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## Cultural Exchange, Communal Destruction in W.G. Sebald's *Vertigo*

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W.G. Sebald's travelogue, *Vertigo*, exemplifies two prevalent forms of European discourse throughout the course of the narrator's journeys and meditations. The first form of European exchange I wish to discuss is the establishment of a network through which ideas, culture and language can be shared by nations. The other is the inevitable distribution and communal experience of destruction that occurs both as a result of and as a means through which this distribution can occur. One need only look at a biography of Sebald to see the former discourse in action: a German academic, he emigrated to England where he lectured in German and European literature at the University of East Anglia before establishing the British Centre for Literary Translation at the same institution, embodying this international discourse of ideas and academia throughout his own actions and career (McCulloh 2003, p.xvi). However, the Europe of Sebald's novel *Vertigo* is not a harmonious network of cultural discourses, with positive exchanges forming the exception rather than the rule. Sebald's Europe acts more often as a centre from which tragedy and destruction erupt and spread throughout the region, contaminating the rest of the civilised world as a result. Cultural exchange is neither consistently altruistic in nature, nor exclusively positive in its effects, and more often than not causes the decline of other traditions as a result of the interfering culture's involvement. As Philip Schlesinger observed, the Europe of Sebald's novels is 'a space of common heritage', but it is also 'a haunted space often divided by war and violence' (2004, p.45). The

Europe that Sebald's narrator traverses is steeped in this shared history, and these embedded historical events rear their heads throughout *Vertigo*. Not only do we find events within living memory brought to the fore, but much older occurrences also often become manifest, exercising their influence over European history long after their initial occurrence.

*Vertigo* is, as a travel narrative, quick to present evidence demonstrating the benefits of European membership, perhaps most obviously in the form of tourism and the economic growth that this industry can provide. Even the narrator's hometown of 'W.' benefits from this influx of revenue: upon returning the narrator finds that the 'farmhouses had been rebuilt without exception' and that the rest of the village 'had been thoroughly modernised or disappeared altogether' (Sebald 2002, p.185-6). This brings to the fore both the positive and negative effects of modernisation through economic growth: on the one hand the town is experiencing a period of prosperity and redevelopment, on the other it is simultaneously suffering from the destruction of many historic establishments and features of its cultural and physical geography. The new holiday home is the first of two establishments that have been constructed within Sebald's thirty-year absence that exist almost entirely as a result of Germany's participation in European economic exchanges; tourists are coming to the town of W. with enough frequency to warrant the existence of both a holiday home and the reconstruction of the Engelwirt inn hotel.

The rebirth of the Engelwirt is not only an indicator of the region's economic development, but as a hotel it also acts as a constituent fragment of a larger network through which the commercial exchanges of European nations can be conducted. Besides the narrator, the reader is presented with only one other category of

guest at the Engelwirt, as Sebald shares the hotel exclusively with 'commercial travellers' (2002, p.252). These travellers are the public face of the industries and economic systems that redistribute wealth between companies and nations throughout Europe, and the hotel assists them in performing their roles by providing them with the services they require to conduct trade over large distances. Both the refurbishment of the hotel and its off-season clientele are indicative of the commercial benefits of trade between nations and distant locales, which benefit both small businesses like the Engelwirt and larger institutions such as those the salesmen represent. The redevelopment of the Engelwirt and the construction of a new holiday home demonstrate a readdressing of W.'s industry from catering for locals to attracting customers from further afield, taking advantage of the increased traffic that exists between nations in twentieth-century Europe.

The economic influence of tourism is further highlighted in *Vertigo* when Sebald exposes the possible consequences for any business that disregards the potential financial impact of holidaymakers and tourists. This is not to say that shunning tourists is to be avoided within the Sebaldian novel, as I will discuss shortly, but that for businesses in particular doing so can be financially devastating due to many companies' reliance upon tourism and business to generate revenue. Upon arriving in a pizzeria in Verona the narrator is subjected to such an act of discrimination which causes him to flee the city, not to return for seven years (Sebald 2002, p.79-80). The waiter serving the narrator confesses to his addressee on the telephone that he has served 'not a soul all day', and that it is only now that there is a solitary diner: '*Un inglese*, he said, and looked across at me with what I took to be a touch of contempt' (Sebald 2002, p.79). This moment of xenophobia,

although brief, holds greater significance regarding the narrator's identity than may be initially perceived by the reader. The waiter determines that Sebald's textual enactor is English, yet both in reality and the text we are shown (literally in the form of a facsimile) that the narrator has a German passport, and is by birth and legal status a German citizen (2002, p.114). Sebald is not a German resident in *Vertigo*, however, nor is he legally English. Instead, he chooses to occupy a position somewhere between these two national identities within his text, as well as in his extra-fictional life. Prior to his death the author Sebald confessed that he had been able to acquire a British passport, yet he had chosen instead to retain his German passport because he was irrevocably German, not English (Angier 2007, p.69). The real-world Sebald and his textual enactor both occupy the role of the emigrant through choice, acting out and personifying the free interchange of cultures and citizens that defines twentieth-century European exchange, both through their movements and intellectual engagements. 'Sebald wrote from a position of self-imposed exile and marginality, between languages and national identities,' writes Anderson, and by discriminating against Sebald's enactor the waiter is not reacting against a single race or individual, but against the malleable European identity that Sebald occupies (2003, p.102). The waiter is rejecting the European status of his customers, and as a result the pizzeria is removed from the economic channels opened up by tourism that allow it to remain open. It is therefore no surprise that upon Sebald's return seven years later the pizzeria is closed (2002, p.125).

While it may be poor economic sense for a business to shun the economic input of European tourism, on a personal level the narrator openly admits to disliking tourists himself. However, while the pizzeria's waiter does so through contempt for a slow business day,

Sebald does so as a result of their ability to tie him to a fixed nationality which he wishes to avoid. He likens the holidaymakers of Limone to 'the wandering dead [. . .] condemned to haunt these streets night after night' (Sebald 2002, p.93). The presence of these ghouls prevents Sebald's narrator from sleeping, especially once he realises that some of these undead creatures are 'compatriots of mine' (2002, p. 93). Their 'uninhibited dialects' and the 'unsavoury things' they speak of become a 'veritable torment', especially when the narrator realises that some members of the crowd appear to be from his hometown (Sebald 2002, p.93). It is at this point that Sebald confesses to his most ardent desire: 'I wished during those sleepless hours that I belonged to a different nation, or, better yet, to none at all' (2002, p.93-94). The appeal of emigration and self-imposed exile is, for the narrator, the opportunity it presents to be separated from one's national identity, freedom from being categorised as a citizen of any one nation. As Mark McCulloh observes, 'this moment of intense solitary shame precedes the mysterious disappearance, in the night, of the documentary proof of his identity as a German citizen' (McCulloh 2003, p.95). It is as if the narrator has wished away his nationality and, in order to achieve a state of national independence, his passport is removed from the narrative as a result (2003, p.95). His endless wandering between England, Germany, Austria and Italy reveals his refusal to stay attached to one location and his wish to occupy a position wherein he is resident in a country that he does not, in any official sense, belong to. For the Sebaldian narrator the increased personal freedom afforded him by his travelling is to be used to remove himself from his origins: he does not wish to travel in order to meet more Germans, especially not citizens of W., but to remove himself from his point of origin and cleanse himself of a single nationality. The irony of this passage is that the

narrator's personal freedom from any one nation, exemplified by his lost passport, comes at the cost of his practical freedom to move between nations until he acquires replacement documentation to prove his nationality. To enjoy the state of emigratory freedom the narrator desires, he must subscribe once more to the norm of claiming a national membership, sacrificing his internalised freedom in order for him to access an external one.

Aside from the economic and personal benefits of tourism, international exchange can also benefit those who embrace it through the exchange of cultures, traditions and ideas. Perhaps one of the most pervasive shared cultural traditions in Europe is the Christian faith, and in *Vertigo* this shared belief system remains present in the form of St. George. As with the economic possibilities offered up by international exchange, Sebald reveals both the positive and negative aspects of the exchange simultaneously, allowing the reader to witness both the pros and cons of sharing ideological and cultural symbols for themselves. St. George appears in two key paintings by Pisanello that the narrator makes a particular effort to admire within *Vertigo*. In the first chapter of the novel, '*All'estero*' (Abroad), and again in the final chapter '*Il ritorno in patria*' (The return to the homeland), images of St. George frame the narrative between two key locations: Verona, where the *flâneur* is holidaying, and his adopted 'homeland', London (Sebald 2002, p.75; p.257). St. George first appears in a devotional painting, adorning the ceiling of a chapel in Italy, a country famously associated with Catholicism, only for the narrator to see St. George again in London, the capital city of the nation to whom St. George is patron saint. This textual positioning is not coincidental, but representative of the spread of traditions from one nation to the next. The story of St. George has

become part of English culture as a result of its inclusion in Christian theology.

The mobility of culture and its ability to take part in international exchanges are further embodied through the nature of each painting, with the immovable fresco of the chapel roof symbolizing the point of origin of Catholic dissemination within the church, and the mobility of the smaller painting representing the same ideology as it is spread to other nations. This connection between the spread of Christianity and the im/movable image is further reinforced by the content of the paintings themselves, with the Veronese fresco depicting the saint, 'about to set off to fight the dragon' (Sebald 2002, p.74). By the time the St. George myth has reached England, alongside the Christian belief-system which asserted itself so strongly as to become part of the nation's culture, the painting in the National Gallery of London shows the dragon already dead, St. George's quest for domination now complete (Sebald 2002, p.257). The dragon's death coincides with the myth's relocation to a new culture, with the new cultural tradition of St. George dominating the previous traditions of England as he simultaneously kills the serpent that represents the population's past status as heathens. The slaying of the dragon is the most famous tale relating to St. George, and it is this fame that has allowed his myth to enforce itself onto a new host culture so strongly. While this is not in itself a negative process at this point, it does have further implications within Sebald's novel when considered in relation to the novel's representation of this ideological spread.

While the Christian faith has allowed St. George to become one of the foremost symbols of English patriotism, there remains cause for concern regarding this appropriation of cultural tradition. On the one hand a cultural symbol is being forced upon another nation by the



originating ideology, here the Catholic Church, symbolised by the slaying of the dragon by the Christian martyr; but ironically this process allows those adopting the new tradition to attach their own meaning to it, potentially subverting its cultural colonisation in the process. Although the Christian belief system desires, as do most religions, to reach as many people as possible, those who are exposed to it can reinterpret the teachings of the faith and make it their own, and this is exactly what occurs within Sebald's novel. Rather than becoming part of English folklore for his martyrdom, which was the result of St. George's staunch Christian beliefs, the English have transformed him from a symbol of Christian faith into one of national identity, one who is no longer famous as a result of his martyrdom, but for his role in a fictional story. Sebald's narrator visits London to see Pisanello's painting, only to discover it has been moved into the basement of the gallery, and there 'lamentably imprisoned in a far too heavy Victorian frame' like a prisoner awaiting trial (2002, p.257). English tradition, here in the form of Victorian aesthetics, now dominates the painting and the image of St. George is now so strongly identified with Englishness that it is shown in the secular National Gallery, a world away from the devotional context of the earlier fresco in the Veronese chapel. The English have managed to create a secularised form of the St. George tale by redefining him as a national, rather than a religious, emblem, while the Italians are shown to have maintained his original position as a religious figure. One can conclude therefore that while cultural exchange clearly has the potential to reap great rewards for both the originating and recipient cultures, as exemplified by the lasting and beautiful works of art found by the narrator, it can also cause mutations of cultural traditions. Cultural exchanges, such as the sharing of the St. George myth, can result in the

subject nation creating its own national symbols inspired by the ideas it receives rather than unquestioningly accepting the new ideology, creating a version that is so fundamentally different as to essentially destroy the original in the process.

The other danger of cultural exchange is quite opposite to this problem: the potential exists for a lifestyle to be overwhelmed by an alternative tradition, resulting in the recipient culture's acceptance of the imposed culture without being provided with ample opportunity to reject it. As the narrator walks the streets of Vienna he passes the Jewish community centre, the windows of which are open, and the children within are 'singing, unaccountably, "Jingle Bells" and "Silent Night" in English'. The Jewish children are singing songs associated primarily with a Christian religious event they should not practice, and are singing these songs in English rather than Austrian (Sebald 2002, p.37). Just as Christianity spread to England along with the image of St. George, English Christianity has spread to Austrian Jews through the popularisation of Christmas songs, perhaps due to the fact that a large proportion of Christmas songs were in fact written by Jews (Foer 2005). The dominant European religion and language have combined in order to overrun another culture, a destructive consequence of the international discourse of cultural exchange. As the narrator completes his retelling of this particular memory he falls asleep in his hotel room with the words, 'Heaps of shoes and snow piled high', linking the destruction of Jewish culture through the sharing of cultural institutions, such as the Christian festival of Christmas, to its destruction through the Nazi-led Holocaust. One need only to visit the museum at Auschwitz to see the 'heaps of shoes' to which Sebald is referring, and the snow accompanying it adds the bleakness of winter and the snow's resemblance to ash in order to complete the image

(2002 p.37).<sup>1</sup> As is usually the case in Sebald's writing, the Holocaust itself is not directly named at this point, but suggested through images and associations, and here the international destruction of culture is one such association, linking the destruction of individual traditions through the dissemination of a dominant culture to the annihilation of a race through direct action. Damaging a culture to such an extent as to make its members use another language and abandon their own traditions, as English Christianity is doing through its expanding influence, is represented as equivalent to the eradication of a race and culture through the murder of its practitioners.

International exchanges, particularly of an economic nature, are once more related to the Holocaust in Sebald's later travelogue *The Rings of Saturn*. Here, as with the heaps of shoes in *Vertigo*, the Holocaust is not directly mentioned but hinted at by the narrator's choice of words and narrative content. The passage wherein this is most apparent is the novel's final chapter, where Sebald's attention turns to the trade of silk and its cultivation in Europe. This, we are shown, is an industry that spread throughout all of Europe and fulfilled a number of additional purposes in pre-war Germany. Citing Joseph von Hazzi's tract *Lehrbuch des Seidenbaus für Deutschland*, Sebald reveals the optimism with which sericulture was at times regarded in his homeland, deemed to herald, among other things, the improvement of the economy and the 'social improvement of the fair sex and all other members of the populace who were unaccustomed to regular work' (2002a, p.290). This attitude to international trade is one that allows the effects of economic progress, such as that which has reached W. upon Sebald's return in *Vertigo*, to become manifest. However the very

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<sup>1</sup> See also the following photograph of one day's shoe collection from Auschwitz for a direct representation of these piles; <<http://bss.sfsu.edu/jacksonc/H317/Holocaust%20Memorials/ShoeHeap.jpg>>, (February 18 2010).

reason this attitude was being espoused by Hazzi was due to Germany's rejection of this trade after its initial failed attempts to secure itself as a major player in the silk industry. This occurred as a result of the 'despotic manner in which German rulers attempted to force [sericulture] along', giving 'extreme financial and physical penalties for transgressing against the silk laws' to members of the population (Sebald 2002a, p.287-288). Here we once again have the narrator bringing together personal domination and international trade: just as St. George's myth and Catholicism overrode the belief systems of the English, the German government attempted to enforce international exchanges upon the general population of their country. However while the English attempted to redefine their position with regards to the cultural artefacts they received from Italy, the German people chose to reject them. This demonstrates an alternative method of dealing with an ideology that is imposed upon a population: they can simply refuse to assimilate it, but unlike a small business like the Veronese pizzeria, the German nation had enough economic influence to survive without the economic input of the silk trade.

It is only once the 'German fascists' acquired power that sericulture was reintroduced in Germany following the previous failures of the German silk industry (Sebald 2002a, p.291). Not only did the Reich very heavily endorse the cultivation of silk, but it promoted it as a necessary step in the preparation for 'the dawning era of aerial warfare' as it re-appropriated what was once an object of international trade for its own internalised use, withdrawing from trade in order to become 'self-sufficient within four years' in the hopes of having an advantage in the impending war (Sebald 2002a, p.292). It was only when silk cultivation became disconnected from trade that it was accepted by the German people, at a time when the nation was

preparing to exert its influence upon other nations leading up to the Second World War, as is revealed in the particular mention of aerial warfare in Professor Lange's pamphlet (Sebald, 2002a, p.292). This withdrawal from international trade comes just before Germany attempts to enforce its own ideologies upon other nations, similarly to the spread of Catholicism through missionary action, with Sebald representing the rise of fascism and the Christian faith as similar in their modes of cultural domination. This is perhaps why Sebald regards a lack of involvement within the European arena with suspicion. This self-supplying silk industry becomes a precursor for the Reich's most infamous attempt at ideological domination, the Holocaust, whereupon the German government's supposition of superiority led to the killing of millions of innocents in an attempt to destroy an ideology with which it did not agree. When Sebald reveals the reasoning behind the use of schools as nurseries for silk worms he paraphrases Professor Lange's idea that children should be taught 'the essential measures which are taken by breeders to monitor productivity and selection, including extermination to pre-empt racial degeneration'. This fiercely eugenicist attitude foregrounds the systematic murder the Germans carried out during the Second World War (2002a, p.292).

This brings us to the final category of international exchange that I wish to discuss – the exchange of destruction and historical tragedy. The primary means of destruction in twentieth century Europe has, in Sebald's novel, been war, primarily the First and Second World Wars, but other conflicts are featured in brief allusions throughout the text and form the basis for much of the 'Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discrete' chapter of the novel. The Second World War is, for Sebald, a prominent example of a shared European calamity:

The pervasiveness of [World War Two] and the fact it wasn't in one or two places but that it happened almost

throughout Europe, and the calamitous dimensions of it, are something that, even though I left Germany when I was twenty-one, I still have in my backpack and I just can't put down (Sebald & Turner 2006, p.28).

The communal tragedy of the Second World War is one that pervades *Vertigo* as much as it does European history. Even in the idyllic surrounds of Lake Garda the narrator became overcome with an overpowering fear that '[froze] my limbs' and that did not leave him 'until we had left Sàlo', the nerve-centre of Benito Mussolini's Sàlo Republic, 'far behind' (Sebald 2002, p.89).

The war, as well as lurking in the narrator's subconscious during his stay in Italy, also enters into his personal history when we accompany him to his hometown of W. Even W. and its citizens witness some events of the Second World War directly, because the nearby Enge Plätt is the location of a 'so-called last skirmish' during the final year of the war in which four German soldiers were killed, later to be memorialised in W.'s churchyard (Sebald 2002, p.181-182). In all, we are told, during the First World War – which remains unnamed within the text, reduced only to its dates, '1914-18' – that '68 of [W.'s] sons laid down their lives for the fatherland' and '125 from [W.'s] ranks did not return home from the Second World War' (Sebald 2002, p.240). These facts serve as a reminder for the reader that not just large cities and ethnic groups suffered in the Wars, but that even small towns experienced the same sense of grief and loss as a result of their occurrence. This emphasis on the smaller losses is typical of Sebald's 'Cultural historiography' that saw him announce 'it wasn't just the great events of the past that determine our lives but every little bit is an evolutionary down-scaling process upon which we come along in the end' (Sebald & Turner 2006, p.24). The smaller losses of the war were just as significant in creating the total destruction of the whole, and this

destruction on every scale was universal within the participating nations. Warfare is the most negative variety of international discourse and exchange, and yet it is warfare that pervades both Sebald's perception of history and writing, partially as a result of his German heritage, and also because of the profound effect it had on the remainder of the twentieth century's political and cultural makeup.

Warfare is also pervasive throughout the novel as a result of its depiction of Marie-Henri Beyle (more famously known as the author Stendhal) and his involvement in the Napoleonic campaigns at the outset of the nineteenth century. While the novel opens with an account of the Napoleonic crossing of the Alps into Italy, we are directly told that Beyle's military career would 'take him the length and breadth of Europe', as it indeed does (Sebald 2002, p.5). What is most interesting about this is the novel's account of Beyle's movements, especially once he begins touring the 'places where the great battles of recent years had been fought' (Sebald 2002, p.15). His tour reaches its climax with his arrival at the sight of the Battle of Merengo, whereupon he is confronted not with the scene of a triumphant victory but a 'few stark trees' and the 'bones of perhaps 16,000 men and 4,000 horses' (Sebald 2002, p.16). The scene is one of destruction of both man and nature, punctuated by dead trees and a monument that fits neither his preconceived notion of the battlefield or its actuality. Having opened the novel with this historic event, Sebald brings the theme around to complete the cycle when he returns to W. Upon encountering the *chasseur* in the loft of which he had been warned throughout his childhood, Sebald's narrator divulges the following information:

From what I have been able to discover since, that uniform, trimmed in the colours pike-grey and green, almost certainly belonged to one of the Austrian *chasseurs*

who fought against the French as irregulars around 1800, a conjecture that gained in plausibility when Lukas told me a story which also went back to Mathild. It seems that one of the more distant Seelos forebears led a contingent of one thousand men levied in the Tyrol across the Brenner Pass, down the Adige, past Lake Garda and onto the upper Italian plains, and there, with all his troops, was killed in the terrible Battle of Merengo (Sebald 2002, p.227-228).

Not only does this distant relative of the Seelos family die in the Battle of Merengo, but he does so as a combatant in the opposing force, the one that Beyle would have faced had it not been for his illness during the battle. The bones upon which Beyle gazes may well be those of the deceased *chasseur* whose uniform the narrator discovers in the attic. Yet the linkages to Sebald's position in time and space within the novel do not end there. The path the *chasseur* takes through the Brenner Pass and past Lake Garda is strikingly similar to Sebald's own journey in the novel. Whereas the *chasseur* proceeds from the Tyrol to Lake Garda via the Brenner Pass, Sebald's narrative takes the reader from the earliest recollection of his retreat from Italy via the Brenner Pass (sharing a carriage with a Tyrolean family), to a trip to Lake Garda seven years later, until most recently he returns to the scene of his birth, W. The narrator's journey also links in with that of Dr. K (a partially fictionalised Franz Kafka), alongside that of the *chasseur* and Marie-Henri Beyle before bringing the narrative and the narrator's personal history to its completion. Time is, in the writing of W.G. Sebald, an interlacing of events and individuals, and by creating this densely woven chronological fabric the narrator is demonstrating just how intertwined the fates of even the most seemingly unrelated people can be connected. Here the lives of a German émigré, a Frenchman, a Czech and an Austrian are all touched upon by the same places, events



and, most significantly, tragedies. In this way, each individual's personal history is made up of a series of shared European locations and events.

The pervasion of destruction throughout history is not the direct result of warfare alone however; the narrator observes several forms of communal tragedy that are not part of a single historical period or event. It is not only individual moments in time and tragedies such as the extended period of warfare during the early twentieth century, but other recurrent tragedies that tie nations' fates together as a result of their occurrence throughout Europe. As well as uniting European nations through the portrayals of both the World Wars and the image of St. George, Sebald demonstrates how other incidents can link seemingly unrelated places, as he does with the town of W. and the city of London during the final chapter of the novel. In the same passage in which Sebald's narrator lists W.'s casualties of the First and Second World Wars he also includes the following events:

In 1511 the Black Death claimed 105 lives. In 1530, 100 houses went up in flames. 1569: the whole settlement devastated in a blaze. 1605: another fire reduced 140 houses to ashes. 1633: W. burned down by the Swedes. 1635: 700 inhabitants died of the plague [...] 1893: on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April a great conflagration destroyed the entire village (Sebald 2002, p.240).

Two recurrent tragedies are made painfully apparent: the most frequent killer in W.'s history is not warfare, but fire, followed closely by the two plagues that the town experienced. This repetition of fire as destroyer returns, alongside its partner the plague, in the novel's closing passages when 'fragments from the account of the Great Fire of London as recorded by Samuel Pepys' take over the narrator's position before the novel closes on the aftermath of the fire. Fire is shown as a universal force capable of destroying settlements of any size, once more solidifying the equivalent significance afforded to both seemingly minor

and major tragedies in the formation of personal history within Sebald's writing. The Great Fire of London, which occurred in 1666CE during the final stages of the last major outbreak of the bubonic plague, completes the linkage between London and W. (Porter 1994, p. 84–86). This act of unifying the United Kingdom and Continental Europe through a shared history of destruction reflects the way fire seemingly acts as a symbol of a much wider history of destruction for Sebald:

When you think of the burning cities and the burning bodies of the 1940's, and then somehow link it up, as I quite often do, with the images of the burning forests of Borneo or of the Amazon. It would be false piety to look back upon 1940–1945 and say “What horrible times these were!” We're still living in the middle of them I feel (Sebald & Turner 2006, p.28).

For Sebald, fire is the symbol of destruction on a massive scale, not just the devastation of the Second World War. As the list of fires that have damaged W. shows, these events happen throughout history. Destruction proceeds heedless of chronology, demonstrating that all times and locations are part of the same shared history, that of the steady progress of destruction across all nations.

The Europe of W.G. Sebald's *Vertigo* is one seemingly founded upon tragedy of both personal and international scales. It is also apparent within Sebald's novel that the primary discourse between nations is not altruistic in nature but of the involuntarily shared tragedies of each nation's past. Such interweaving of the past leads, invariably, to the return of these linkages in the present. Whether it is through the repetition of the same journey by individuals from four separate nations through the Brenner Pass, or the return of plague and fire to cities throughout Europe, the same rule applies in Sebald's cultural historiography. It is not just the international catastrophes, such as the World Wars of the early twentieth-century, that determine the

makeup of twentieth-century Europe, but also the local traumas such as the destruction of a small town in the Alps. '[Sebald's] vision of human devastation and darkness is much larger, at once geophysical and metaphysical,' writes Anderson, and its roots 'lie in a profound meditation on the violence of European Modernity' (2003, p.121). This rooting of Sebald's historical consideration both in the physical and psychological geography of Europe is exhibited through the narrator's actual and imagined movement through the eras and nations of which it is comprised, and it is this freedom of movement that allows the narrator to interrogate the effect of destructive acts of all sizes upon the citizens of Europe. International discourses of ideologies and assets, even of destruction, are performed through every action and interaction that has occurred throughout the past, allowing a sense of European identity to form attached to this shared culture and sense of communal suffering that the Sebaldian narrator is then able to claim for himself. The narrator sheds the outdated idea of a mono-cultural identity in order to engage more fully in the exchange of ideas and art that interests him as a wholly European citizen. Despite the prevalence of this destruction as the foremost form of international exchange within his novel, Sebald reminds the reader that within these international exchanges there remains the opportunity for great art, intellectual discussion and, perhaps most importantly, personal freedom. This is the ideal outcome of European discourse in *Vertigo*, and that which is, although often exploited or subverted by larger political and social bodies, worth persevering for in the hope that it may one day be achieved.

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