

The past as the future. Sebald's anamnesis

Prace
Kulturoznawcze XV
Wrocław 2013

1.

It would not be putting forward too conflicting a thesis to say that our present is leaning strongly towards the past¹. The main vector of the present, the indicator of our thinking and feeling goes decidedly forward, more towards what is to come than what has already happened. It is enough to listen carefully to language, which – so often – betrays our not always consciously articulated desires and expectations. On various levels of the official speak, the “future” occupies a cosy place. Though we have to add that the face of the future is that of Janus. On the one hand, political incentives (“let’s choose the future”), advertising imperatives (“create the future”) and promises of science (*Science and Future*)² highlight, above all, the bright aspect of the future, with the thinking behind this being a conviction that the future will obviously bring only fulfilment and good. On the other hand, every now and again pop culture tries to scare us, as is its wont, with visions of an upcoming apocalypse (the number of scenarios is almost unlimited) or collapse of civilisation brought on often by the same scientists who – in the optimistic versions of the futurological fantasising – served as midwives of progress.

Out of these two faces of the future, the “positive” vision still prevails, however. Eschatological images appear and disappear seasonally; besides, sooner or later they are successfully tamed by the culture of spectacle and lose their real

¹ The article is an expanded version of a paper delivered during a conference entitled *The future in culture*, Institute of Culture Studies, University of Wrocław (12-14 November 2012).

² It is no coincidence that the two nouns were combined in the title of a well-known journal.

or alleged terror. “Our merry apocalypse” (in Kołakowski’s words)³ is something we can negotiate with and postpone the vision of the final extinction to a distant future (so distant that it is beyond our imagination). Today’s fixation on the future has a lot in common with a phenomenon known as *l’accélération d’histoire*, acceleration of history⁴. In this, it is difficult to say what is the effect and what is the cause. Does the historical acceleration (which can be seen in various spheres of daily life) lead to a wild run towards the future, or is it only a spectacular manifestation of this process? In any case, the idolatry of acceleration observed on various levels of experience brings us closer to some form of the future much faster than past generations. The future is no longer something distant and impossible; it is – it would seem to us – within our reach, waiting just round the corner...

Despite some dark clouds of the horizon, the future generally appears as a realistic promise. Even if the idea of unlimited progress has long been exposed as a casual ideological construct, and the spirit of utopia rarely visits contemporary political projects, the future continues to appear as a land of (relatively) fulfilled hopes. True, no one believes anymore in the promises of an earthly paradise, but in collective terms the future (nevertheless) seems optimistic. This is largely thanks to the technological stem of our world today, the measurable and spectacular successes of which have effectively neutralised (if not removed completely) religious concepts with their inherent sceptical view of human nature (cf. the Christian idea of original sin) and, consequently, far-reaching criticism of the possibility of reconciling in the earthly dimension various conflicting desires, objectives and values.

Against this quickly and roughly sketched picture, the phenomenon known as “W.G. Sebald” must look – and does look – somewhat peculiar and rather exotic. I am talking about a phenomenon, because “Sebald” is not only a name of an author, who died early, of widely commented books, which have won many prizes. More broadly: it is a name of an attitude – a specific thinking about culture and history as well as specific thinking about the duties of literature. The world described by Sebald concerns largely past events; his prose is turned entirely towards the past. Or to put it differently: in its main thread, in its fundamental, founding gesture, it radically turns its back on the future. In the books he has left (books so difficult to classify in terms of their genre)⁵ the main theme is the past understood, problema-

³ L. Kołakowski, *Nasza wesola apokalipsa. Kazanie na koniec wieku*, [w:] idem, *Moje słuszne poglądy na wszystko*, Kraków 1999.

⁴ Thérèse Delpech (*L’ensauvagement: essai sur le retour de la barbarie au XXIe siècle*, Polish translation by W. Dłuski, Warsaw 2008) in her outstanding book: “The acceleration of history that we now sense so vividly began a little more than two centuries ago. Since then, humanity seems to have been launched on a wild epic journey whose trajectory is ever more obscure” (English translation by George Holloch, Washington 2007).

⁵ I take into account only his prose works, leaving aside his volume of poetry *Nach de Natur*; collection of essays *Campo Santo* and commentary on Jan Peter Tripp’s visual work *Unrecounted*.

tised and localised in one way or another. Sebald's prose pentalogy penetrates various enclaves of the world of the past, describes them in detail, recalls them, tells the readers to think about them seriously.

What are Sebald's narratives about? Let me try to summarise their main threads and their recognisable tone, using someone else's words. Here are excerpts from publisher's notes written by another eminent writer – Roberto Calasso. Calasso is a rare example of an insightful and empathic reader and one of the few who can extract and compress the main subjects of a work into a brief account. His several-sentence description of Sebald's prose is precise, credible and very symptomatic. The order of presentation is chronological.

The four stories of *Vertigo* are dominated by a journey motif, with the protagonist of these journeys being not only the narrator and his sudden departures – for Vienna, Verona, Venice, Lake Garda or places of his childhood in the Bavarian Alps – but also other writers: Stendhal, Casanova and Kafka as well as their visits to Italy. Railway stations and hotel rooms, houses and trees moving outside train and bus windows, travel companions that sometimes are worryingly like historical figures brought back to life. [...] Travels become spiritual journeys in search of the sources of melancholy and memories. Written down, they can be revived. Eminent figures from the past and the nameless crowd today, dreams in the bright light of the day and night-time apparitions, the living and the dead discovered in the endless lake of memory – all are saved, though eventually they'll be lost. (*Vertigo*)

The author personally met the four protagonists from the collection *The Emigrants*: in his youth Sebald rented a room [...] from Henry Selwyn; Paul Bereyter [...] taught the future writer in primary school; Ambros Adelwarth [...] was Sebald's great-uncle; with the painter Max Ferber Sebald talked long into the night in Manchester. These four figures shared the fate of the Jewish nation: they were alienated and travelled from place to place; in order to reconstruct their stories, Sebald looks for their friends and outside witnesses to their lives. (*The Emigrants*)

It is an "English pilgrimage", as the subtitle explains. [...] Sebald, a melancholic, Saturn-marked traveller, talks in ten chapters [...] about his meetings with peculiar interlocutors or friends, but also with places showing the "natural history of destruction", which in fact sets a path for humanity and creates the course of daily events. [...] A pilgrimage but also wandering around in a labyrinth, in accordance with the best tradition of Sebald's oeuvre, in a labyrinth which does not, however, lack a thread that guides the writers and the reader. Its is probably a silk thread, because in the geological seams of the novel one of the layers is made up of a story of silkworm breeding started by Thomas Browne. (*The Rings of Saturn*)

In Germany, this topic was for many years – moreover: it still is – a neglected topic *par excellence*: no one returned to the unprecedented destruction caused during WWII by over one million tons of bombs that had fallen on one hundred and thirty one German cities, killing six hundred thousand civilians and leaving seven million beings without a roof over their heads. [...] When in 1997 Sebald raised this matter in a series of moving lectures [...], he knew very well that he was touching an unhealed wound. However, no one else would have been able to tackle the issue. (*Luftkrieg und Literatur*)

Jacques Austerlitz is a professor, who lectures in the history of architecture and studies public buildings (barracks, railway stations, prisons, courts) [...]. He lives in London, in a flat without furniture, like a prison cell; he rarely is guided by feelings and has few friends. His eccentric lifestyle and vast interests hide emptiness. Austerlitz simply does not know who he is, but for

years this knowledge has not bothered him. However, one day he begins to look for his own traces, as if he were embarking on a new scientific trip in search of an unknown building. (*Austerlitz*)⁶

In a succinct but very accurate manner Calasso not only highlights the most important threads and topics of Sebald's books, but also provides an excellent introduction to their mood and subtly delineates the author's main premises. What is significant are the lexical choices in these notes. Even people not well-versed in Sebald's oeuvre, when reading the Italian writer's microessays (for his notes are more than just banal summaries and occasional blurbs), will easily spot the main tones of his elegiac oeuvre. The semantic field marked by Calasso's comments is quite uniform: history, memory, past, geological layers, destruction, the living and the dead, traces, wounds, amnesia, emptiness, search, survival, remembering, melancholy... Even if they do not make up a complete and exhaustive list of entries in the Sebaldian glossary, they certainly provide us with a handy map for a competent and serious exploration of the territory of his prose. As can easily be seen, most of the entries in this glossary are on the negative side of the scale of values. And this is of some importance.

2.

This article is not meant to be a thorough presentation of Sebald's oeuvre or a literary analysis of his prose. Instead, I would like to think about how the past is presented in his works and what functions are performed by the author's initial, perhaps even ostentatious, gesture of turning towards the past reality. All the more so given the fact that, if we are to believe the famous phrase from L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (subsequently repeated in the title of Lowenthal's famous book⁷): "the past is a foreign country". Thus, naturally, there is no easy and unproblematic access to it. What does this German version of "à la recherche du temps perdu" look like then? What does Sebald look for in the past? Why is his sight focused on history, both distant and very recent? Why does he tell us these complex, collage-like and very involving stories of history? What is the point of this strange literary archaeology? Finally, the most important question from our perspective: are these anachronistic journeys into the past linked somehow to the future, and if so, what is the principle of this linkage?

In my brief recapitulation, presented below, of the temporal threads in Sebald's prose I abandon the entire complex issue of the poetics of his books; the literary and iconographic dimension of his writing is left aside here (this is a subject for a separate article). I am interested only in the images of the past, evoked in his

⁶ All notes written by Roberto Calasso, *Zeszyty Literackie* 2012, no. 118, pp. 120–123.

⁷ D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge 1999.

prose, in their meaning and function in the text (and in the author's thinking). And, finally, in the not so obvious link between the images of the past and the future.

An easily discernible feature of the narrators and protagonists of Sebald's prose (*Luftkrieg und Literatur* is a separate script) is their mobility. They are on the move almost all the time; their being is in essence nomadic. The narrator of *Vertigo* travels across a large chunk of Central and Southern Europe in some thought-provoking daze and distraction. The protagonist and narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* (resembling the author himself so much) sets out on a strange journey, a secular pilgrimage across east England. The eponymous hero of *Austerlitz* roams railway stations, ruined fortresses, phantom cities in Europe in search of traces of his own mother and, ultimately, in search of his own identity. The Jewish protagonists of *The Emigrants* are constantly on the move, resembling wandering Jews – as if *exodus*, the myth of exit has permanently marked their biographies.

Superficially, it might seem that the leading protagonist of Sebald's prose is space. There is evidence to substantiate this thesis. Indeed, geography in his works is never indifferent. Semiotically, these spaces are very strongly marked. Almost any place, any town, any village mentioned in the text turns out to be a sign of some sort, a message; it is not just a neutral point in cartography. In Descen-zano del Garda the narrator talks about doctor Kafka's visit to the town; in Verona – about Pisanello's pictures and unexplained cases of mysterious murders; at the Greenwich observatory he reflects on time; near the town of Lowestoft, East of England, he pontificates unexpectedly about herring fishing in the region; in Deauville, Normandy, he talks about the once luxurious Roches Noires hotel, now a ruin; Dresden from the Zurich lectures provides a setting for carpet bombings by the Allies, a city full of fire, smoke and blood...

Neutral geography does not exist in Sebald's works. Nearly all places mentioned in the books are semantically hot. All are associated with some – more or less – important events, of which the narrator readily reminds us. Sometimes these places, seemingly unconnected, turn out to be pieces of a puzzle – its outline emerges as we read. However, what strikes the readers of Sebald's prose is, first of all, the hypertrophy of historical events he evokes. A kind of over-appreciation of facts from the past. Indeed, it is time – not space – that is both the author's and his protagonists' obsession. Places in Sebald's works are like palimpsests. They are often complex, "geologically" layered. Sebald's narrator travels through space in the present (as our contemporary), but constantly encounters "leakages" in time during his peregrinations. These are points in which the narrator "goes out of time", these are cracks through which we can look into the well of the past. It looks as if some places existing in the "now" were exceptionally convenient points for looking into the past "then". As if their presence was covered with a thin layer of varnish, and all we need to do is to scratch it to see "through the looking-glass". The status of these points in space is ontologically wobbly. Seemingly precisely mapped, well set in the present, they often turn out to be – when we take a closer

look – just a surface hiding dark facts from the past. Like the spectral Terezin⁸, the Belgian fortress Breendonk or Gare d'Austerlitz in Paris.

In any case, time itself, the past, getting to know the past – these threads appear in Sebald's books rather frequently. Significantly, they are thematised in discursive fragments, which are more like essays than traditional prose. *Austerlitz* in particular contains this type of reflections. What is time, asks the eponymous hero placed in a unique vantage point:

Time, said Austerlitz in the observation room in Greenwich, was by far the most artificial of all our inventions, and in being bound to the planet turning on its own axis was no less arbitrary than would be, say, a calculation based on the growth of trees or the duration required for a piece of limestone to disintegrate, quite apart from the fact that the solar day which we take as our guideline does not provide any precise measurement, so that in order to reckon time we have to devise an imaginary, average sun which has an invariable speed of movement and does not incline towards the equator in its orbit. If Newton thought [...] that time was a river like the Thames, then where is its source and into what sea does it finally flow?⁹

It is not only the abstract concept of time that is a source of trouble for Sebald's narrators/protagonists. What about the past? What access to it do we have? What about the understanding of historical events, the possibility of coming closer to them years later? At Waterloo, watching the panorama of the famous battle, the narrator reflects on a possibility of touching past time:

This then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was. The desolate field extends all around where once fifty thousand soldiers and ten thousand horses met their end within a few hours. The night after the battle, the air must have been filled with death rattles and groans. Now there is nothing but the silent brown soil. Whatever became of the corpses and mortal remains? Are they buried under the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that our ultimate vantage point? Does one really have the much-vaunted historical overview from such a position?¹⁰

"Mountain of death" is, we should note, an important topos in Sebald's prose. There is biting irony as well in the rhetorical questions ending the fragment. We have no direct access to the past. We know it only through a system of various mediations. We see it as a static picture devoid of real pain and suffering, just like the slaughter at Waterloo is depicted by a modern panorama. Perhaps Hegel's owl does indeed spread its wings only with the falling of the dusk, perhaps distance is indeed a prerequisite for understanding, but the distortion of perspective characteristic of historical cognition prevents us from getting into the heart of darkness, the heart of the past. We need to use other languages in the narrative of the past. In such a situation literature's chances will increase rapidly. According to Hayden

⁸ I have written earlier about Austerlitz's specific experience of the space of contemporary Terezin in D. Czaja, *Lekcje ciemności*, Wołowiec 2009, pp. 74-79.

⁹ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, transl. A. Bell, Random House 2007, p. 100.

¹⁰ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, transl. M. Hulse, Vintage 2002, p. 125.

White, wherever we deal with topics that are difficult to capture at source (love, suffering), what is not only possible but even necessary is an imaginative hypothesisation. It is thus not surprising that *Austerlitz* – understood not as “fiction” but as a model example of “historical prose” – is for him one of the most credible “testimonies” to the spiritual climate in Europe after the Shoah¹¹.

What we may find interesting from this point of view are Austerlitz's remarks defying the artificial, fake time determined by clocks. Clock time seems to him false, although this conviction may have been, as he suspects, only an expression of rebellion against the power of time. Austerlitz distances himself from the present, from the terror of current events. In a passionate monologue he reveals his hope:

time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely, I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously, in which case none of what history tells us would be true, past events have not yet occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment when we think of them, although that, of course, opens up the bleak prospect of ever-lasting misery and never-ending anguish¹².

This dialectically somewhat tortuous fragment is extremely important when it comes to the reconstruction of Sebald's thinking about the past. It speaks directly about problems with historical representation, but also about a peculiar vision of time in which – following a bit the three presents from Augustine's *Confessions* – we are dealing with co-existence of two, this time, temporal dimensions. In this approach time does not disappear, does not pass, does not become a thing of the past, as the clocks would have it. The past can be recalled and the function of this recall is painfully dialectic. Memory saves and restores to existence, but in this recall those who suffered will suffer forever, like Ixion bound to a burning wheel spinning for all eternity.

What already happened in the past is almost exclusively dark for Sebald. For him, the past is nearly always a story of catastrophes, a story of collapses, disasters, falls, and the world presented resembles a landscape after a battle. Reality presents itself in a state of permanent ruin, dying, annihilation. As a constant “natural history of destruction” happening before our very eyes¹³. The expression itself, slightly oxymoronic, tells us clearly that “natural” destruction is part of history, that forms emerging in it crumble, disappear and die exactly like natural forms. Great fortresses (which no one needs today) are crumbling, as are bunkers that were useful once. But also everything to which we can attribute life, the

¹¹ H. White, *Foreword*, transl. E. Domańska, [in:] *idem, Proza historyczna*, Kraków 2009, pp. 16-17.

¹² W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz...*, p. 144.

¹³ It is no coincidence that the English translation of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* — a series of Sebald's lectures devoted to German literature describing the Allies' bombing of German towns — is entitled *On Natural History of Destruction*.

smallest organisms even – what Eric Santner calls *creaturely life*¹⁴ – is streaked with death and decomposition. For Sebald, the entire organic world – humans, butterflies, moths, herrings – is heading for death and from this ultimate point of view there is not much difference between them. Sebald's prose constitutes an introduction to a future "theory of catastrophes", it reveals and painfully reminds us that History is a series of repeated falls, being, perhaps, a logical consequence and continuation of the first fall described in *Genesis*.

With veristic virtuosity Sebald draws a picture of the world after a catastrophe; he reveals the European space filled with phantoms. The apocalypse has already happened. We are living in a world of fulfilled eschatology. The darkest point in the history of catastrophes told by Sebald may have been the Shoah, the extermination of the world of European Jews. We can still feel its dark radiation, like a sinister version of cosmic background radiation after the first bang. This is the dark point from which modern sensibility and memory cannot break away. Hence the strong, moving undertone of melancholy in this prose. The logic of melancholy is founded on the traumatic experience of loss. The history of this vision is a history of painful separations and absences. It is probably no coincidence that Sebald's protagonists suffer from attacks of melancholy, nostalgia, vertigo bordering on madness. This lack, this irreparable loss is the main source of Sebald's writing gesture, a gesture with such a strong undertone of melancholy.

Thorough critics of Sebald's work quickly noted the clear affinity between some threads of his thinking and Walter Benjamin's writings. For example, *The Rings of Saturn*, the title of Sebald's third novel, is a clear allusion to one of the early sketches from Benjamin's *Arcades Project*¹⁵. But these affiliations are much deeper and more serious. If we were to look at history proclaimed by Sebald as an arena of never-ending catastrophes, we would not fail to note that one of the possible sources of such thinking could be the famous fragment about a painting by Paul Klee from Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*. Even if we do not treat this allegorical figure as a specific and genetically perceptible starting point for Sebald's thinking about the past, then certainly this thinking can be perfectly explained in it and through it:

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresist-

¹⁴ E. Santner, *On Creaturely Life. Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, Chicago 2006, s. XIII.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 63. Cf. *The Ring of Saturn or Some Remarks on Iron Construction*, [in:] W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, transl. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Harvard University Press 1999, pp. 885-890.

ible into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress is this storm¹⁶.

All elements present in this fragment are important to the understanding of Sebald's literary strategy. The past as a permanent catastrophe and ruin-strewn landscape¹⁷ have already been mentioned. As has the author's turning its back on the past. But there is another important element in this still disconcerting fragment by Benjamin. It is about the desires of the angel of history. He would like to pause, "to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed". But this is also about the most profound, it seems, motives behind Sebald's writing. True, in his works time is an entirely destructive force. Yet salvation (partial salvation) also comes in time. In this it is easy to see that this salvation has no consolation, even in its residual form. It is fully and completely in the element of telling, naming, evoking. Sebald's fundamental writing gesture stems on the one hand from the understanding of the past as a function of disintegration, but on the other from an intense conviction of

how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on¹⁸.

Despite this doubly traumatic consciousness (and perhaps because of it), Sebald writes down what has passed. He exhumes the past in its various forms. We cannot prevent entropy, we will not remove death from our experience, but we can try to talk about all this, we can try to name the successive episodes of disintegration, death, exhaustion. Amazingly, in an era of disbelief in literature, in its cognitive power, the word (or perhaps more specifically: a thought-out literary form) in Sebald's oeuvre serves revelatory and saving functions. His works may not ingenuously reconcile us to the world, but they make us capable of going deeper into the flesh of reality. However, an alchemical trick enables the literary world presented to maintain a strong – though not direct – reference to the non-literary world. And probably the most amazing element: this Saturn-marked world, the world of protagonists gradually becoming melancholic and mad, the kaleidoscopic, discontinuous, collage-like world of constant disappearing, dying, disintegration and diminishing is without any undertone of nihilism. Although sense has seeped out of the world after the catastrophe and all "hard" attempts

¹⁶ W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, Classic Books America 2009, p. 11.

¹⁷ The figure of ruins and its significance to the understanding of important issues in *Austerlitz* (history understood as a scene of catastrophes and history understood as a useless mass of information, unable to tell us "what really happened") are analysed in an interesting manner by Karolina Kolenda, *Ruination of things past. On W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz*, [in:] *Confronting the Burden of History. Literary Representations of the Past*, ed. I. Curyłło-Klag, B. Kucała, Kraków 2012.

¹⁸ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings*, p. 24.

to recover it fail, in Sebald's oeuvre the language and the literary form are still fragile guarantors of sense. They are more evidence of a desire to achieve it than evidence of actual fulfilment.

3.

We can pose several fundamental questions to Sebald's tales immersed in the past and evoking the past in its various forms (people, animals, places). Why recall all this? Why agonise over the memory of ruins, pain and inflicted suffering, and, finally, death? Why bother about events that are part of the dark chapters of history long and not so long gone? Why bring back at all the demons of Europe's past? These are questions all the more significant given the fact that a strong, seemingly decisive and, significantly, negative answer was given already by Friedrich Nietzsche in the famous passages from *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. Nietzsche's remarks return also today (from the pens of journalists as well), at a time referred to by Pierre Nora as an "era of commemoration", at a time of a violent eruption of memory. The enthusiasts of Nietzsche's theses point to the need for forgetting, to its "healthy", therapeutic functions liberating productive social behaviour from the allegedly destructive burden of history and memory¹⁹. How does Sebald's attitude, so overtly turned towards the past, compare to these enunciations?

A book that partly answers these questions – and gives decidedly positive answers – is Thérèse Delpech's historical-political study: *Savage Century: Back to Barbarism*. The brilliant book by the French political scientist should be read simultaneously with Sebald's work in order to see how close the main timbre of the book's argument is to the German writer's remarks. Delpech writes discursively about what Sebald has captured in an elaborate literary form; in any case, the French writer constantly refers to literary sources. Historical objectivism and political realism fit in perfectly here with literary fiction. On the other hand, Sebald's generically impure prose, encrusted again and again with essay-like and discursive fragments, validates many of Delpech's strong theses with its forays into the past (into its dark regions). These books, so different in terms of their

¹⁹ "All acting requires forgetting, as not only light but also darkness is required for life by all organisms" (F. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, transl. P. Preuss, Hackett Publishing 1980, p. 10). Nietzsche's work is sometimes (especially in journalistic writing) quoted selectively and thoughtlessly. Various authors, ingenuously substantiating their theses about forgetting with Nietzsche quotes (referred to a specific case), completely disregard the historical context of his reflection, failing to understand that it was to a large extent a polemic with German historicism of the second half of the 19th century. Nietzsche's thought is much subtler; suffice it to mention the three types of attitudes to history that he distinguishes (monumental, antiquarian and critical).

genres, surprisingly complement and give light to each other. Their style, too, is similar at times: analytical coldness (prevailing in Delpech's work) complemented by emotional turmoil (prevailing in Sebald's oeuvre). The issue which particularly preoccupies Delpech and which runs through, though implicitly, Sebald's writing is the relation between the past and the future. To be more precise: between the recognition of dark deposits of history and a rational vision of the future. In both books the problem is closely connected with architecture.

For Sebald, particularly sinister connotations were associated with some architectural objects: railway stations, bunkers, fortresses, warehouses, barracks, prisons, archive buildings, spa houses, palaces. These buildings often appear as clear emblems of the "evil" European past. Today some of them have changed their old functions, while others are gradually being destroyed. Delpech speaks metaphorically about a "House of Europe". Interestingly, this object, too, has mainly negative connotations. The "House of Europe" described by the author is definitely not a safe space for its inhabitants. It is still a family house, but founded on a crime that has not fallen under the statute of limitations. It is a house that drags behind it its dirty family history like ill-fate impossible to escape. It is a haunted house full of the spirits of the past returning at night. A house that looks stylish and impressive on the outside, but is in fact in a state of advanced decay and hides dark secrets which have not yet been fully recognised.

In one fragment Delpech develops the image of this European house in an interesting manner. Here, too, she is helped by literature, the fictional creations of which sometimes have an amazing power of concentrating the historical experience in a symbolic abstract. With successive close-ups, the capacious symbolic image of the "House of Europe" acquires a concrete form. Now it turns into a well-known castle-house from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is the Danish Elsinore. The castle haunted by the Ghost of Hamlet's father, an object which becomes the venue of new tragedies. What is more, the eponymous figure becomes here a very credible *porte parole* of the European spirit: apathetic, submissive and mired in acedia. Hamlet's soul – fathomless, equivocal, mysterious even to himself – becomes a mirror for the European mentality. As Delpech writes,

The detour down which the human species began to travel early in the last century resembles a storm whose causes and ultimate consequences it remains ignorant of. Those consequences are still washing up on our shores, like the belated waves of **a great catastrophe** [emphasis – D.C.] of which we have not heard the last. Elsinore thus possesses exceptional symbolic power for the Europe of the twentieth century²⁰.

This inability to engage in the difficult self-reflection is for Delpech a mortal sin of the European spirit. The eponymous *l'ensauvagement*, savagery, a characteristic feature of twentieth century history rarely (if ever) becomes the subject of thorough reflection. Yet this is not about a simple registering of the phenomenon

²⁰ T. Delpech, *Savage Century: Back to Barbarism*, p. 73.

(this is what school textbooks already do!), but an in-depth, multi-layered analysis of the political and mental, or perhaps above all spiritual conditions that have made the “House of Europe” a place of phantoms, death and savagery. About counteracting this amnesia for which we ourselves are to blame²¹. About a lively, emotional response, but also wise working through this historical trauma, both individually and collectively. It seems that a lack of such a reflection means that bloody history likes to repeat itself again and again:

Europe is at once turned too much toward the past to be a major actor in the twenty-first century and too cut off from that past to find its inspiration there. Like the other Western societies, it lives in the moment, and that prevents it from adapting its present to its past and from imagining a future for itself. [...] It is time for Europeans to interrupt the subterranean ruminations about history and start thinking about the future. Otherwise, others will do it for us²².

The paradox formulated at the beginning of this statement needs to be well understood. This turning too much toward the past, which has negative consequences for the European consciousness, is about Europe’s ritual celebration of its past glory (Nietzsche would talk about “monumental history”). Cutting off from the past is this traumatic burden resulting from a failure to think over the deeper causes of its historical collapses. The most striking consequence of this state of affairs is a lack of a clear vision of the future. Europe is a house drifting inertly in the sea of history, a leaking raft full of castaways of indeterminate identity. Sebald would have easily recognised himself in this picture.

What is the future of the haunted and shaking “House of Europe”? In the last chapter of her book Delpéch stresses that our situation today resembles that from 1905. History, as we know, never repeats itself exactly, but some analogies between distant moments of history can be captured, however. The author insists that an honest recognition of current signs of the times not only is an important cognitive task, but can also save us from a nightmare scenario which is by no means unlikely. From historical reoffending. What are we hiding in the cellars of our European house, what do we not want to – or are unable to – assimilate? In one of the most important fragments of the entire book we can read that

What is most peculiar about our age is the conviction that evil is installed at the core of history and our frenetic rejection of that conviction. Twenty-first-century man bears a strange resem-

²¹ This European form of forgetting is accurately described by Paul Ricoeur (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press 2006): “A devious form of forgetting is at work here, resulting from stripping the social actors of their original power to recount their actions themselves. But this dispossession is not without a secret complicity, which makes forgetting a semi-passive, semi-active behaviour, as is seen in forgetting by avoidance, the expression of bad faith and its strategy of evasion motivated by an obscure will not to inform oneself, not to investigate the harm done by the citizen’s environment, in short by a wanting-not-to-know. Western Europe and indeed all of Europe, after the dismal years of the middle of the twentieth century, has furnished the painful spectacle of this stubborn will” (pp. 448-449).

²² T. Delpéch, *Savage Century: Back to Barbarism*, p. 45.

blance to primitive man seeking drive evil outside the known world and transform it into a taboo. For us as for him evil brings misfortune, and we want it out of our sight. But the world no longer has any borders beyond which we might cast it. The experience of evil has such force in contemporary consciousness, and the disorder of minds and things is so evident that what seems most pressing is restoring vigour to whatever might allay the ubiquitous anxiety²³.

Our situation resembles somewhat the mood of 1905 in the sense that, similarly to the people of that world, we are dead scared and are waiting apprehensively for what we can feel with our sixth sense but what we cannot yet well define and name. This waiting is associated mysteriously with traumatic memory pushed into the subconscious (underground) regions of the European soul. The crimes of the 20th century are to a large extent crimes of the subconscious, which is why they are so mysterious. And so dangerous. As long as we fail to assimilate and work through this sinister legacy, the European house will be haunted by the spectres of the past world. Thus, there is no doubt that it is precisely from this dark background, still present in the cellars of our European subconsciousness, that we need to start in our thinking, because only such a strategy can help us rediscover a promise of the future appearing indistinctly on the horizon.

It seems that Sebald's archaeology of memory goes in that direction. Of course, this is not about remembering everything, about the burden of the past effectively obscuring the present. This type of imperative to remember is in any case hopelessly ineffective: after all, we need to forget (both in the individual and in the collective plane) in order to be able to function reasonably, to be able to constantly construct a coherent narrative of our experience. We need to forget in order not to transform individual and collective memory into an accidental and useless warehouse of events from the past. But not every forgetting is the same. There is forgetting stemming from an excess of absorbed past, and there is forgetting that is a result of a conscious cleansing of memory of inconvenient, shameful or disgraceful events. The duty to remember concerns both noble and shameful events. Forgetting the latter is not only unfair (to oneself, to the community), but also dangerous. A future built on forgetting must be lame and is also dangerous. Ricoeur is right, when he talks in his "Sebaldian" statement (i.e. evoking the spirits of the dead) about the consequences of forgetting in the collective dimension:

If we gave up remembering and commemorating our most shameful behaviours, forgetting would probably lead to a risk of reoffending. [...] Instead of remembering, we can repeat old mistakes. After all, we talk about the "spirits of the past". The spirit is a creature without its own place in space or time. The spirits hover around us, but our memory can place them in time, can push them into the past. And if we don't give them a place in the past, they will be revealed in the future. That is why we need to restore to the future its own place²⁴.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 175.

²⁴ *Większość była gapiami. Rozmowa z Paulem Ricoeurem, [in:] J. Żakowski, Rewanż pamięci, Warszawa 2002, p. 47.*

Sebald's writing can be understood as a constantly renewed effort of de-forgetting of the already forgotten (and repeatedly forgotten) past. With its words and narratives it fills the void that cannot be completely filled. Yet this anamnestic procedure itself is not a futile activity, it is a weak – because it comes from humans – response to gaps in memory, to growing stretches of oblivion, which is identical with non-existence. Literature cannot do much; it cannot resurrect the dead (but which art has this power?), but at least it can tell us about those who perished, about places which we want to forget for some reason. It can significantly reduce the areas of amnesia.

4.

Now the literary strategy adopted by Sebald probably seems a bit clearer; it is easier to understand not only the biographical reasons (a German born in 1944, a son of a Wehrmacht soldier) behind his decision to send down a probe into the dark depths of the past. The shape of the future is deposited in past events. Especially in those dark ones. Pushed outside the sphere of the conscious, they have – like in a textbook psychoanalytic story – a compelling influence on us. The fact that we do not know it, essentially changes nothing. This is why Sebald developed a taste for forays into the usually dark past. He clearly gives us to understand that the past (especially traumatic past) is also our land. Even if we did not want to admit it as ours, even if we wanted to forget about it (perhaps especially then!). Entering it is not easy and is not without our own losses. A journey to the unknown is never easy. Sometimes it induces stupor, and always adds a burden to our existence. It is an imperative invitation to a serious rethinking of the traumatic sides of the past. But above all it is an invitation with a specific personal address: it assumes the profile of the person engrossed in reading at a given moment. Sebald does a lot not to leave us “outside” the stories he tells. On the contrary, he wants us to internalise them as much as possible, to feel the cold touch of bad past.

We can see how depersonalised, institutionalised the contact with the past can be seen in a fragment from *Austerlitz*. The eponymous protagonist, looking for information about his Jewish father – deported to one of the camps during the war – visits the newly built National Library in Paris. He is disgusted already by the fact that

this gigantic new library, which according to one of the loathsome phrases now current is supposed to serve as the treasure house of our entire literary heritage, proved useless in [his] search of any traces of [his] father who had disappeared from Paris²⁵.

²⁵ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*..., p. 282. What sounds completely perverse in this context is the information provided by an employee of the archives that the building of the new library has been

Moreover, during his conversation with the library employee he becomes certain that as information systems become increasingly complex, our capacity to remember, paradoxically, dissolves. We cede remembering to official and objective "remembering devices", remembering less and less ourselves:

The new library building, which in both its entire layout and its near-ludicrous internal regulation seeks to **exclude** [emphasis – D.C] the reader as a potential enemy, might be described, so Le-moine thought, said Austerlitz, as the official manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still have some living connection to the past²⁶.

The institution established to protect memory is no guarantee of its simple and unproblematic transmission and assimilation²⁷. Like his protagonist, Sebald does not believe in the automatically saving power of archives; instead, he does believe in the power of personal touch.

Obviously, we do not have to follow the writer in everything. Sebald's demons speak German and it is understandable that not all of us can follow the same path as they do. However, Europe's traumatic past is devoid of borders, it speaks different languages. Whether we want it or not, it is a matter of all the living. With his impressive prose Sebald demonstrates that there is no other way to assimilate the past than by filtering it through oneself. But not only through the cognitive, discursive, purely recording apparatus. Something more is needed here: a kind of co-feeling, co-experiencing, co-responsibility, because otherwise that past will never become alive for us and will never answer any question. At best it will become a conventional chapter in a history textbook; at worst – a yellowish index card in a bombastic archive.

Perhaps the most moving moments in Sebald's books are associated with the dead. With their appearance among the living. In *Austerlitz* the eponymous hero says with thought-provoking conviction:

It does not seem to me [...] that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like²⁸.

erected on the site of a large warehouse in which the Germans stored objects taken from the apartments of the Parisian Jews during the war.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 286.

²⁷ A very simple opinion about the ambiguity of the process of archiving itself and of archive documents was presented by Ricoeur (*Memory, History...*, p. 169): "Whatever may be the shifts in documentary history – positivism or not – the documentary frenzy took hold once and for all. Allow me to mention here [...] Yerushalmi's dread confronted with the archival swamp and Pierre Nora's exclamation: 'Archive as much as you like: something will always be left out!' Once freed of its disgrace and allowed arrogance, has the *pharmakon* of the archived document become more a poison than a remedy?"

²⁸ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz...*, p. 185.

In his books Sebald goes underground again and again. He performs a literary exhumation of the dead, allows them to come into being for us, saves them from inevitable oblivion. He wants to carry their names, their lives into the future. Of course, we can pretend that they are not there, that the future belongs only to the living. But sometimes they let their presence be known suddenly.

Towards the end of the first story (the protagonist of which is doctor Henry Selwyn, who committed suicide towards the end of his life) from the collection *The Emigrants*, we can read the following:

In late July 1986 I was in Switzerland for a few days. On the morning of the 23rd I took the train from Zurich to Lausanne. As the train slowed to cross the Aare bridge, approaching Berne, I gazed way beyond the city to the mountains of the Oberland. At that point, as I recall, or perhaps merely imagine, the memory of Dr Selwyn returned to me for the first time in a long while. Three quarters of an hour later [...] I was just laying aside a Lausanne paper I'd bought in Zurich, when my eye was caught by a report that said the remains of the Bernese Alpine guide Johannes Nae-geli, missing since summer 1914, had been released by the Oberaar glacier, seventy-two years later.

And so they are ever returning to us, the dead. At times they come back from the ice more than seven decades later and are found on the edge of the moraine, a few polished bones and a pair of hobnailed boots²⁹.

Sometimes words look for each other. Delpech chose one of Kafka's aphorisms as a motto for her book: "We must break the frozen sea within us". We can hear in it a distant echo of the above words.

²⁹ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, transl. M. Hulse, Vintage Classics 2002, p. 23.