentary book (even though there are a few facts in it). Not a historical book (even though it deals with historical documents and historical events). I wrote a book about the reflection of the Shoah in the soul of a man who was born after it. (qtd. in Baumgarten 2007: 272)

Grossmann is defining his novel by what it is not: not docu-fiction, not history, not a realist novel, but something else. He sees his engagement with the Holocaust as necessarily an act of imagination because he is writing a novel not to recreate the Holocaust but to understand the Holocaust in relation to his own time. I have taken this position in my own work, which begins with a Holocaust narrative that focuses on the experience of two gay men in the camps, and then shifts focus into several related contemporary narratives.

If there is a moral imperative to write Holocaust literature as a form of contemporary reflection, then it could be argued that the case for writing about gay men is an urgent one. To my knowledge, there are only three memoirs in existence which document the experience of gay men in the camps: *The Men with the Pink Triangle* (1980) by an anonymous survivor, *Liberation Was for Others: Memoirs of a Gay Survivor of the Nazi Holocaust* (1997) by Pierre Seel, and *An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay*

Jew in Nazi Berlin (1999) by Gad Beck and Frank Heibert. The one major work of art is a 1979 play called *Bent* by Martin Sherman, which was made into a feature film of the same name in 1992. The lack of historiography, the scarcity of witness testimony, the absence of a body of literary work dedicated to the gay Holocaust experience have all contributed to a sense that my writing is a work in absence, something sculpted out of smoke.¹

Of course, there is an overwhelming body of work, historical, biographical and literary, about the Jewish Genocide, and any work of fiction about the Holocaust, no matter the focus, has to begin there. In the course of my study into the Holocaust, my reading of both fiction and non-fiction, I return again and again to the work of German writer WG Sebald. In this paper I will discuss the influence of Sebald's work on my own writing practice. My work in progress, *Letters to the end of Love*, is an elegiac, epistolary novel that utilises the art of rhetoric in its philosophical investigations of love and suffering. It is, like Sebald's novels, the work of someone who was 'not there,' someone without the right to speak of the Holocaust from direct experience, but who has had a creative response to the traces of the Holocaust that still exist in the present.

WG Sebald's death in a car accident in 2001 deprived the literary world of one of its most unique writers. Sebald did not describe himself as a novelist—he preferred to be known as a writer of prose narrative. Sebald's works are a hybrid of many genres and styles: travel writing, memoir, photo essay, documentary, fiction, magic realism, post-modern pastiche, cultural historical fantasy (Santner 2006: xiv).² In Sebald's work, another kind of truth other than a factual one is being sought. What is being sought through language is a metaphysical truth; a truth that is gained through what Sebald refers to as 'the aesthetic illumination of the world'ⁱ (qtd. in McCulloh 2006: 398). In all of Sebald's full length works—*Rings of Saturn* (1998), *Vertigo* (1999), *Austerlitz* (2001), *The Emigrants* (2002)—the narrator is a simulacrum of the author, a well-read, well-travelled German scholar of a certain age who has spent his working life in England. In Sebald's two Holocaust novels, *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, this narrator is not only a philosophical wanderer, he is also the engaged, awake listener of personal stories of the Holocaust. He is the remorseful, horrified post-war German émigré. The narrator engages with the detritus of the recent past in a claustrophobic, paranoid, melancholy present through a series of serendipitous encounters with strangers, friends and relatives, all of whom have a story to tell, a diary to hand over, or a photograph to share with our poetic narrator. There is no perceivable difference in tone, style or intonation between Sebald's narrator and any other character: they all speak in the same formal tones, recalling their past with uncanny accuracy and at exactly the same time articulating, in the most ornate language possible, the impossibility of ever really talking about their unspeakable tragedies.

Just as Sebald's narrator is a troubled, disturbed witness to stories of both the victims and the survivors, so the reader of *The Emigrants* or *Austerlitz* becomes such a witness. This process happens in a curiously intimate way, through an identification with the ordinariness of the lives of the people, their day to day routines, the ordinary objects of their domestic existences—not through an explicit recounting of the terrible

realities of the camps, that extraordinary reality which no one who has come after it can truly grasp or understand. What Sebald refuses to shy away from is not the gruesome details of internment, but the continuing, ongoing effects (personal, spiritual, psychological, cultural) of the Holocaust. This is his whole terrible focus.

Sebald's narratives, with their endless diversions and digressions, their melancholy comedy, uncanny repetition, historical curiosity, gothic undertones and alarming coincidences make for an overwhelming and slightly giddy experience. In all of Sebald's works there is *decalage*, or discontinuity of time. In his essay 'Destruction and transcendence in WG Sebald,' Mark R McCulloh (2006: 401) argues that Sebald combines this atemporality with a certain loftiness of view. For McCulloh, Sebald's art of metaphysics depicts sublime moments of ascent and transcendence, which are coupled by the depiction of a kind of 'existential melancholia,' and is not a negative impulse, but in fact is an attempt to 'resist and overcome depression related to the human predicament, especially the prospect of extinction' (McCulloh 2006: 403). McCulloh cites critic Robert Pyrah's comment that he sees in Sebald a juxtaposition of Walter Benjamin's *Kulturpessimismus* (Benjamin's historical pessimism as it affects culture) and artistic method (qtd. in McCulloh 2006: 399). In his essay, "Not knowing what I should think": The language of postmemory in WG Sebald's *The Emigrants*, Murray Baumgarten suggests that Sebald's is a narrative structure that mimics the repetition and looping of trauma, where 'instead of discovery and resolution, there is insistent, repetitive questioning' (Baumgarten 2007: 272). And like many critics, he argues that the *palimpsest* is a useful metaphor for Sebald's aesthetics: 'that which has been erased still haunts the visible surface of the canvas and the narrator's consciousness' (Baumgarten 2007: 274).

However, Sebald's metaphysical melancholia is also seen by some as problematic. Ruth Franklin, in her essay 'Rings of Smoke,' has no doubt that Sebald was a writer of unique and singular talent, and that his Holocaust novels show a deep understanding of the plight of the European Jews. But she is concerned about the relationship between artistic memory and actual memory:

Art is the preserver of memory, but it is also the destroyer of memory: this is the final tug-of-war in Sebald's work and the most fundamental one. As he searches for patterns in the constellation of grief that his books record, he runs the risk that the patterns themselves, by virtue of their very beauty, will extinguish the grief they seek to contain. Sebald's peculiar alchemy of aestheticism and sorrow unwittingly underscores its own insubstantiality. (Franklin 2007: 126)

Franklin articulates for me the ethical dilemma I find myself in—even if my work is respectful, insightful, beautifully wrought, do I run the risk of negating the real historical experiences even when (as is the case of gay men in the Holocaust) the representations of those real experiences are almost silent, almost non-existent? These kind of unanswered questions, questions about representation, love, memory, suffering and art, have brought welcome and strange pressure to bear on my writing. In the last eighteen months I have written many drafts of my Holocaust narrative. The following excerpt of my work is from the letters written by John Carpenter, in

Bournemouth in 1947, to his lover David Pabst (who died in Flossenbergs concentration camp in 1940) and is taken from the opening pages of the novel:

If you didn't smoke, and I didn't look like a man who had a spectacular gift for telling the time, we never would have met. Or perhaps it was the uniform that attracted you, the white coat, the stethoscope. On June 21st 1929, you were smoking on the steps of St Jude's, a newspaper tucked under your arm like a dispatch from a war room. Your hat was pulled down over your face and you were flicking the cigarette ash across your body like it was incense. I was escorting the distressed husband of a patient down the steps, reassuring him that his wife would come through this difficult period. I was deliberately speaking to him in tones that would calm him, tones I'd practised and perfected. By the time I got him to the bottom of the steps the slight tremor in his left hand had stopped and he could look me in the eye. He thanked me, shook my hand, and told me he would be back tomorrow with the children. I said that would be wonderful, his wife would like that and he smiled, briefly, before walking away from me and into the busy street. I stood there for a moment, reviewing his wife's case in my mind and tapping my chest with my stethoscope, looking for a way into her condition that I couldn't see yet, but that I knew would come with time. I turned to go back up the steps and I noticed you again. You had taken your hat off, though the cigarette was still burning in your left hand. The newspaper threatened to fall out from under your arm and you had the most spectacular blue eyes. You were surprised by something. You noticed my watch and asked me for the time. I gave it to you.

Perhaps love at first sight is a ridiculous notion, encouraged in bestsellers and popular songs, perhaps it isn't. I can't say it was love with you, definitely not at first sight; perhaps curiosity is the better word. You were beautiful, but I was not, in my doctor's coat and shoes, about to kiss you on the steps of St Jude's. I had kissed men of course, long before I met you, I had slept with them on occasion, on many occasions, but I was not about to sleep with you. You looked like you weren't allowed to cross the road without permission. Tennis seemed an appropriate offer. As soon as you said yes I knew that you had never played tennis in your life, hence the need to borrow clothes from my wardrobe. You were quite good actually, for an absolute beginner. Violet was very taken with you, even though she knew quite well why I invited you and why you accepted. She liked to charm any young man she could, just for the practice. You told her about the cottage your family had in Sulz, how you would take her there and the two of you would go walking in the Vienna Woods. You explained to Violet that your father lived in Berlin, your mother in Vienna. It was an arrangement that suited them both. (Walker 2008/9: 1-2)

It is difficult for me to quantify the influence of Sebald's work on my novel, particularly as this process is still occurring. But he will continue to have a profound effect on my work for several reasons: He engages with the memories of the Holocaust without sensationalism or melodrama. This is achieved through a focus not on the camps themselves, but on the ordinary lives destroyed by them, and the inadequate response of the post-war world. His unapologetic use of almost archaic language has produced a profound literary engagement with historiography. His

writings illuminate a constellation of memory, trauma and grief that is not strictly true, not strictly the facts, but which re-imagines, in the most skilful way, the metaphysical truth of tragedy. He has reforged the novel as a tool to break open the world, in the way that Woolf, Joyce and Proust did before him.

In my work in progress, I have not attempted a Sebaldian panoramic view of the twentieth century; nor have I grappled, as Sebald does, with philosophical questions regarding the spectacular failure of modernity to reconcile technology with humanity. My writing, through the use of an epistolary structure, is focused on a philosophical exploration of the disintegrating subject, the grieving ‘I’ in a world blown apart but moving forward in time. The Holocaust narrative I have written tells the story of John and David through a deliberate focus on the ordinary aspects of their life together before the war, not on the extraordinary details of their internment, which were researched, imagined and written but which largely remain below the surface of the narrative. John tells their story as a written expression of love, grief, and intimacy which becomes a meditation on the worth of romantic love, a form of fictional memoir and a metaphysical letter to his, and David’s, suffering.

My choice of love letters as the narrative structure for the Holocaust story is similar in some ways to Sebald’s use of diaries, letters and journals—these texts are fictional historical artefacts which carry some trace of authenticity.ⁱⁱ While Sebald uses his contemporary narrator as a mediator for the stories these documents tell, I produce other love letters, other documents written by other lovers in the future (1967 and then 2009). I do not, as Sebald does, employ an outsider, an empathetic narrator to mediate the Holocaust story. Sebald’s compassionate, contemporary narrator can be seen as instructive, he is a lesson in how to engage with the terrible sufferings of the Holocaust, how to sit and listen to individual, ordinary stories and to hear them. In a similar way, my contemporary characters look back at John and David’s story whose difficulties and sufferings eclipse their own, they engage with one single, terrible story that exists within millions of terrible stories.

But this terrible story of mine is a fiction. Moreover, Sebald’s stories, while they are based on real people and real events, are imagined renderings of Holocaust stories and not biography. For Inga Clendinnen, it seems clear that the only kind of Holocaust literature that really matters is that of survivors such as Primo Levi and Charlotte Delbo. All other aesthetic renderings (films, novels, plays) – no matter how moving – are still only entertainment, even when (as in the work of Sebald) that entertainment has serious and ethical intent. Clendinnen argues that as a reader of the true stories of the Holocaust she stands in ‘a moral relationship with these people, because they are my fellow humans, whose blood is real and whose deaths are final and cannot be cancelled by turning back a page.’ (Clendinnen 1999: 170).

American literary scholar Daniel Schwarz, in his book, *Imagining the Holocaust* (1999), takes a different view. He suggests that when Theodor Adorno said, ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,’ poetry was meant to be understood as standing in for ‘imaginative literature’ (Schwarz 1999: 22). Schwarz takes the position that it would be barbaric *not* to write Holocaust literature ‘because if we do not write imaginative literature, how can there be a post-Holocaust era?’ (Schwarz 1999: 22).

For myself, my own research leads me to conclude that Holocaust fiction can offer us a philosophical and emotional anteroom: a space where we can address, through imagination, the *idea* of the Holocaust. Then, perhaps, what becomes a little easier for us to contemplate is the *reality* of the Holocaust—as it has been witnessed, recorded and documented.

Endnotes

[1] In the Nazi concentration camp system, the labour camps (such as Flossenbergs and Sachsenhausen) were populated by Jewish prisoners, gypsies, homosexual men, religious minorities, political prisoners and foreign resisters to the Nazi occupations. The Nazis used the death camps (such as Auschwitz) to murder millions of European Jews, but other types of prisoners were also interned there. Study of the persecution of groups other than the Jews under National Socialism is on the margins of Holocaust scholarship. The historical research into the experience of gay men in the camps has been limited, and only exists at all because of the work of three men: Richard Plant (a refugee from Nazi Germany), Dr. Klaus Muller (a Holocaust scholar) and Rüdiger Lautmann (a German sociologist).

[2] Sebald's literature is influenced by contemporary European writers such as Peter Handke (McCulloh 2006: 397), Peter Weiss, and Thomas Bernhard (Silverblatt 2007: 82), as well as by the nineteenth century writers Adalbert Stifter and Gottfried Keller (Silverblatt 2007: 77).

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