

The Hidden Treasures of the Review Section of JES

Anthony Cross & Uwe Schütte

The *Journal of European Studies* began life in 1971, some seven years after the establishment of the School of European Studies (EUR) at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, and unlike the School which engendered it and was disbanded two decades ago, it has survived to claim its place as a leading journal of the humanities. It was designed to propagate the concept of the interrelationship of European cultures, as embodied in its subtitle: 'Literature and Ideas from the Renaissance to the Present', and not to chart the vicissitudes of the European Market and Union, as many publishing houses seemed to have understood and continue to understand its coverage, to judge by the number of books in that area submitted to the Reviews Editor.

Reviews have been a staple of the journal from the beginning and omitted only on rare occasions for reasons of space. The quesstimate is of some 3000 reviews appearing over forty-five years in the 180 issues of the journal. Although *JES* was never seen as a house journal, it was understandable that in the early years we turned frequently to own colleagues *in situ* to review for us. It is, however, a matter of note that no less than five members of UEA's School of European Studies in the 1960s continue to write reviews for *JES* on a fairly regular basis. The reviewers for *JES* nevertheless represent a healthy mix of old and experienced and young and emerging scholars. As the long-serving, long-suffering Reviews Editor of *JES* (since its inception) I am taking this unexpected opportunity to thank all the reviewers who over the years have yielded to my requests and supplied the copy for the Review Section, especially at a time when reviewing no longer receives official academic recognition.

The stimulus to this little exercise in self-praise was receiving from Uwe Schütte the essay that follows. It is devoted in large part to the reviews that the late Max Sebald

contributed to the journal after he joined the EUR faculty in 1970. The fame that Sebald achieved before his untimely death in 2001 pales before the posthumous cult of the man and his writings and the Sebald industry that has grown apace in the last decade or so. To some extent this has been reflected on the pages of *JES*, where many works about Sebald have been reviewed, most often by his former colleague and close friend Richard Sheppard, who also edited a special double number of the journal in December 2011, marking ten years since Sebald's death. It is Sheppard who is credited by Schütte with identifying in 2010 the reviews that Sebald wrote for *JES*, representing in his estimation a 'new' and not insignificant addition to the Sebald canon. John Flower in his 'Editor's Preface' to the special Sebald issue also drew attention to the '17 polemical reviews of books dealing with aesthetics, photography, literature and politics, Austrian, East German and West German literature', believing that 'the lessons that Max learnt from writing such reviews fed not only into his other critical work but also into his literary oeuvre'. It should also be pointed out that Schütte himself has already written extensively in German about the reviews in an article entitled 'Ein Portrait des Germanisten als junger Mann. Zu W.G. Sebalds dissidenter Haltung gegenüber der Literaturwissenschaft in seinen akademischen Rezensionen' (*Sprachkunst*, 39:2 (2008), pp. 309-32) and in a chapter in his recent book *Interventionen. Literaturkritik als Widerspruch bei W.G. Sebald* (Munich: Edition Text & Kritik, 2015).

It is not irrelevant to note that Sebald wrote for *JES* at a time when the initial editorial decision to include review 'notices' rather than full-length reviews was still being observed – these notices, about 300 words in length, continued until the end of 1975. With the change of publisher from the Seminar Press to Alpha Academic, longer reviews were now published and in 1977 the original rubric of 'Review Notices' was changed to 'Reviews' that now bore the reviewers' names in full rather than merely initials. It was perhaps the length dictated that only increased the pithiness and epigrammatic point of Sebald's contributions, which finished in September 1975.

Anthony Cross

Uwe Schütte: Sebald vs. Academia

Make no mistake: W.G. Sebald's first critical publication opens with a declaration of war against *Germanistik*, the academic discipline he joined with his 1969 book on the Wilhelmine playwright Carl Sternheim. 'The aim of the present study is the revision of the image of Sternheim as propounded by German studies', the twenty-five year-old scholar boldly proclaimed, 'and it goes without saying that this revision will predominantly take the form of destruction.' (Sebald: *Carl Sternheim: Kritiker und Opfer der Wilhelminischen Ära* (Stuttgart 1969), p. 7.)

This was no shallow threat either. Sebald's academic debut amounted to an unqualified critique of Sternheim, a widely appreciated critical satirist whose plays had enjoyed a remarkable renaissance on the stages of post-war Germany. Taking a consistently negative—and frequently unfair—approach, Sebald pulled no punches in giving vent to his dislike of Sternheim. Not merely did he try to dismiss Sternheim as mentally deranged, he went as far as to accuse the German-Jewish playwright as a precursor to fascism.

For Sebald poor Sternheim became a whipping boy on two fronts. Firstly in that he represented the type of opportunistic writer Sebald always loathed: in order to achieve recognition in the militaristic and anti-Semitic society of the German Empire, Sternheim, a convert to Protestantism, had been willing to adopt the conservative values and chauvinistic attitudes that prevailed in the run-up to the Great War. To expose Sternheim as a case of assimilation gone tragically wrong could be seen as contentious but in another respect there can be little doubt that, in the sixties, Sebald's reflections on the role of Jewish authors in Wilhelmine Germany are groundbreaking. (And over two decades later, he was to return to the painful topic of Jewish assimilation and emigration in his own narrative works.)

Secondly, and more importantly, the actual target of Sebald's attack was *Germanistik* as a politically compromised academic discipline. Many of those who taught Sebald during his student years at Freiburg University from 1963 to 1965 had been tainted by their involvement with the Nazis. 'All my teachers had gotten jobs during the Brownshirt years', Sebald claims, 'and were therefore compromised, either because they had actually supported the regime or had been fellow travellers or otherwise been silent.' (James Atlas: W.G. Sebald. A Profile, in: *Paris Review* 41 (1999), p. 290.)

Wilhelm Emrich, the editor of Sternheim's complete works, was a particularly notorious case in point. He started out his opportunistic career as member of a Communist student organisation only to go on to join the Nazi party and work for Joseph Goebbels at the Ministry of Propaganda. Promptly switching allegiances after the War, Emrich developed into a fervent democrat who never discussed his past. In fact, so as to bury proof of his previous political loyalties, anti-Semitic articles he had published during the War were torn out of journals in university libraries. Fittingly Emrich, at the time one of the most respected scholars in German Studies, capped his career with a distinguished chair at the Free University of Berlin.

Sebald's decision to quit Germany in 1965, first for a brief, one-year-stint at the francophone Swiss University of Fribourg and then in 1966 for Manchester, was undoubtedly motivated by his desire to escape such a noxious milieu and find for himself a more congenial academic environment. For Sebald, Manchester provided just that: an absence of a strict university hierarchy, an enormous degree of academic freedom and a welcome spirit of collegiality amongst staff. Over time Sebald began to feel at home in England despite an initial cultural shock experienced by his move from a small medieval Swiss town to the grimy birthplace of industrialisation.

Removed from the student protest then raging in the streets and lecture halls of Germany, he was able to develop a form of protest quite unique to himself: the brief study on Sternheim, which had swelled into his MA dissertation, was published in 1969 and caused outrage amongst Sternheim scholars. Quite rightly so, Sebald was slated for his blatant disregard of academic standards coupled with an overtly arrogant tone. Outside academia, however, many reviewers applauded Sebald's fresh and audacious approach to an established author. The belligerent tone had paid off: Swiss

Radio invited Sebald to participate in a programme; a review, albeit a critical one, appeared in a leading German national paper. A little later a TV interview on Sternheim followed. All in all, a sizeable PR stunt for an academic rookie.

While his book was still causing a stir in Germany, Sebald managed to secure a lectureship at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. Soon he embarked on a second project, his PhD thesis on Alfred Döblin. Actually he had envisaged himself writing this in Cambridge but failed to obtain a scholarship. (The reference Sebald had requested from Theodor Adorno in support of his application never materialised; if it had, Sebald might just have ended up a Cambridge don, who knows?)

In any case, Sebald's study, 'Der Mythos der 'Zerstörung im Werk Döblins' ('The Myth of Destruction in the Works of Döblin'), when published in its German version in 1980, proved just as controversial as its predecessor: essentially a character assassination, Sebald's argument rubbished Döblin's literary and essayistic works, accusing the Jewish writer – who had been forced into exile to save his life – of intellectually paving the way for the Nazi dictatorship. In his novels, Sebald maintained, Döblin had glorified violence through his repeated graphic portrayal of cruelty, thereby fostering a 'myth of destruction', which the Nazis subsequently put into practice. (Arguably from Döblin Sebald learned a fundamental lesson for his own literary aesthetics: while the horrors committed by the Nazis constitute an ever-present backdrop to the life stories traced in his books, he never references the Holocaust other than in a tangential, oblique way.)

In parallel to his study on Döblin, Sebald continued his campaign against *Germanistik* via a number of reviews for the *Journal of European Studies*, recently founded at UEA. Passing judgement—all of it negative—on established German scholars, he persisted with his own private student rebellion. Keeping up his confrontational pose, these reviews, too, represented a 'direct attack on literary critics', were penned in an 'arrogant, aggressive tone', which was peppered with 'many doubtful generalizations' and distinguished by a 'doctrinaire, jargonistic style', as Donald G. Daviau succinctly put it in his review of the Sternheim book (*Germanic Review* 47 (1972), p. 234–36).

In 2010 Richard Sheppard, a former colleague at UEA, identified these academic reviews. The existence of these twenty or so brief texts had remained a well-guarded secret. Given the strong interest, occasionally bordering on zeal, which Sebald's writing has attracted within the Anglophone community, this seems somewhat curious. Given also that a great many remarkable critical texts still await their turn to be translated into English, it strikes me as odd that these reviews have largely been ignored; after all, they constitute the greater portion of texts Sebald originally published in English.

True, they represent minor works. Even so, the palpable aggressiveness of tone in these writings could be seen to evince a little-known side to Sebald's personality. Then again, doesn't the ostensible arrogance actually indicate a certain lack of self-confidence on the part of a junior academic? Be that as it may, the reviews definitely make for entertaining reading. Written with panache and consistently aiming for provocation, they are reminiscent of the way Thomas Bernhard sought to demolish received symbols of cultural greatness. Scorn is *de rigueur*. Commenting on the elaborate structure of an introduction to literary criticism, Sebald mocks that 'only a bureaucratic mind will derive any pleasure from reading it' (JES 1:3 (1971), p. 273.); another monograph is dismissed as 'in many respects a lit. crit. pot-pourri rather than an organic whole'. (JES 1:3 (1971), p. 274.)

Over and over again, Sebald's general mistrust and disapproval of *Germanistik* comes to the fore. Reviewing a history of Yiddish literature he notes: 'From its early beginnings *Germanistik* as a discipline was fatefully wed to the growth of the German ideology and it is therefore quite consistent that Yiddish literature, from the early middle-ages to the nineteenth century should fail to figure in the clerks' account of [German literary history]. And it strikes one as the supreme quirk in all this that the efforts of the one established academic in present-day Germany who is actively engaged in researching Yiddish texts are somewhat marred by his own past record of anti-Semitic activities.' (JES 4:3 (1974), p. 304.) A sorry pattern, indeed, as Emrich's case demonstrates.

It goes without saying that once again Sebald's reviewing style —throughout his career as a reviewer— was pretty casual and did not hesitate to include personal comments. In his 1990 review on a book exploring the reflection of the Nazi past in

Austrian literature, he digresses into an attack on Austrian *Germanistik*: ‘Literary historians [from Austria] such as Nadler, Kindermann, Langer and Adalbert Schmidt remained influential into the early 1960s and did their best to obfuscate the moral and aesthetic issues which should have been brought onto the agenda in those years. Indeed I remember vividly a lecture delivered by Adalbert Schmidt in this country in the early 1970s which made my hair stand on end.’ (MLR 85:3 (1990), p. 531.)

This is not to say that Sebald is averse to bestowing praise. However, he reserves it for academic outsiders and those going against the grain of *Germanistik*. Take the example of Hans-Albert Walter, who ‘modestly describes himself as an autodidact’. His two-volume tome *Deutsche Exilliteratur 1933-1950*, on authors forced into emigration by the Nazis, had closed a gap previously left wide open by university academics. Sebald, himself concerned with the problematic state of exile (in *The Emigrants*), accordingly extolled the study as ‘the one indispensable work on the subject’, a ‘comprehensive and exemplary work – literary history at its best.’ (JES 3:3 (1973), p. 289.)

The academic reviews yield lots of discoveries. With hindsight, there are many clues of narrative techniques employed in Sebald’s later writing. Reviewing illustrated books such as Franz Hubmann’s collection of photographs from Imperial Germany, he observes on an 1860 portrait of the Russian ambassador and his family that ‘the casual *raffinement* of this scene reminds one of the insufficiency of literary and, to be sure, historical descriptions’. The review closes with the epigrammatic statement, ‘Old photographs have much to commend them.’ (JES 3:3 (1973) p. 286.) It was this very potential of images that Sebald would tap into himself—it became one of the hallmarks of his own literary texts.

Germanistik was an institution that readily participated in the great silence enveloping the crimes committed during the Nazi reign and which took far too long to overcome this moral deficit. Sebald’s reviews reveal a very angry young man indeed – one who, from British soil, fought a solitary guerrilla campaign against the institution. Eventually he would switch his battleground and channel his energies into writing literature of such distinction that it propelled him to an altogether different position: as one of the most popular objects of study by the very discipline on which he had poured so much scorn during his lifetime. A poignant irony indeed.