‘The Questionable Business of Writing’: Intertextual Anxiety in W. G. Sebald’s *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*
Abstract

This study examines W. G. Sebald’s *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* in relation to his beliefs and doubts regarding the writing of fiction. Highly conscious of his aims as a writer, Sebald’s narratives constantly address the issue of intertextuality. Utilising Bloom’s theories of literary influence, Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, and Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, this study demonstrates how Sebald’s insecurities as a writer are responsible for his characteristic blend of fiction, photography, biography, and history.

The first chapter explores the intertextual presences of Kafka’s ‘The Hunter Gracchus: A Fragment’ and Nabokov’s autobiography *Speak, Memory*. It introduces Sebald’s anxieties regarding literary identity and narrative truth, and also the self-perceived inadequacies engendered by his admiration for Nabokov’s work.

Chapter Two uses *Camera Lucida* to comment upon Sebald’s doubts and their relationship to the presence of photography within his narratives. It questions the connection between memory and photography, and the efficacy of the photograph as a medium for documenting the past.

The final chapter asserts that Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* concerns the literature of the past and its constant presence. It explores the notion of cultural programming in relation to artistic interpretation and the role of literature in the formation of identity.
Contents

Abstract 2
Contents 3
Introduction 4

Chapter One: The Anxiety of Influence and A Map of Misreading

• The Hunter Gracchus: Literary Limbo 6
• Narrative Truth: The Sebaldian Struggle 8
• Nabokov: Artistic Freedom and the Realm of True Instructors 10
• Ferber and the Impossible Portrait 14

Chapter Two: Camera Lucida

• Photographic Evidence 16
• The Image of the Past 18
• The Barthesian Punctum 21
• The Silent Gaze and Literary Imagination 23

Chapter Three: Specters of Marx

• Gracchus: The Spectre of Literature 26
• The Narrator’s Misprision 27
• Speak, Butterfly 29
• Intertextual Ghosts 31

Conclusion 33
Bibliography 34
Introduction

In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (1975), Harold Bloom contributed significantly to literary criticism and postmodern preoccupations with intertextuality. Bloom would ultimately state that no text is born independently, but mutates from the embryonic state of poetic imitation. His dictum was a positive one, asserting that ‘The precursors flood us, and our imagination can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded’ (1973: 154). In this dissertation I demonstrate how the intertextual presences of Kafka’s ‘The Hunter Gracchus: A Fragment’ and Nabokov’s autobiography *Speak, Memory* engender doubts within W. G. Sebald’s *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* and greatly affect their narratives. Using Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* and Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, the narrative consequences of intertextuality will be analysed.

Sebald struggles throughout his texts to escape the influence of his precursors, and the conflict between admiration for his literary forefathers and asserting his own literary identity is constant; regarding *The Emigrants*, Harris argues that ‘the work is […] as much a story of the narrator and his attempt to write these stories as it is a telling of the stories themselves’ (2001: 380) As a result of the meta-fictional nature of Sebald’s texts, the influence of Kafka and Nabokov is hard to trace directly. There are direct intertextual allusions to their works, but these are not of interest to my study. I am interested in how influence dictates Sebald’s approach toward composition and the effects of narrative. Consequently, Sebald’s views toward writing, his respect for Nabokov, and the implications of his project, are considered.
*Camera Lucida* is used to discuss memory and its relationship to photography. Sebald’s narrator and characters regard memory with aversion, and their experiences with photography are troubled by the reopening of the past. I explore how society fixes the past in a photograph, and that this supposedly accurate static image leads to the ignorance of history. Sebald creates a unique narrative effect in aligning the reader’s position with the narrator’s, frequently withholding information from the reader whilst providing a photograph. I suggest that the insufficiency of the photograph leads to a questioning of history and the creation of literature.

*Specters of Marx* combines with Bloom’s theories of literary influence to suggest that the literature of the past always returns to form identity. Discussing how Sebald demonstrates the act of misinterpretation through his narrator, it is shown that literary identity is never separate from the past.
Chapter One: *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*

The Hunter Gracchus: Literary Limbo

The concept of intertextuality asserts that the creation of literature is a continual borrowing from the past. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom states that ‘Poetic history [...] [is] indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves’ (1973: 5). Kafka’s Gracchus fragment makes repeated reference to the various masters of the ship he travels on, and Sebald identifies these masters as symbolic of Kafka’s literary forefathers. In *Vertigo*, the character of Dr K., a fictional rendering of Kafka, is described as feeling a ‘tacit solidarity’ (1990: 157) with the general who declares that ‘Tiny details imperceptible to us decide everything! [...] Stendhal had a clearer grasp of this than any high command [...] and now, in my old age, I have apprenticed myself to that old master’ (156-7). By referring to Stendhal as a master, Sebald alludes to the masters of the Gracchus texts and draws attention to his own interpretation of the masters as literary ghosts. Gracchus’s relationship to the masters that come and go suggest the doubts of literary endeavour and anxiety. Gracchus says how ‘They are excellent men, these masters. Except that I don’t understand them. I don’t mean their language [...] [as] Over the centuries I’ve learned enough languages to act as interpreter between this generation and their ancestors. What I don’t understand is the way the masters’ minds work’ (Kafka 1917: 231). As symbolic of the struggling writer, Bloom’s archetypal poet at the end of literary tradition, Gracchus can interpret the writings of his literary forefathers but cannot comprehend how they have created their works. The
potential for Gracchus to misinterpret the minds of his masters is synonymous with the poet’s misreading of his literary forefathers.

The narrator of the second section of Vertigo, ‘All’estero’, like Gracchus, suffers insecurities due to the self-doubt regarding his abilities to understand his literary forefathers and match their achievements. To Sebald, Gracchus’s perpetual journey signifies the writer and his inability to forge his own identity as a result of the presence of his literary influences. Whilst attempting to lose himself in Venice the narrator denounces his wanderings as futile, complaining that ‘If the paths I had followed had been inked in, it would have seemed as though a man had kept trying out new tracks and connections over and over, only to be thwarted by the limitations of his reason, imagination or will-power’ (Sebald 1990: 34). The narrator’s inability to get lost in Venice prevents his efforts at forming his own experiences and literary personality; he is stuck in a literary limbo and, like Gracchus, follows a repetitive path against his will. As Parks suggests, the ‘coincidence that Stendhal, Kafka, and Sebald all take similar trips at similar times of year [...] removes uniqueness from these events; the recurrence diminishes the original, replaces it, falsifies it’ (2000: 31). The narrator’s experiences of Venice are shrouded in the shadow of feeling ‘as Grillparzer did on his journeys [...] the sights [...] infinitely disappointing, one and all’ (Sebald 1990: 53), and he struggles to ‘shake off a sense of the uncanny’ (54); his feeling of the uncanny results from the realisation that he is repeating the past and the actions of his literary forefathers. Long argues that his dissatisfaction becomes a clichéd literary trope, with Sebald’s narrator unable to ‘stake [...] [a] claim to originality or authenticity’ (2010: 75) due to his ‘recourse to activities and representational strategies that have long been part of the anti-tourist’s repertoire’. As well as his inability to lose himself and forge an individual literary identity,
then, the narrator repeats the feelings and thoughts of his literary influences and further de-individualises himself. Bloom outlines the frustration that Sebald exhibits in his narrator: ‘No one can bear to see his own inner struggle as being mere artifice, yet the poet, in writing his poem, is forced to see the assertion against influence as being a ritualized quest for identity’ (1973: 65). Sebald’s ‘quest for identity’ engenders doubt in himself as a writer and his narrator struggles throughout *Vertigo* to balance the literary past with his identity.

**Narrative Truth: The Sebaldian Struggle**

As well as identifying with the character of Gracchus, Sebald’s doubts also correlate with Gracchus’s guest. In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom asserts that the strength of literary ghosts and their influence ‘increases as the struggling poet’s distance from them lengthens in time’ (1975: 17). Gracchus turns to his guest to shed light on the way the masters’ minds work, to which he replies ‘How could I explain anything to you, compared with whom I am but a babbling babe?’ (Kafka 1917: 231). The guest presumes that his inexperience and age render his views perfunctory and naïve when compared with Gracchus, and the distance between the struggling poet and his literary ghosts is suggested. The guest’s doubt in himself is synonymous with the anxieties that Sebald experiences as a writer; he explains that ‘one of the central problems of fiction writing, which is that of legitimacy and the arrival at the truth on a crooked route’ (Sebald in interview with Green, 2000) is a concern of the novel, which ‘is why “vertigo” in German has a double meaning -- *schwindel* in German means “swindle”. What right do you have to write about any of these things? Have you been there, and felt these things for yourself?’ With his heightened concern for truth within fiction, Sebald sees himself as Gracchus’s ‘babbling’ (Kafka 1917: 231) guest. This, again, is shown through the
narrator of ‘All’estero’. After reading about the murders carried out by Organizzazione Ludwig, the narrator attempts to write a crime story based around the news article. When later looking over his writings, the narrator describes his efforts as ‘the most meaningless, empty, dishonest scrawl’ (Sebald 1990: 95) and cannot continue the story. The narrator’s discomfort with the truth of the story based on reality reflects Sebald’s own reservations regarding the writing of fiction, and the insufficiency of his own knowledge about the murders. The discomfort Sebald associates with swindling his reader is a central ingredient which results in the unusual mixture of factual and fictional narrative throughout *Vertigo*.

Sebald has to balance the lives of his literary forefathers within the framework of a fictional narrative, and he draws attention to himself as the writer repeatedly. In ‘Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet’, the narrator prefaces Mme Gherardi’s appearance with a theory that ‘There is reason to suspect that Beyle used her name as a cipher for various lovers […] and [she] was merely a phantom’ (Sebald 1990: 21-22) and that it is ‘unclear at what time in his life Beyle made the journey with Mme Gherardi, always supposing that he made the journey at all’ (22). Whilst up to this point the reader sees Sebald’s narrative as following Beyle’s life closely, the questioning of Mme Gherardi’s existence exposes the vulnerability of the narrative and Sebald’s unwilling position of potential swindler. This is seen again in ‘Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva’ when the narrator admits that ‘How Dr K. passed his few days in Venice in reality, we do not know […] We know, as I have said, nothing of what he really saw’ (148). The reader’s experience of the text is interrupted and they are prompted to question the narrative and investigate the events within it, recognising that the narrator is not omniscient. Sebald’s narrative is cut short by the lack of biographical documentation, and there is a sense of frustration in the narrator’s reliance on factual stimulation. This is
suggested by the envy of the narrator in ‘All’estero’ when he visits the Biblioteca Civica and comments how the list-making librarian possessed ‘every detail he needed for the composition of [the] visibly lengthening register in his head […] [continuing] his writing without ever referring to any source’ (122). Sebald’s conflicted position between fact and fiction is linked to his fear of becoming the ‘babbling babe’ (Kafka 1917: 231) of the Gracchus fragment; Sebald is almost paranoid of losing himself in the creation of fiction. In *The Emigrants*, Sebald struggles between his concern for truth and the influence of one of his major literary forefathers.

**Nabokov: Artistic Freedom and the Realm of True Instructors**

Nabokov’s autobiography *Speak, Memory* engenders doubt within *The Emigrants*, and Sebald’s writing in general, by producing a conflict between artistic freedom and factually based historical narrative. Nabokov’s confidence with the world he records for the reader is shown throughout *Speak, Memory*:

> while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time. Lost in thought, he taps his knee with his wandlike pencil, and at the same instant a car (New York license plate) passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door of a neighbouring porch […] a granule of cinder-gray sand is rolled by the wind on Venus […] and trillions of other such trifles occur – all forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N. Y.) is the nucleus (1967: 165)

The poet, in Nabokov’s view, is an infinitely powerful observer capable of almost becoming the centre of everyday events. This scene is alluded to in *The Emigrants*, in an instance which is fundamentally dissimilar: ‘I felt as if I and the car I sat in were being guided by remote control through an outsize toyland where the place names had been picked at
random by some invisible child, from the ruins of another world long since abandoned’ (Sebald 1993: 105). Sebald views the world around him with suspicion, an ‘outsized toyland’ created at random by an ‘invisible child’; he does not possess Nabokov’s unbridled confidence in the powers of the poet, or the joy of observing the world.

As has been discussed with regards to Vertigo, Sebald is conflicted in his attitudes toward the composition of fiction. This highly self-conscious position, however, is a significant facet of Sebald’s writing; he described how, in the act of writing ‘You have this string of lies, and by this detour you arrive at a form of truth which is more precise, one hopes, than something which is strictly provable’ (Cuomo 2001: 108). Speak, Memory serves as an archetype for The Emigrants, with Sebald endeavouring to balance narrative truth with the effects of Nabokov’s writing. In his essay ‘Dream Textures: A brief note on Nabokov’, Sebald admiringly states that in Nabokov’s writing ‘one is borne along by the current of lines sweeping on and on into a radiant realm which, like everything that is wonderful, has a touch of the surreal about it, and finally seems to stand on the threshold of the revelation of an absolute truth’ (1996: 152). Although Sebald admires the ‘touch of the surreal’ in Nabokov’s writing, the nature of Sebald’s project does not allow him the same manner of artistic freedom as Nabokov. As Curtin and Shrayer assert, both

Nabokov and Sebald faced the predicament of the post-war artist who writes to address the Shoah: the imperative to remember and to try and make sense of unimaginable evil and the seeming impossibility of such a task, as well as the very real possibility of reducing or cheapening history by and through its fictionalization (2005: 259)

Unlike Nabokov, though, Sebald cannot confront the history of his subjects and their suffering directly as he has not lived the life of those he is writing about. Sebald is at odds
between presenting the past accurately, or crafting an aesthetically rewarding fiction and as a result doing injustice to the stories he has been granted access to; concerning this he stated that ‘the only way in which one can approach these things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation’ (Silverblatt, 2001: 80). Instead of revelling in the creation of literature as in Nabokov’s Speak, Memory, Sebald asserts that writing is inherently flawed: ‘You have one image and you have to make something of it – half a page, or three quarters […] – and it only works through linguistic or imaginative elaboration. Of course, you might well think, as you do this, that you are directing some sort of sham reality’ (Cuomo, 2001: 114). Sebald can see his literary project as only succeeding through ‘imaginative elaboration’, but in trying to produce an effective narrative he becomes concerned with its truth and the creation of a ‘sham reality’. Sebald’s desire to create the surreal effects of Nabokov’s writing conflicts with his ambition to reach the ‘radiant realm’ (Sebald 1996: 152) of ‘absolute truth’.

Sebald’s desire to create the effects of Nabokov’s writing is argued by Bloom to be a symptom of creative anxiety. In A Map of Misreading, Bloom states that the ‘compulsion to repeat the precursor’s patterns […] is an attempt to recover the prestige of origins, the oral authority of a prior Instruction […] [and] such mediation holds open the perpetual possibility of one’s own sublimity, one’s elevation to the realm of true Instructors’ (1975: 59). Sebald hopes to create what he sees Nabokov achieving: ‘writing, as Nabokov practised it, is raised on high by the hope that, given sufficient concentration, the landscapes of time that have already sunk below the horizon can be seen once again in a synoptic view’ (Sebald 1996: 151). Sebald’s ambition to equal Nabokov, becoming a part of ‘the realm of true Instructors’ (Bloom 1975: 59), is a constant preoccupation throughout The Emigrants. Nabokov is
optimistic in his attitude to memory, as exhibited in a number of passages in *Speak Memory*. Speaking of his youth and his efforts at recalling it, Nabokov says how ‘I witness with pleasure the supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past’ (1967: 128). Sebald does not regard memory with the same degree of optimism as Nabokov. When retelling Ambros Adelwarth’s life, the narrator’s Aunt Fini casually remarks that ‘in my mind’s eye I always see Ambros crossing Lake Constance from Lindau by steamer, in the moonlight, although that can scarcely be how it was in reality’ (Sebald 1993: 77). Although a passing comment, it suggests Sebald’s predicament; the distortion of memory, and the consequential difficulty of his project. Ambros himself is wary of memory, saying how it ‘often strikes one as a kind of dumbness. It makes one’s head heavy and giddy, as if one were not looking back down the receding perspectives of time but rather down on the earth from a great height, from one of those towers whose tops are lost to view in the clouds’ (145). The figures in Sebald’s narrative do not believe in ‘the supreme achievement of memory’ (Nabokov 1967: 128), and he has to attempt to reflect this in *The Emigrants*. Although many of the figures in *The Emigrants* regard memory with suspicion, Sebald cannot wholly lend himself to the gaps and distortions inherent in their stories as he has to render a comprehensible narrative for his reader. The fictional character of Max Ferber, a painter living in Manchester, symbolises Sebald’s struggle with the narrative and his hopes to become a ‘true Instructor’ (Bloom 1975: 59).
Ferber and the Impossible Portrait

The narrator of *The Emigrants* watches Ferber as he paints, commenting that ‘The painter lacked the necessary skill, and the perspective he had chosen was a difficult one, as a result of which both the human figures and the beasts of burden were slightly distorted, so that, if you half shut your eyes, the scene looked like a mirage, quivering in the heat and light’ (Sebald 1993: 164). The narrator highlights Ferber’s inadequacies, almost patronisingly stating that he ‘lacked the necessary skill’ that all painters should possess. The flawed painting, the distorted figures and Ferber’s difficulty in rendering them, is symbolic of Sebald’s literary project and his self-perceived inadequacies. After appearing throughout *The Emigrants*, referred to as the butterfly man, Nabokov becomes the subject of one of Ferber’s ‘most unsatisfactory works’ (174) resulting in an unprecedented struggle, as ‘in [...] [Ferber’s] view it conveyed not even the remotest impression of the strangeness it referred to. Work on the picture of the butterfly man had taken more out of him than any previous painting [...] he destroyed it and burnt it several times’ (174). The seeming impossibility of capturing Nabokov’s portrait, the ‘strangeness’ of his presence, describes the difficulties of achieving the surreal effects of Nabokov’s writing that Sebald experiences throughout *The Emigrants*. The admiration that Sebald holds for Nabokov’s work becomes the drive for both his ambitions as a writer, and his neuroses; he says how

> There are passages in Nabokov’s memoirs which touch you physically when you read them. But whether any of my stuff falls into that box I wouldn’t know. And even when you do produce a passage which you feel is quite good, you feel like a swindler at that moment, because you get a sense of gratification, of having pulled something off (Sebald in interview with Green, 2000)
Bloom outlines this struggle, saying how ‘The Anxiety of Influence is so terrible because it is both a kind of separation anxiety and the beginning of a compulsion neurosis, or fear of a death that is a personified superego’ (1973: 58). Recounting a dream to Sebald, Ferber sees his father’s art collection with his own paintings interspersed, but he says how ‘to my dismay they differed not at all, or only insignificantly, from the salon pieces’ (Sebald 1993: 176). Sebald and Ferber regard their works with self-conscious disdain. The model of the Temple of Solomon is emblematic of Ferber and Sebald’s insecurities: ‘Just look, said Frohmann: you can see every crenellation on the towers, every curtain, every threshold, every sacred vessel. And I, said Ferber, bent down over the diminutive temple and realized, for the first time in my life, what a true work of art looks like’ (176). Frohmann’s ability to render the model perfectly from memory suggests a central facet to Sebald’s doubts as a writer. Through discussing the concepts surrounding Barthes’ Camera Lucida in relation to Vertigo and The Emigrants, however, imperfect memory is shown to be a reality which is central to producing Sebald’s own narrative effects.
Chapter Two: Camera Lucida

Photographic Evidence

Barthes posits that the photograph ‘is violent [...] because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and [...] in it nothing can be refused or transformed’ (1980: 91). Photographs function as a fixed memory, and although the photograph seems to capture an event completely, this perceived accuracy can be a dangerous self-delusion and lead to an incomplete recollection of the past. The optimism with which Nabokov regards memory is shown to be problematic throughout Sebald’s texts. In ‘Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet’, Sebald uses the character of Beyle to reflect this conflicted position. This is suggested by the plaster cast of Métilde’s hand that Beyle obtains. Beyle renders every detail of the hand, even ‘the slight crookedness of the ring finger’ (Sebald 1990: 21). Capturing Métilde’s image and the emotions of the past, the cast comes to mean ‘almost as much to him as Métilde herself could ever have done’. The cast becomes symbolic of the photograph; with Métilde gone and their relationship irrecoverable, Beyle convinces himself that the visual rendering of her hand is a sufficient document of the past. Sebald uses Beyle to suggest the potential for memory to be replaced by a visual document and, eventually, forgotten entirely. Beyle recalls that the memory of a town he visited years before was replaced by an engraving that he once saw in a newspaper, ‘a copy of that very engraving’ (Sebald 1990: 8) and that consequently ‘Beyle’s advice is not to purchase engravings of fine views and prospects seen on one’s travels, since before long they will displace our memories completely, indeed one might say they destroy them’ (8). As symbolic of the photograph,
the engraving is shown to take the place of memory whilst leaving out any details which are personal to Beyle.

This is seen in a different manner with the photograph of Kafka in ‘Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva’.

Capturing a rare moment in the narrative where Dr K. is outwardly happy around other people, the photograph emphasises the limited preservation of the past. Long suggests how ‘The Kafka image is a particularly radical variant of [...] [the] structure of mediated experience, since it is a photographic record of nothing beyond the act of being photographed. This image has abandoned all pretence of reference to a real experience’ (2007: 67). There is no real motivation for Dr K.’s happiness; the photograph does not reflect the subsequent misery of Dr K. throughout the narrative and it is in itself a non-event. With the appearance of capturing a moment or scene, where nothing can be ‘refused
or transformed’ (Barthes 1980: 91), the authority of the photograph ironically results in its limited ability to represent the past.

The Image of the Past

In Speak, Memory, Nabokov says how ‘A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present [...] Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die’ (1967: 52). The photograph becomes symbolic of the need for society to perpetuate the image of an ideal past, whilst denying the present. Barthes posits that the photograph is

a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, shared hallucination (on the one hand “it is not there,” on the other “but it has indeed been”): a mad image, chafed by reality (1980: 115)

The characters in Vertigo and The Emigrants are confronted with their past and ‘chafed by reality’, violently reminded that it is irrecoverable. Barzilai further suggests that in the Sebaldian text

memories brought up from the depths of the protagonists’ psyches and the reproduced photographs share the uncanny quality of something that was once familiar but that, over time, has become alien or strange [...] [and] through the act of photography, the subject [...] is captured and defamiliarized, turned into an object for contemplation (2006: 211)

This defamiliarisation in The Emigrants is made most explicit in the scene where the narrator is visiting Dr Selwyn. Selwyn and Edwin show the narrator a slide projection of their trip to the Alps taken as young men. Whilst speaking prolifically on the photographs of the plants and creatures they observed during the trip, when they see a photograph of
themselves they are silenced: ‘this return of their past selves was an occasion for some emotion. But it may be that it merely seemed that way to me because neither Edwin nor Dr Selwyn was willing to or able to make any remark concerning these pictures’ (Sebald 1993: 17). Selwyn and Edwin remember the past but, as Barzilai suggests, the passing of time has rendered this image of themselves ‘alien or strange’ (2006: 211). Barthes’ ‘temporal hallucination’ (1980: 115) arrests their present selves in contemplation of the once familiar past. Sebald suggests that the preservation of happiness in a photograph or memory is dangerous to revisit. After a period of romantic rejection, Beyle attempts to relive his past whilst attending the opera Il Matrimonio Segreto for the second time, but cannot conjure up his former joy: ‘unable to imagine himself among the protagonists as he had done in Ivrea […] he was now so far removed from it all that the music well-nigh broke his heart’ (Sebald 1990: 15). Beyle’s memory of the past, fixed as a photograph, causes his grief; his need to relive the past as it is in his memory, ‘false on the level of perception, true on the level of time’ (Barthes 1980: 115), leads to his defamiliarised sense of self and memory of the opera. The narrator of Vertigo experiences this same abstraction from the past when he returns to Venice.
The narrator passes by the pizzeria that he visits earlier in the narrative and finds that it has closed down. Like Selwyn and Beyle, the narrator’s past is reopened but defamiliarised. In attempting to make sense of this alteration of his memory, the narrator asks the photographer in the shop next door, who is unwilling to provide the information or take a photograph of the pizzeria. Significantly, it is a photographer who denies the narrator an explanation. Through the character of the photographer, Sebald suggests the lack inherent in photography. As with Métilde’s hand and the photograph of Dr K., the past is suggested but the complete history is not communicated. The photographer further emphasises this when the narrator notes that ‘I heard him utter a screed of savage curses behind my back, curses which seemed directed less at myself than at some incident which had happened in the restaurant next door’ (Sebald 1990: 125). Sebald aligns the reader’s position with the narrator; because the pizzeria is significant in that it appears earlier in the narrative, the
reader is also interested in its reason for closing down. Scott asserts that the ‘teleological perspective projects the photograph out across its future, towards its encounters with countless spectators for whom it is ostensibly unfamiliar, but who strike up with it relationships of mysterious familiarity. Photos may not be ours, but it may be as if we had taken them’ (2008: 211). Instead of producing the surreal Nabokovian effects that Sebald admires the reader experiences the ‘temporal hallucination’ (1980: 115) defined by Barthes, sharing the narrator’s need to comprehend what was once familiar. Although unsettling, this constant displacement of perspective and memories is central to Sebald’s project.

The Barthesian Punctum

Near the beginning of the chapter on Ambros Adelwarth, the narrator describes the feeling he experiences whilst looking through his mother’s family photograph album. A photograph of a family dinner is included in the narrative, and the narrator says how ‘The longer I studied the photographs, the more urgently I sensed a growing need to learn more about the lives of the people in them’ (Sebald 1993: 71). By including the photograph within the text, Sebald prompts the reader to experience the same degree of curiosity as the narrator.

The lack of information is central to Sebald’s use of photography. Whilst the narrator is speaking with his Aunt Fini regarding the trip Ambros took with his close friend Cosmo Solomon, she says how ‘I cannot tell you anything of what happened on that journey […] because Uncle Adelwarth would never answer questions about it. But there is a photo of him in Arab costume, taken when they were in Jerusalem’ (1993: 94-5).
At this point in the narrative there is no story to accompany the photograph, and the reader experiences the frustration of photography’s claim to record an event sufficiently. When the photograph is referenced later in the narrative, through Ambros’s diary account of the trip, the presence of Sebald as the author of the diary is emphasised. Blackler argues that what the photographs ‘enunciate is the presence both of the narrator and of the author, the strange dualism of the constructed voicing of the text (the narrator) and that which that voicing represents but which is always withheld (the author). This lends the texts much of their sense of the uncanny’ (2007: 140). By not providing a story to accompany the photograph at this point in the narrative, Sebald manipulates the reader’s experience and makes them highly conscious of the role of the writer in society’s comprehension of the past.
In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes asserts that ‘Society [...] mistrust pure meaning: It wants pure meaning, but at the same time it wants this meaning to be surrounded by a noise [...] which will make it less acute’ (1980: 36). The wish to keep the past as the mind remembers it, as a static image, implies to a certain degree the fear of displacing a memory, as in the cases of Selwyn and Beyle. Sebald, on the other hand, is driven by a compulsion to dispel this noise:

I have always had a thing about old photographs. The older pictures have an uncanny ability of suggesting that there is another world where the departed are. A black-and-white photograph is a document of an absence, and is almost curiously metaphysical [...] The figures in photographs have been muted, and they stare out at you as if they are asking for a chance to say something (Sebald in interview with Green, 2000)

Ironically, the muted condition of a photograph functions as the noise which Barthes describes: the lack of a voice and a story, as discussed previously. Ambros and Cosmo’s trip takes them to a small village where they come to a mosque and a young dervish ‘aged about twelve [...] wearing a high brimless camel-hair toque on his head’ (Sebald 1993: 134-5); intrigued by the boy, Ambros goes on to write how ‘I spoke to him in Turkish, but he only looked at us without a word’.
The photograph included by Sebald again brings the position of the reader in line with the narrator, the reader exposed to the silence of the boy. The boy is a photograph, with no voice and no way for Ambros and Cosmo to communicate with him and learn his story. Barthes describes this, asserting that ‘what the chemical action develops is undevelopable, an essence (of a wound), what cannot be transformed but only repeated under the instances of insistence (of the insistent gaze)’ (1980: 49). It is the silence of a photograph which makes the ‘insistent gaze’ so forceful. In the middle of ‘Ambros Adelwarth’, the narrator recalls his time in Deauville and draws attention to ‘what was once the most luxurious hotel on the coast of Normandy’ (Sebald 1993: 118) succumbing to the changes of time: ‘Most of the flats have long been empty, their owners having departed this life. But there are still some indestructible ladies who come every summer and haunt the immense edifice. They pull the white dustsheets off the furniture for a few weeks and at night, silent on their biers, they lie in the empty midst of it’ (118). The women have become photographs, fixed in the luxury of the past and silent. Sebald asserted that
I realise that making in prose a decent pattern out of what happens to come your way is a preoccupation which, in a sense, has no higher ambitions than, for a brief moment in time, to rescue something out of that stream of history that keeps rushing past. This is why, among other reasons, I have photographs in the text, because the photograph is perhaps the paradigm of it all. The photograph is meant to get lost somewhere in a box in an attic (Sebald in interview with Turner, 1998: 24)

Photography is used by Sebald to demonstrate the need for history to be re-evaluated and questioned constantly to render a more accurate understanding from our present standpoint.
Chapter Three: *Specters of Marx*

**Gracchus: The Spectre of Literature**

Although most overtly regarding the ghost of communism, Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* also suggests the spectre of literature, and combines with Bloom’s theories of literary influence to create a complex reading of Sebald’s texts. Derrida speaks of how the spectre ‘looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there [...] we do not see who looks at us’ (1993: 6).

Sebald’s literary forefathers permeate the narrative of *Vertigo* in the very manner that Derrida defines. Alone in Vienna, the narrator of *Vertigo* begins to hallucinate and imagines that ‘the poet Dante, banished from his home town [...] [was walking] a short distance ahead of me, distinctly taller than the people in the street, yet he passed by them unnoticed’ (Sebald 1990: 35). As Derrida asserts ‘we do not see who looks at us’ (1993: 6); Dante’s spectre is unseen by the crowd. Sebald, by alluding to the exiled status of Dante and the crowd’s ignorance of the spectre, also draws an intertextual reference to Kafka’s Gracchus. Also a perpetual exile, forced to travel foreign seas, Gracchus’s tale has been forgotten by the world; Sebald recognises in Gracchus’s altered status in the world the change of cultural knowledge. Gracchus is under the impression that his legend is still a part of culture: ‘That old, old story. All the books are full of it, teachers draw it on the blackboard in every school [...] historians in their studies realize with open mouths what happened long ago and never cease describing it’ (233). Gracchus’s guest, however, says how ‘it’s a fact that you are not the talk of the town, however many subjects are discussed you are not among them, the world goes on its way and you go on your journey’ (233). Sebald sees
Gracchus’s story as an allegory for the spectre of literature in a world devoid of an awareness of literary history; he stated that

What drew me in is the way in which literary and life experience overlap in that story. We are thrown into four or five cultural relationships of various types, and in turn the narrator is informed and programmed by this cultural knowledge. If one writes at this point in time, you cannot pretend that you are not programmed to a large extent by culture rather than by nature (Sebald in interview with Green, 2000)

Gracchus’s guest is seen by Sebald as emblematic of this cultural ignorance. The notion of being ‘programmed’ by cultural knowledge forces Dante and Gracchus’s spectres out of the world by a shifting literary consciousness. The crowd do not see Dante; it is only Sebald, aware of his existence, that can see the spectre of literature. Sebald goes on to say how ‘We are being reduced to curiously gesticulating forms of spoken language, which mimic what we see on the screens before us. It is crucial that we have some knowledge of how far we have already been pushed as a species, beyond our original form of dignity’. It is suggested that the shift of culture leads to a lack of history creates an inferior cultural consciousness. It is Sebald’s concern for becoming a ‘babbling’ (Kafka 1917: 231) writer, and his highly self-conscious regard for narrative truth, that is behind his disdain for this ignorance. When the narrator of Vertigo later speaks directly of the Gracchus story, this position is ironically adopted.

The Narrator’s Misprision

The narrative of Vertigo turns toward the Gracchus story and the narrator’s interpretation of it, insisting that ‘the huntsman’s ceaseless journey lies in a penitence for a longing for love, such as invariably besets Dr K.’ (Sebald 1990: 165). Sebald’s narrator avoids the
concept of cultural programming as Sebald himself asserts as his interpretation and instead adopts a limited and clichéd reading of the Gracchus story. The purpose of this intentionally limited interpretation is complex, as Sebald transforms *Vertigo* into a meta-narrative in the process. Misinterpretation is central to Bloom’s concept of literary influence: ‘A poet interpreting his precursor […] must falsify by his reading. Though this falsification can be quite genuinely perverse or even ill-willed, it need not be […] But it must be a falsification, because every strong reading insists that the meaning it finds is exclusive and accurate’ (1975: 69). Derrida and Bloom are identical in their belief that for a future to be possible, the past must be misinterpreted; Derrida asserts that one must assume the inheritance of Marxism, assume its most “living” part, which is to say, paradoxically, that which continues to put back on the drawing board the question of life, spirit, or the spectral, of life-death beyond the opposition between life and death. This inheritance must be reaffirmed by transforming it as radically as will be necessary (1993: 67)

Sebald’s narrator enacts Derrida and Bloom’s concepts of influence, radically falsifying Sebald’s own interpretation of the Gracchus story and demonstrating the dangers of cultural programming. At the same time Sebald uses the extreme example of his narrator to dispel the feelings of inadequacy described in ‘All’estero’ regarding the formation of literary identity. Sebald suggests that the narrator’s doubts in Venice are naïve, and that literary identity can never exist separate from intertextual influence. The spectre of literature is seen by Sebald to be a constant presence, and throughout *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* it pervades the lives of his subjects.
Speak, Butterfly

The function of the butterfly man is not defined by Sebald’s narrative; his appearances provoke contradictory reactions from those that see him. Derrida suggests that the spectre’s return is uncertain: ‘no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future, for the revenant may already mark the promised return of the specter of living being’ (1993: 123). Ambros, whilst in a sanatorium in Ithaca, tells Aunt Fini that the butterfly man ‘comes round here quite often’ (104) and she says how ‘I thought I caught an undertone of mockery in the words’. Shortly after in the narrative Dr Abramsky, one of Ambros’s doctors, tells the narrator of an instance where Ambros misses his first treatment of shock therapy, to which he responds that ‘It must have slipped my mind whilst I was waiting for the butterfly man’ (115). For Ambros, the spectre of the butterfly man is a constant presence that leads him to remember the past against his will. In the diary of Luisa Ferber, Max Ferber’s mother, she sees a young boy with a butterfly net shortly after meeting a man named Fritz. When he proposes to her, Luisa says how she ‘nodded, and, though everything else around me blurred, I saw that long-forgotten Russian boy as clearly as anything […] I saw him as a messenger of joy, returning from that distant summer day to open his specimen box and release the most beautiful admirals, peacock butterflies, brimstones and tortoiseshells to signal my final liberation’ (214). With the contradictory reactions of Ambros and Luisa to the butterfly man, his function is left unclear. Curtin and Shrayer assert that this is a characteristic of the Nabokovian text, saying how in ‘Nabokov’s art, the text is often constructed around a definitive controlling vision that the reader can decode […] bestowing a higher unity upon the logic of the whole’ (2005: 272). Although Sebald does not make the Nabokov figure’s meaning explicit, it is suggested by his assertion
that ‘Without memories there wouldn’t be any writing: the specific weight an image or phrase needs to get across to the reader can only come from things remembered – not from yesterday but from a long time ago’ (Sebald in interview with Jaggi, 2001). Nabokov and his presence in The Emigrants celebrates remembrance as integral to existence, and literature enables a person to comprehend their life.

When the narrator of The Emigrants visits Ferber after a number of years, he describes how Ferber exclaims ‘Aren’t we all getting on!’ (180) and gestures towards a copy of a Rembrandt portrait ‘which still hung in the same place on the wall as it had twenty-five years before, and added: Only he doesn’t seem to get any older’. Like Bereyter, Ferber finds meaning in the art of the past and the constant presence of it, surviving the changes of history. Bereyter uses literature as a way of making sense of his own position:

He copied out passages into notebooks which give a good idea of how much the lives of these particular authors interested him [...] as if Paul had been gathering evidence, the mounting weight of which, as his investigations proceeded, finally convinced him that he belonged to the exiles and not to the people of S (Sebald 1993: 58-9)

Although Bereyter uses literature to legitimise his decision to end his life, the writers allow him to recognise his subjugation and the mistreatment he has experienced. Bereyter’s obsession with copying out the writings of the past signifies literature’s role in the formation of culture and history. It is literature which allows Bereyter to assert his own identity, as the narrator of Vertigo attempts to do constantly.
Intertextual Ghosts

The spectre of literature in *Vertigo* appears frequently to the narrator. During his childhood, the narrator becomes severely ill; he describes how ‘my lips [were] cracked and grey and flaking and in my mouth the foul taste of the rotting skin in my throat’ (250). With this comment, the narrator makes reference to Beyle’s throat disease earlier in the narrative, for which an unusual triptych of illustrations emphasise its significance. Pearson suggests that ‘the more the reader becomes aware of the narratives network on inter- and intra- textual allusions, the greater the dislocation of the normal process of reading […] as factual narrative gives way to dream or hallucination, [and] continuity is broken by sudden shifts in time and space (2008: 264). Sebald emphasises the coincidences between the narrator’s life and the texts that occupy his imagination, which he recognises throughout the narrative whilst recollecting his past. Walking around his home town at a ‘sombre midday hour’ (Sebald 1990: 245), a limousine passes by the narrator, and he says how ‘there was no doubt in my mind that the driver of the car […] was none other than King Melchior, and that he bore with him […] several ounces of gold, a frankincense caddy and an ebony box filled with myrrh’. Weller suggests that ‘Sebald’s writing of the negative is almost always disquieted by intertextual ghosts’ (2008: 70). Indeed, just prior to seeing the figure of Princess Elizabeth, daughter of King James I, the narrator says how ‘there were so many people crowding the platforms that I feared they were fleeing from a city doomed or already laid waste’ (Sebald 1990: 254). With the spectre a returning presence, the narrator is the link between the past and the present. Although in this privileged position, the narrator cannot find the words to respond to Elizabeth’s versifying, saying how
That I did not know what to respond at the time, did not know how this winter verse continued, and, despite the feelings within me, could not say a word but merely stood there stupid and mute, looking out on a world that was now almost gone in the fading twilight, is something which, since that day, I have often much regretted (256)

This inability to interact with Elizabeth is linked to the narrator's own self-perceived inadequacies, but we see in the final pages of *Vertigo* that the function of the spectre is not necessarily to provoke a direct response. On a train from Liverpool Street station, the narrator paints a quietly despairing scene of his poor fellow travellers, who had all set off early that morning neatly turned out and spruced up, but [who] were now slumped in their seats like a defeated army and, before they turned to their newspapers, were staring out at the desolate forecourts of the metropolis with fixed unseeing eyes (260)

Instead of continuing to contemplate his surroundings directly, the narrator is instead taken by a daydream:

> Into that breathless void, then, words returned to me as an echo that had almost faded away – fragments from the account of the Great Fire of London as recorded by Samuel Pepys [...] The glare around us everywhere, and yonder, before the darkened skies, in one great arc the jagged wall of fire. And, the day after, a silent rain of ashes, westward, as far as Windsor Park (262-263)

The narrator comprehends his surroundings by an intertextual scene, balancing literature and history. The spectre of literature returns to give the narrator a respite from reality, his imagination allowing him this freedom.
Conclusion

Nabokov’s unflinching respect for memory is absent in Sebald’s narratives. Sebald addresses the past through his use of photography and shows that although seeming to render a memory, and potentially assisting the act of remembrance, it instead encourages a memory to be incomplete or forgotten altogether. With the past so vulnerable to distortion, Sebald suggests that photography prevents society from revisiting and re-evaluating history. The desire to keep a memory fixed in the past is easily fulfilled through the medium of photography, with the potential for the sequence of a person’s life organized in an easily digestible form. Through the inclusion of photography within his narratives, Sebald deconstructs the family album and forces the reader to scrutinise its insufficiency as a medium. The reader shares in Sebald’s need to question the past. Sebald enters ‘the realm of true Instructors’ (Bloom 1975: 59) and also achieves Nabokov’s surreal effects through aligning the reader and the narrator’s positions.

Through his narrator, Sebald demonstrates that identity is inseparable from history. The subjects of Vertigo and The Emigrants need the spectre as a means of remembrance, and literature is inherently bound up with this comprehension of the past.
Bibliography


