

W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and the Emigrants: Suffering Absorbed into the Setting of Human History

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ABSTRACT

History can be viewed both as a science and a form of remembrance. This means that it is an experience which has the capacity of bringing the past into presence while keeping the two in tension. The tension is due to the fact that remembrance makes the forgotten events in the past appear in the present through disruption. Therefore, remembrance is an experience that does not allow us to see history as a cumulative. Not only does it force its invincible story to fragment but our very existence as responses to the suffering in the past is refashioned. This is what happens in Sebald's works. The reader is placed in a position to remember events of ruined lives, thus preventing us to see history as progress without ruins and destruction; this, in turn, calls into question our own tranquility. *The Emigrants* interrupts the flow of history by depicting the protagonists' attempted homecomings, only to find mere ruins of their personal histories. Here Sebald has a retrospective look into the silent and pervasive presence of the traumatic legacy of unspoken horror. *The Emigrants* seems to be a kind of album dedicated to the lives and sufferings of people who surely would have otherwise been forgotten. The next work, *Austerlitz*, illustrates an adult expected to reconstruct his forgotten origins in order to discover his true identity. It is novel about the delayed and deferred sufferings of an orphan. It can also be regarded as critique of European social history. Here the protagonist tries uselessly to recall his own life, but cannot eradicate the fifty years of not remembering, driving him to increasing despair. Sebald's works are concerned to a great degree with the suffering body. The slight shift of perspective brought about by physical pain is both the driving force and the structural principle of Sebald's narratives. This paper is an attempt to examine how W. G. Sebald's narrative establishes the interrelation between history and suffering.