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A literature of restitution

Critical essays on W. G. Sebald

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THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED MOTHER IN
W. G. SEBALD'S FICTION

Graley Herren

Anxieties about the Holocaust often assume the form of anxieties about lost mothers in Sebald's fiction. His narrator¹ is relentlessly drawn to victims who were separated from their mothers during the war, mothers who then disappeared with scarcely a trace into the camps. In Sebald's treatment of the Holocaust, Nazi 'crimes against humanity' are often translated as 'crimes against the family'. Mark M. Anderson identifies the central importance of the family drama in Sebald's work:

In a very literal sense, his stories are 'familiar' – not just because of their casual presentation of his subjects' quotidian activities but because they explicitly focus on family relations. And although the narrator keeps himself quietly out of the spotlight, his own family narrative is subtly intertwined with that of his protagonists. Family photograph albums, memoirs, and diaries play a fundamental role in the telling of these stories, both formally and affectively. (2008: 141)

Sebald's literature of reparation is rooted in large part to a troubled paternal legacy as the son of a soldier in the *Wehrmacht*. However, with a few notable exceptions, the maternal dimension of these 'crimes against the family', particularly the severing of the mother-child bond, have not been fully appreciated.² Sebald addresses this subject most explicitly in the Luisa Lanzberg section of *The Emigrants* and in the search for Agáta Austerlitzová in *Austerlitz*. However, I am more interested in less direct manifestations of this crisis of maternity, visual and textual instances where the mother's identity is obscured or suppressed. In this chapter I will concentrate primarily upon two such instances from *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*. Here Sebald's indictments extend well beyond the Nazi perpetrators of 'crimes against the family', and these indictments hit uncomfortably close to home.

My preference for the generic label 'fiction' to categorize Sebald's work is important to establish at the outset. The near-identity of the narrator with his author makes it tempting to equate the two and thus to think about Sebald's works categorically as memoir, travel narrative or essay. Indeed, Sebald at times

encouraged such a reading, affirming for instance in his interview with Carole Angier: 'What matters is all true. The big events [...]. The invention comes in at the level of minor detail most of the time, to provide *l'effet du réel*' (Angier 2007: 72). It is interesting to note, however, that, far from being reassured by the author's affirmation, Angier was clearly disconcerted by his manipulation of source material. As Sebald 'confessed' to one creative intervention after another in *The Emigrants*, Angier could barely conceal her unease: 'This is the answer to my question, then: *The Emigrants* is fiction. And the photographs and documents are part of the fiction. It's a sophisticated undertaking, and perhaps a dangerous one, given its subject' (2007: 73). I share Angier's conclusion that Sebald's works are best understood as works of fiction, though I find little cause for distress in this fact. One of the more fascinating dynamics at play in the fiction is the *distortion* of autobiography – Sebald's wilful manipulation of raw material from his own experiences to produce a narrator whose perspective on those experiences is instructively incongruent with that of his author. To put it in terms of an instructive analogy, the narrator is to Sebald as Stephen Dedalus is to James Joyce. Critics customarily focus so much upon the narrator's explicit and implicit critiques of German history, ideology and behaviour that they often fail to recognize that the narrator himself is frequently held up for critique as well. Far from being immune from the faults that he diagnoses in the collective German psyche, the narrator is at times a walking case study of the very pathologies he decries. Nowhere is the narrator's proclivity for denial, distortion and repression more evident than in matters maternal.

Sebald's narrator laments the corruption of sacred maternal virtues as a deplorable casualty of the Second World War. I use the term 'sacred maternal virtues' advisedly, knowing from the outset that, rather than lending credence to such moral platitudes, Sebald invests his narrator with these values only to disappoint them. Sebald was raised in a Catholic family. His quasi-autobiographical narrator periodically invokes the same childhood background, though as an adult he has ostensibly become a religious sceptic, particularly when it comes to Christianity's complicity in violence. Nevertheless, the narrator still clings to strikingly traditional attitudes toward women, evidence of residual Catholic values at least in the arena of gender relations. Though he is apparently married to a woman named Clara (Sebald's own wife was named Ute), he is persistently revolted at the sight of sex,³ and he shudders anytime a woman so much as touches him with less than virtuous intent.⁴ Carnal knowledge – at least of the heterosexual variety – is consistently portrayed as dirty and disgusting. This is routinely offered as evidence of the narrator's closeted homosexuality,⁵ but we might just as well chalk it up to a severe symptom of closeted Catholicism. In general, the narrator either idolizes women as divine Mothers (Madonna) or reviles them as carnal predators (Whore), with little acknowledgment of depth or nuance between these two extremes in matters

of gender and sexuality. Again, it is worth emphasizing the crucial distinctions between Sebald and his narrator. In his provocative book *On Creaturely Life*, Eric L. Santner argues that the notion of 'creaturely life' – 'the peculiar proximity of the human to the animal at the very point of their radical difference' (2006: 12) – is an abiding concern in Sebald's work, and that sexuality is a key index for gauging this complex creaturely exchange. Yet when it comes to the depiction of mothers by Sebald's narrator, the fictional proxy reverts nostalgically to naive (and distinctly Catholic) maternal ideals at odds with the author's more complex and nuanced project outlined at length by Santner.

The narrator assumes a default position of the Mother as the family's virtuous source of affection, nurture, mercy and domestic tranquillity. He frequently invokes his ideal image of motherhood through reference to fine art. Anne Fuchs characterizes Sebald's approach to fine art as providing 'a therapeutic haven of contemplation [...] that enshrines moments of transcendence' (2006: 168). With striking frequency, the objects of contemplation and transcendence in these works of art are mother-figures enacting the traditional maternal virtues. His ideal mother tries steadfastly to protect her child, like the mother in the Paulino painting he admires in Corsica (Sebald 2005c: 5). When the inevitable trouble comes, she clings to her child like the Mary of Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece (Sebald 1996: 160), and if he must flee she watches over him in exile like the Mary of Rembrandt's *The Flight into Egypt* (Sebald 2001f: 120). Finally, if the worst comes – torture, decrepitude, death, or even self-defilement – she is there to hear her children's lamentations and to heal their suffering, like Tiepolo's St Thecla (Sebald 1999d: 51). It should be noted that these religious images fit comfortably within the political context of the rise of German Fascism, which likewise promoted an elevated ideal of motherhood. The easy affinity between Catholic belief and Nazi ideology on this score helps to explain Sebald's characterization of his family background in the Angier interview: 'I come from a very conventional, Catholic, anti-Communist background. The kind of semi-working-class, petit bourgeois background typical of those who supported the fascist regime, who went into the war not just blindly, but with a degree of enthusiasm. They all fell up the ladder in no time at all, and until 1941 they all felt they were going to be lords of the world. Absolutely, there's no doubt about it, though nobody ever says it now' (Angier 2007: 66).⁶

As with all deeply held myths, the believer seems to find confirmation of his beliefs everywhere, in things both great and small. A less iconic, but no less revealing, instance of idealized maternal values can be found at the beginning of the final chapter in *The Emigrants*, when the narrator recalls his first arrival in Manchester. From the air he sees a city blanketed in fog as if it is suffocated in ash, and as the taxi drives him through the dilapidated and largely evacuated heart of the city, he feels as if he has wandered into a 'Totenhaus' ('necropolis' (Sebald 1994a: 220–1; 1996: 150–1)). Out of this darkness and death, the narrator finds

sanctuary in the form of a hotel announcing its name in bright neon lights: the AROSA. There he is treated with graceful kindness by the proprietress, Mrs Gracie Irlam, who instantly makes him feel right at home. This should come as no surprise to students of Sebald, who can literally read the writing on the wall: AROSA. Max Sebald was born to Georg and Rosa Sebald on 18 May 1944. To emphasize Gracie's maternal identification even further, upon entering the hotel the narrator notices a photo of Gracie as a pretty young woman, dressed in Salvation Army uniform and carrying a distinctly German flugelhorn. The photo is dated 17 May 1944 – the day before Sebald was born – implicitly hearkening back to a prelapsarian ideal when he was literally at one with his mother. The narrator thus finds serendipitous sanctuary in a hotel which graphically bears the name of Sebald's mother. He is greeted at the door by a woman dressed in a pink candlewick robe, 'rosa' also being the German word for 'pink'. Gracie leads him to his cosy room where he discovers that the bedspread is made of the same material as her pink robe. The landlady also bestows a memorably quirky gift upon the narrator: the teas-maid. Most readers find this item comically bizarre, but the narrator invests this little gadget with surprisingly deep – and uncannily maternal – significance:

[Die teas-maid] phosphoreszierte, wie sich in der hereinbrechenden Dämmerung bald schon zeigte, in einem mir auf der Kindheit vertrauten stillen Lindgrün, von dem ich mich in der Nacht immer auf unerklärliche Weise behütet fühlte. Darum vielleicht ist es mir, im Zurückdenken an die Zeit meiner Ankunft in Manchester, mehrfach so gewesen, als sei der von Mrs. Irlam [...] mir auf mein Zimmer gebrachte Teeapparat [...] es gewesen, das mich [...] am Leben festhalten ließ damals, als ich mich, umfassen, wie ich war, von einem mir unbegreiflichen Gefühl der Unverbundenheit, sehr leicht aus dem Leben hätte entfernen können. (Sebald 1994a: 227–8)

([The teas-maid] glowed a phosphorescent lime green that I was familiar with from childhood and which I had always felt afforded me an unaccountable protection at night. That may be why it has often seemed, when I have thought back to those early days in Manchester, as if the tea maker brought to my room by Mrs. Irlam [...] kept me holding on to life at a time when I felt a deep sense of isolation in which I might well have become completely submerged. (Sebald 1996: 154–5))

This surrogate mother Gracie, with her weirdly comforting, illuminating, protective gadget, blesses the exiled narrator with maternal virtues when he needs them most. Late in his essay "The 'Uncanny'" Freud equates uncanny places with 'the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. [...] [W]henver a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: "this place is familiar to me, I've been here before", we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body' (Freud 1955: 245). Likewise in *The Emigrants*, though the narrator finds himself exiled in a foreign country, the uncannily familiar

sanctuary provided by Gracie and her teas-maid in the Arosa hotel makes him feel as if he has returned home to the womb.

Despite the narrator's nostalgic attachment to maternal ideals, Sebald's depictions of motherhood ultimately emerge as far more ambivalent. Consider, for instance, the sequence involving the Gypsies in the final chapter of *Vertigo*. After years away from his home-town, the narrator crosses the Ach bridge leading into W. He recalls that an area at the foot of the bridge served as a summer campsite for a group of Gypsies after the war. These Gypsies were shunned by the community, and even by his own mother, who would pick him up and quickly carry him past the interlopers whenever she passed by the camp with her son.⁷ These recollections lead him back to a seminal image from the family album:

Ich [durchblättere] das Fotoalbum [...], das der Vater zur ersten sogenannten Kriegsweihnacht der Mutter als Geschenk mitgebracht hat. Es enthält Bilder von dem sogenannten Polenfeldzug, sämtliche säuberlich mit weißer Tinte beschriftet. Auf einigen der Bilder sind Zigeuner zu sehen, die man zusammengefangen hat. Freundlich schauen sie durch den Stacheldraht, irgendwo weit hinten in der Slowakei, wo der Vater mit seinem Werkstattzug Wochen vor dem sogenannten Ausbruch des Krieges schon gelegen war. (Sebald: 1994d: 201–2)

([...] I leaf through the photo album which my father bought as a present for my mother for the first so-called Kriegsweihnacht. In it are pictures of the Polish campaign, all neatly captioned in white ink. Some of these photographs show gypsies who had been rounded up and put in detention. They are looking out, smiling, from behind the barbed wire, somewhere in a far corner of Slovakia where my father and his vehicle repairs unit had been stationed for several weeks before the outbreak of war. (Sebald 1999d: 184–5))

This image (Figure 12.1) is surely one of the most unsettling in all of Sebald. It is unsettling to him as an adult, in a way that it never was as a child, because it provides incontrovertible proof that his father knew about the concentration camps from the very beginning of the war. His father's position among the perpetrators is visibly emphasized by his camera position on the free side of the prison's barbed wire fence, and his father's silent assent to the Nazi project is implicit in the very fact that he would take a tourist photo of such a scene and send it home to his wife.⁸ Yet this practice, far from aberrational, was common up and down the ranks of the *Wehrmacht*. Janina Struk observes in *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence*: "The practice of making photo albums was so popular among all military ranks that it seemed tantamount to a duty. [...] The photographs shift seamlessly from picture-postcard views, drinks parties and social occasions, to poverty-stricken indigenous peoples in destroyed towns and cities, deportations, hangings, murders and executions. It was as though the atrocities



Figure 12.1 Gypsy Mother. Image from *Vertigo*.

were just another sight along the way, all part of the foreign adventure' (2004: 66). What might have been intended as a tourist memento by the photographer, however, becomes a *memento mori* for the adult son who returns to it years later.

While the Gypsy photo does not capture any overt acts of atrocity, it does open a window into the ideology that would eventually justify such atrocities. As J. J. Long astutely observes:

the ethnographic gaze that is inscribed in the gypsy photograph implicitly aligns the narrator's father with Nazi racial ideology and implicates him in the genocidal war in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, while the photograph itself was originally a gift, intended as a memento of war experience, it is also [...] the heavily coded bearer of ethnographic assumptions. As such, it contributes to the reinforcement of stereotypes designed to reproduce Nazi racial ideology within the family. (2006: 60)

Long's analysis is convincing. But I would also point out that, though he uses the collective term 'family', Long's immediate focus is on the complicity of the father and the ramifications for the son. Mark M. Anderson likewise places exclusive focus upon the father-son dimension: 'The inclusion of the family photo in this story documents what the father would not tell his son – a gap in narration that has a collective dimension, since it also exists for the millions of German children in his generation who had a father who served "somewhere in the East"' (2008: 145). Long and Anderson are both right as far as they go, but what get lost in the discussion are the specifically maternal implications for this image. The photo is, after all, a picture of mother and child, one made all the more disturbing by her inexplicable smile. Why would she be smiling? Because that is simply what one does when one's

photo is being taken? Or because at least she still has her child? (Is that a child in her arms? Or is it just a bundle of cloth?) Perhaps she is smiling because that is what the vanquished always do when appealing for mercy from the vanquisher. Remember that the Gypsy woman is not staring at just any photographer, but at a group of uniform-clad German soldiers. For his part, Georg Sebald may have been moved to capture this image not simply as a souvenir from his adventures in Slovakia, but specifically because it presented such a benign image of the camps. Like Genewein's photos of the Litzmannstadt ghetto, perhaps the intended visual message here is, 'Look. See? Things aren't so bad here after all.'

So much for the paternal gaze; it is the maternal gaze that is most interesting in this case. Recall that it was an episode involving the narrator's mother, and a very different averted gaze, that prompted him to recall this photograph in the first place: '[wir] mußten [...] bei den Zigeunern vorbei, und jedesmal hat mich die Mutter an dieser Stelle auf den Arm genommen. Über ihre Schulter hinweg sah ich die Zigeuner von den verschiedenen Arbeiten, die sie stets verrichteten, kurz aufschauen und dann den Blick wieder senken, als grauste es ihnen' ('we would pass by the gypsies, and every time as we did so my mother picked me up and carried me in her arms. Across her shoulder I saw the gypsies look up briefly from what they were about, and then lower their eyes again as if in revulsion' (Sebald 1994d: 200–1; 1999d: 183)). Here the narrator's mother engaged in what could seem, out of context, an act of maternal virtue, sweeping her child into her arms and protecting him – in purely iconic terms a gesture which mirrors the one captured in the photo of the Gypsy mother. However, located within the context of racism exposed in this sequence, the German mother's actions become something to cringe over, inspiring retrospective shame rather than filial gratitude. Rosa did not wield the camera or wear the uniform like Georg did, but this anecdote suggests that she shared the same ethnographic assumptions.

Other evidence outside the photographic frame incriminates the narrator's mother as well. The album page with its caption of 'Zigeuner' ['Gypsy'] is particularly revealing. Janina Struk comments upon the significance of presentation in the racially pure German family album:

Although making albums was a personal activity, it was part of a wider collective responsibility. It gave individuals an opportunity not only to order their own experiences and decide how the past should be remembered and preserved, but also to express commitment to National Socialist ideals. Organizing photographs and handwriting captions was a way of combining these aims and an opportunity to give a personal interpretation to a photograph and to direct the viewer in how to read it. (2004: 68)

Long directs us how to read the Gypsy photo with an incisive reading of its caption: 'the compiler of the album leaves gender unmarked by employing the generic

masculine plural term *Zigeuner*. The women are thus reduced to an example of type' (2007: 57). Interestingly, Long himself leaves gender unmarked in his reference to the compiler of the album. Who did compile this album? Can we know? Thus far, critics have taken it for granted that the photographer and the compiler are one and the same. But we are told only that the father bought the album (obviously without the photos in it) and presented the album as a gift to his wife for 'the first so-called Kriegsweihnacht [War-Christmas]' (1996: 184). It seems at least as likely that Georg bought the album for Rosa, sent it to her for Christmas 1939, and subsequently sent her photographs that he shot and developed over a period of time during the Slovakia campaign. In other words, the circumstantial evidence points to Rosa as quite possibly the compiler of the album and the author of the captions. Already a wife and mother herself (though her only son was not born until 1944), she surely had the most personal vested interest in the family to elide the gender of the Gypsy mother – in effect suppressing the fact that not only enemy combatants but also civilian women and children were being rounded up and imprisoned in camps from the very beginning of this war. No other image in all of Sebald offers a more concentrated indictment of Nazi 'crimes against the family' as such than this image from *Vertigo*. Most damning of all is the implication that the narrator's mother was a co-conspirator against maternity, years before she even became his mother.

Of course, none of this is spelled out explicitly by the narrator. Sebald rarely does spell things out explicitly; the attraction of his prose depends upon subtlety, indirectness, obfuscation – and no one would wish it otherwise. He is a master prose stylist, not a preacher or pamphleteer, and his measured rhetorical approach is a welcome antidote to the vehement rhetorical excess we normally associate with Fascism. Nevertheless, sometimes critics are too quick to read Sebald's indirectness in exclusively stylistic terms. For instance, the narrator's reluctance to dwell upon any of the disturbing ramifications of the Gypsy mother photograph tells us at least as much – if not considerably more – about the narrator's repressive impulses as it does about Sebald's prose style. The narrator passes a spot by the road outside his home-town that reminds him of the Gypsy camp there after the war. This thought immediately makes him recall – not his father, who was deeply complicit in Nazi internment policies as a German soldier during the war – but his *mother*, who shamefully whisked him away rather than let her son get near such undesirables. When he then recalls his father's involvement, he does so through the mediation of his mother's (presumed) framing and labelling of the '*Zigeuner*' photo. Yet the narrator conspicuously declines to damn the image, nor does he damn the photographer who captured that image or the compiler who attempted to sanitize it in the family album. Instead, the narrator recalls these disturbing facts and images only to change the subject quickly, continuing his narrative without any commentary – a gesture of evasion and elision every bit as significant as the '*Zigeuner*' caption.

Here it becomes crucial once again to spell out the differences between Sebald and his narrator. The author has equipped the narrator with a past that mirrors his own, right down to reproducing an image from the Sebald family album as 'evidence'. However, the author's and narrator's respective approaches to that evidence are markedly different. In an interview with Christian Scholz, Sebald described the effect of returning to his family album as an adult and looking at the old photos through new eyes: 'Because in the meantime you have learned what history is. You know what happened. You have suspicions about the societal role of your own parents and relatives in this context, and now you suddenly and with complete clarity see it before yourself as visual evidence. And the shock then is typically inevitable' (Sebald in Scholz, 2007: 106). Elsewhere, he explained his obsession with uncovering the truth about his national and familial past with regard to the war and the Holocaust: 'If you know in the generation before you that your parents, your uncles and aunts were tacit accomplices, it's difficult to say you haven't anything to do with it. I've always felt I had to know what happened in detail, and to try to understand why it should have been so' (Jaggi 2001: 3). Where is the 'typically inevitable' shock in the *narrator's* reaction to the Gypsy photo? Where is *his* compulsion 'to know what happened in detail', 'to try and understand'? Certainly, the narrator does frequently display such impulses throughout the fiction – but, tellingly, *not* here. Not when the subject hits so close to home. Not when his own mother is implicated. The narrator approaches the moral and psychic precipice, only to turn away and reverse course. Sebald equips the reader with sufficient detail to be shocked, but he does so through the vehicle of a narrator who, in his very reluctance to confront such unpleasant truths directly, proves himself a legitimate heir to a national and familial conspiracy of silence.

The final maternal image that I want to consider is the most famous withheld image in all of Sebald: the sempstresses of Litzmannstadt,⁹ or, as the narrator reimagines them, the Sisters of Fate. Sebald ends *The Emigrants* with an unforgettable ekphrastic evocation of a photograph he once saw in a Frankfurt exhibition. The photos were taken by a Nazi accountant in the Litzmannstadt ghetto, Walter Genewein. The narrator was thunderstruck by one photo in particular, and its haunting after-effects are worth repeating at length:

Hinter einem lotrechten Webrahmen sitzen drei junge, vielleicht zwanzigjährige Frauen. Der Teppich, an dem sie knüpfen, hat ein unregelmäßig geometrisches Muster, das mich auch in seinen Farben erinnert an das Muster unseres Wohnzimmersofas zu Hause. Wer die jungen Frauen sind, das weiß ich nicht. Wegen des Gegenlichts, das einfällt durch das Fenster im Hintergrund, kann ich ihre Augen genau nicht erkennen, aber ich spüre, das sie alle drei herschauen zu mir, denn ich stehe ja an der Stelle, an der Genewein, der Rechnungsführer, mit seinem Fotoapparat gestanden hat. Die mittlere der drei jungen Frauen hat hellblondes Haar und gleicht

irgendwie einer Braut. Die Weberin zu ihrer Linken hält den Kopf ein wenig seitwärts geneigt, während die auf der rechten Seite so unverwandt und unerbittlich mich ansieht, daß ich es nicht lange auszuhalten vermag. Ich überlege, wie die drei wohl geheißsen haben – Roza, Lusia und Lea oder Nona, Decuma und Morta, die Töchter der Nacht, mit Spindel und Faden und Schere. (Sebald 1994a: 355)

(Behind the perpendicular frame of a loom sit three young women, perhaps aged twenty. The irregular geometrical patterns of the carpet they are knotting, and even its colours, remind me of the settee in our living room at home. Who the young women are I do not know. The light falls on them from the window in the background, so I cannot make out their eyes clearly, but I sense that all three of them are looking across at me, since I am standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera. The young woman in the middle is blonde and has the air of a bride about her. The weaver to her left has inclined her head a little to one side, whilst the woman on the right is looking at me with so steady and relentless a gaze that I cannot meet it for long. I wonder what the three women's names were – Roza, Luisa and Lea, or Nona, Decuma and Morta, the daughters of night, with spindle, scissors and thread. (Sebald 1996: 237))

The narrator includes so very many photos, some of quite trivial objects, that it is fair to question why he neglects to include this vitally important image. Perhaps he is sparing us the accusatory gaze of the sisters, or sparing us the experience of standing in Genewein's shoes as spectators. But since he does not pull his punches in providing other disturbing images elsewhere, these explanations ring false. The narrator's reaction to this photo is highly personal, as if the woman on the right has a message addressed specifically to him. So his suppression of this photo hardly seems altruistic; if he is sparing anyone discomfort here, it is himself. Yet he remains unsparing, for the return of the repressed image continues to haunt him. The real question, then, is why does this particular image haunt him, out of all the images he saw in the Frankfurt exhibition and out of all of the far more graphic Holocaust photos he might have chosen (or that might have chosen him)? Why can't he bear to face the gaze of the woman on the right (our left)?

In order to dissect this buried image properly, it would be useful first to exhume it. This photo (Figure 12.2) from the Frankfurt exhibition catalogue certainly seems to be the one the narrator has in mind.¹⁰ In the middle sits the blonde woman, whom the narrator imagines as Luiza, an appellation that clearly connects her to the ill-fated Luisa Lanzberg. To her left is the woman with the tilted head, whom he imagines as Lea, probably an allusion to Israel's wife Leah, the mother of Judah, forefather of the Jews. Finally, chillingly, we see the woman on the right, our left, with the penetrating gaze, whom the narrator christens Roza, a clear proxy for Sebald's own mother. The narrator singles Roza out for her relentless gaze, but the accidental composition of the photo seems to single her out as well. The narrator reveals that the pattern they are working on reminds him of the settee in his

childhood home, but pay particular attention to the pattern behind them. The white shape above and behind the woman on our left seems to be pointing straight down at her, like an aimed gun, or like the downward-turned thumb of the Roman emperor at the Coliseum, or like the Sword of Damocles, marking her for death. This image calls to mind the one explicit mention of the name 'Rosa' in connection with the narrator's mother. It comes from his Aunt Fini in *The Emigrants*, in reference to a school photo: 'Das Kind ganz rückwärts mit dem Kreuzchen über dem Kopf ist deine Mutter, die Rosa' ('The child right at the back, with a cross marked over her head, is your mother, Rosa' (Sebald 1994a: 110; 1996: 75–6)). In the case of the school photo, the picture has been marked to single Rosa out of the crowd for distinction, as if to say, 'This person is special: she is my sister, your mother.' Of course, the so-called Roza of the Litzmannstadt photo is effectively being singled out for a much harsher fate, where she will take her place among a crowd of over six million. Sebald makes reference to his mother's class photo in *After Nature* as well, though he does not mention her by name. In the final section ('Dark Night Sallies Forth') he locates the photo at the end of the First World War (1917 at Allarried) and adds this foreboding detail: 'auf der rückwärtigen Seite/ des fleckigen grauen Kartons/ die Worte 'in der Zukunft/ liegt der Tod uns zu Füßen'/ einer jener Dunklen Orakelsprüche/ die man nie mehr vergißt' ('on the reverse of the/ spotted grey cardboard mount/ the words "in the future/ death lies



Figure 12.2 Three Weavers. 'Litzmannstadt-Getto Teppichweberei' (Lodz-311)

at our feet",/ one of those obscure oracular sayings/ one never again forgets' (Sebald 2008c: 72; 2002a: 84–5)). The oracle's enigmatic prophecy finally yields its bitter fruit in the sweatshop of Litzmannstadt.

Now return to Sebald's description of the photo, since that is all the reader is actually given. The narrator notes with clear discomfort that: 'ich stehe ja an der Stelle, an der Genewein, der Rechnungsführer, mit seinem Fotoapparat gestanden hat ('I am standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera' (Sebald: 1994a: 335; 1996: 237)). This is certainly true, not only for this photo but for all photos: we see what the camera saw, no more, no less. The empathetic narrator does not share Genewein's heart, but he cannot help but share his eye – an uneasy convergence which Simon Ward characterizes as 'the most high-risk dialectic of the book' (2004: 69). In this context, think back a moment to the Gypsy photo. The same dynamic is seemingly at play there, too. The narrator does not share his father's ethnographical assumptions, but he does see through his father's eyes, stands in his shoes – sort of. Actually that would strictly be true only if the photo had been included by itself. Instead, what we actually receive is Rosa's photo album page, meaning what the narrator is really doing – and what we are doing too – is looking through Rosa's eyes looking through Georg's eyes at the Gypsy woman. Contrast that dynamic with the ending of *The Emigrants*. The narrator is no longer gazing through Rosa's eyes; instead, he imagines that he is gazing at Rosa's eyes, having effectively shoved her through the looking-glass, cast her behind the persecuted side of the fence, or in this case, the loom.

The narrator in effect tries to empathize his way into the world of the photo, enacting an imaginative exercise in "What If": what if these three sisters had been my sisters (Sebald did in fact have three sisters)? What if one of these women had been my mother? What if I had to endure the experience of losing my family to the Holocaust? This is, to be sure, a very slippery ethical move.¹¹ If Rosa was guilty of 'crimes against the family' in the first case, surely a son who vicariously condemns his mother to hard labour in Litzmannstadt has violated the family ideal as well. Furthermore, such a presumption of the subject position is highly dubious, empathizing to the point of identification with suffering that neither Rosa nor the narrator actually experienced. As historian Dominick LaCapra judiciously warns,

If we who have not been severely traumatized by experiences involving massive losses go to the extreme of identifying (however spectrally or theoretically) with the victim and survivor, our horizon may unjustifiably become that of the survivor; if not the victim, at least as we imagine her or him to be. [...] We may even undergo surrogate victimage – something that may at times be unavoidable but, in terms of ethical, social, and civic responsibility, is open to question, particularly in its effects in the public sphere. (2001: 211)

On the other hand, the desire for identification is counterbalanced with certain gestures toward 'empathic unsettlement', to borrow LaCapra's term.¹² For instance, the narrator acknowledges that the weaver in question is not in reality his mother: he spells her name differently ('Roza' instead of 'Rosa'), and he prefaces his meditation by admitting, 'Wer die jungen Frauen sind, das weiß ich nicht' ('Who the young women are I do not know' (Sebald 1994: 335; 1996: 237)). Furthermore, he declines to replicate the ethnographic gaze of Genewein, seizing some measure of control over the image by reproducing it verbally rather than visually. Again, this deflective strategy is one of Sebald's signatures. Though one can sense the centripetal pull of the Holocaust throughout his work, the narrator rarely faces this vortex directly lest he lose himself in its darkness. As Sebald told Maya Jaggi shortly before his death, 'I don't think you can focus on the horror of the Holocaust. It's like the head of the Medusa: you carry it with you in a sack, but if you looked at it you'd be petrified' (Jaggi 2001: 5).¹³ In the case of the Litzmannstadt photo, the narrator avoids the weaver's dreadful gaze by suppressing her image. But in this case removing the head of Medusa does not completely destroy her power, nor does it relieve her adversary from the burden of carrying her with him wherever he goes. Of course, the narrator's real battle is not against the forced labourers in Litzmannstadt; his battle is against truths that he does not want to be true but cannot wish away; his battle is with congenital culpability. He cannot bear to look in his sack because he suspects that the face staring back at him will bear a family resemblance.

Sebald's anxiety is historically and psychologically specific, yet his indirect approach displaces the source of that anxiety, cloaking its origins in a fog of metaphysical noir. The resulting narrative reads like *Oedipus Rex* refracted through Kafka and Beckett. Like Oedipus, Sebald's narrator wanders through a waste land, corrupted by some vast but shadowy crime from the past. Whoever is responsible for this crime must be rooted out and punished with exile, even if the investigation leads to the investigator's own hearth. For Sebald as for Kafka and Beckett, the protagonist's exile is an established fact from the start, so he is really working backwards from the punishment in an effort to discover the unnameable original crime. The narrator traverses Europe in search of clues, compiling evidence, searching for justice, atonement, and reparation. However, the more evidence he accumulates, the more the trail leads him back to where he started – his corrupt family home, the primal scene of the crime. His father's complicity was already understood, and indeed he paid some penance for his crimes with a stint in a prisoner of war camp. Yet the narrator's investigations increasingly point to another unindicted co-conspirator in the home. He resists this knowledge, he deflects it – he tries to keep her true identity *sub rosa*.

–By the end of *The Emigrants*, the narrator effectively chooses to blind himself

rather than face the full implications of his family crisis head on. In wilfully choosing blindness, he proves himself not only a literary successor to Oedipus but, more importantly, an inheritor of what Sebald has diagnosed as German historical blindness. Speaking in his own voice without the mediation of a fictional narrator, Sebald berated his compatriots during his 1997 Zurich lectures for collective failure to confront the nation's recent history head on. In the preface to the published lectures (included in *On the Natural History of Destruction*), he boldly states that:

wir Deutsche heute ein auffallend geschichtsblindes und traditionsloses Volk [seien]. Ein passioniertes Interesse an unseren früheren Lebensformen und den Spezifika der eigenen Zivilisation, wie es etwa in der Kultur Großbritanniens überall spürbar ist, kennen wir nicht. Und wenn wir unseren Blick zurückwenden, insbesondere auf die Jahre 1930 bis 1950, so ist es immer ein Hinsehen und Wegschauen zugleich. Die Hervorbringungen der deutschen Autoren nach dem Krieg sind darum vielfach bestimmt von einem halben oder falschen Bewußtsein, das ausgebildet wurde zur Festigung der äußerst prekären Position der Scheibenden in einer moralisch so gut wie restlos diskreditierten Gesellschaft. (Sebald 2002h: 6–7)

([W]e Germans today are a nation strikingly blind to history and lacking in tradition. We do not feel any passionate interest in our earlier way of life and the specific features of our own civilization, of the kind universally perceptible, for instance, in the culture of the British Isles. And when we turn to take a retrospective view, particularly of the years 1930 to 1950, we are always looking and looking away at the same time. As a result, the works produced by German authors after the war are often marked by a half-consciousness or false consciousness designed to consolidate the extremely precarious position of those writers in a society that was morally almost entirely discredited. (Sebald 2004b: viii–ix))

In the non-fictional formats of public lecture and published essay, Sebald's approach to the problem of German historical blindness is to compel confrontation. In his fiction, however, he often draws attention to the problem of blindness by *replicating* it through his narrator. At the end of *The Emigrants* the reader finds a perfectly representative re-enactment of 'looking and looking away at the same time', of 'half-consciousness or false consciousness'.

The narrator's mother instilled him with Catholic reverence for the maternal virtues, a reverence perfectly compatible with the ethos of German Fascism. His attitudes toward women remain deeply informed by these values. However, his various investigations occasionally lead him to evidence that his own mother betrayed those values – betrayed other mothers as well as other women who would never get a chance to become mothers. Were the narrator to confront this evidence directly, he would be forced both to reconsider the value system by which he adjudicates gender propriety and to denounce his mother as a tacit accomplice to the Holocaust's 'crimes against the family'. Rather than do either of those things, he half-sees and then looks away. Nevertheless, Sebald provides his readers with suffi-

cient evidence to see beyond the narrator's averted gaze and thus to reach the very conclusions that his literary avatar avoids. This privileged insight not only permits us a fuller vision of the familial 'scene of the crime', but it also allows us to see that, in his blindness, the narrator is still very much his father's and mother's son.

NOTES

- 1 Given the network of cross-references and the consistency of voice, I work on the assumption that the first-person narrator is the same for *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Austerlitz*. However, as will be clear from the present chapter, I do not equate this narrator as strictly autobiographical.
- 2 For two exceptional treatments of the maternal dimension in Sebald's work, see Barzilai (2004: 203–16) and Kempinski (2007: 456–71).
- 3 Consider the narrator's traumatic response as a child upon seeing Schlag and Romana having sex in *Vertigo* (Sebald 1999d: 238–3), or his revulsion as an adult when chancing upon a similar scene off the Covehithe cliffs in *The Rings of Saturn* (Sebald 1998b: 68–9).
- 4 See, for example, the narrator's unnerved response to Luciana touching his shoulder in *Vertigo* (Sebald 1999d: 97).
- 5 Maya Barzilai usefully applies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire for an understanding of Sebald's male protagonists vis-à-vis other male characters and various secondary female characters in the fiction (Barzilai 2004: 208). Eric L. Santner explores the element of 'homosexual panic' in Sebald's work in chapter 4 ('On the Sexual Lives of Creatures and Other Matters') of *On Creaturely Life: Rilke/Benjamin/Sebald* (2006: 143–96).
- 6 For an iconic fusion of these two value systems, consider Hengge's mural of the reaper woman in *Vertigo*.
- 7 Though prejudice against the Gypsies had been prevalent in Europe for centuries, persecution in modern Germany seems to have been particularly pronounced in Sebald's home region of Bavaria. Time and again, in his extensive study *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, Guenter Lewy (2000) singles out Bavaria for leading the way in anti-Gypsy policies. In 1899 Bavaria established the *Zigeunerzentrale* (Central Office for Gypsy Affairs), specifically designed to police Gypsies. In 1926 'the Bavarian legislature approved the Law for the Combating of Gypsies, Travelers and the Work-Shy' (Lewy 2000: 7). In 1934, when the central government was looking for a more unified national policy toward Gypsies, Bavaria was held up as a model: 'As in the past, the *Zigeunerzentrale* (Central Office for Gypsy Affairs) in Munich was well ahead of everyone else in suggesting measure for attacking "the Gypsy problem" and in pressing for united action' (Lewy 2000: 18). Even after the war, Bavaria distinguished itself for its anti-Gypsy prejudice. In 1947, the 1926 law was overturned. But in 1953, 'the Bavarian legislature approved a new law that dealt with "travelers" (*Landfahrerordnung*). The word "Gypsy" did not appear in the legislation; travelers were defined sociologically as those who itinerate as a result of a deep-seated inclination or out of a strong aversion to leading a sedentary life. However, in terms of substance the new law for the most part repeated the prohibitions of the 1926 legislation' (Lewy 2000: 200). The *Zigeunerzentrale* was

replaced nominally by the *Landfahrerzentrale* (Central Office for Travelers), but the records and even some of the personnel simply carried over. This office was not closed until 1965, and the legislation remained on the statute books until 1970.

- 8 Though German photography complemented the aims of Nazi ideology, and though amateur photography by German soldiers attested to the widespread success of this aim, the Nazi leadership officially discouraged such photography among soldiers – apparently because they foresaw its potential as incriminating evidence against the regime. Hanno Loewy observes, 'the Wehrmacht supreme command and the SS leadership issued repeated circulars and decrees prohibiting photos being taken of executions and maltreatment, or of ghettos at all. [...] The point, it would seem, was not whether photographs were taken or not, but the awareness of the photographers that, in taking these pictures, they became conspirators, accomplices, perpetrators, and thereby fully subscribed to the regime and its aims' (1997: 106).
- 9 The native Polish name for this settlement is Łódź. When the Reich annexed and closed off the Jewish ghetto in early 1940, Łódź was renamed Litzmannstadt in honor of Karl Litzmann, a distinguished German general from the First World War. Since all of my references are to the Reich-controlled ghetto as such, I opt for the appellation 'Litzmannstadt'.
- 10 The photo is labelled no. 311 in the exhibition catalogue, with the caption 'Litzmannstadt-Getto Teppichweberei'. See Loewy and Schoenberner (1990: 119). Though he does not examine this particular photograph, I am nevertheless indebted to Ulrich Baer's (2002) probing analysis of Genewein's photographic project.
- 11 For several particularly provocative considerations of the ethical implications of suppressing the photo and the women depicted therein, see Ward (2004: 68–70); Franklin (2007: 140–2); and Horstkotte (2009: 178–83).
- 12 'I would argue that the response of even secondary witnesses (including historians) to traumatic events must involve empathic unsettlement [...]. But a difficulty arises when the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to become an identity. And a post-traumatic response of unsettlement becomes questionable when it is routinized in a methodology or style that enacts compulsive repetition, including the compulsively repetitive turn to the aporia, paradox, or impasse. I would like to argue that the perhaps necessary acting-out of trauma in victims and the empathic unsettlement (at times even inducing more or less muted trauma) in secondary witnesses should not be seen as foreclosing attempts to work through the past and its losses, both in victims or other agents and in secondary witnesses' (LaCapra 2001: 47).
- 13 As Ben Hutchinson notes, Sebald's Medusa metaphor is appropriated from Primo Levi (Hutchinson 2009: 148). In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi insists, 'I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. [...] We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the "Muslims", the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception' (Levi 1988: 83–4).