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“Doubly taxing”: W. G. Sebald and Translation¹

A translation is an infernally complicated business in the best of cases, but when you are dealing with texts which are in themselves complex and layered then it becomes doubly taxing.

W.G. Sebald, quoted from interview on *NightWaves*, BBC Radio 3, 5 October 2001

SEBALD AMONG TRANSLATORS

As an ‘Auslandsgermanist’, W. G. Sebald always took a lively interest in translation, as is usual for anyone who not only works in a university language department, but also lives in one language and works and writes in another, regardless of which of these languages is his or her ‘mother tongue’.² Some of his earliest publications, perhaps surprisingly, were translations of poetry: four poems from Roger McGough’s book *gig*, published in *ZET: Das Zeichenheft für Literatur und Graphik* in 1975,³ following the publication of some of his own early poems in the same journal in 1974.⁴ Twenty years after this debut, his translations of two poems by Michael Hulse appeared in an edition of *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* devoted to modern British poetry,⁵ at a time when Michael Hulse, who had visited the

¹ I should like to express my grateful thanks to the British Academy and the Modern Humanities Research Association for their support of the research for this article.

² Asked at a reading why he did not write in English Sebald replies ‘I use English every day ... but I still feel it to be a very unfamiliar language, nevertheless, and with German it’s the other way round: it’s very familiar but very distant but, definitely, German is the original thing for me.’ ‘Three Conversations with W. G. Sebald: Lost in Translation? Conversation with Jon Cook (Norwich, 1999)’, *Saturn’s Moons: W. G. Sebald - A Handbook*, dir. Jo CATLING / Richard HIBBITT, Oxford, Legenda, 2011, pp. 356-63 (p. 361).

³ W. G. SEBALD, trans., [Four poems by Roger MCGOUGH], *ZET: Das Zeichenheft für Literatur und Graphik*, 3.12 (December 1975), 6-8: ‘Zauberers Balladen’ [‘Warlock Poems’]; ‘Exsomnia’, [‘exsomnia’], ‘Tigerträume’ [‘tigerdreams’], ‘Auf dem Seil’ [‘tightrope’]; all from Roger MCGOUGH, *gig* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), pp. 40-47, as part of a section on five English poets: ‘Fünf englische Lyriker [Paul Evans, Spike Hawkins, Roger McGough, Anselm Hollo, Tom Raworth]. Aus dem Englischen von Richard Anders (Evans, Hawkins, Hollo, Raworth) und Winfried Georg Sebald (McGough).’ It seems likely that the suggestion for the translations came about as a result of the publication of Sebald’s own poems: cf. correspondence with the editor, Wolfgang Rothe, in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach (DLA).

⁴ W.G. SEBALD, ‘Panazee’; ‘Analytische Sommerfrische’; ‘Mithräisch’; ‘Norfolk’; ‘Stundenplan’, *ZET: Das Zeichenheft für Literatur und Graphik*, 2.6 (July 1974), 13; ‘K.s Auswanderung’; ‘Mölkerbastei’; ‘Elisabethanisch’; ‘Unerschlossen’, *ZET: Das Zeichenheft für Literatur und Graphik*, 3, 10 (June 1975), 18-19.

⁵ W.G. SEBALD, trans., ‘Michael HULSE: Gedichte’ [‘An Botho Strauß in Berlin’ and ‘Raffles Hotel Singapur’]: ‘To Botho Strauss in Berlin’/ ‘Raffles Hotel (Singapore)’, from Michael HULSE, *Eating Strawberries in the Necropolis* (London: Harvill, 1991), p. 50 and pp. 11-12, *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter*, 33, no. 134 (June 1995), pp. 161-64, reprinted in *Saturn’s Moons*, pp. 336-37.

University of East Anglia (UEA) on several occasions to give guest lectures at the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT), as well as translation workshops for the university's MA programme in Literary Translation, was poised to become his first English translator.⁶ *The Emigrants*, Hulse's translation of *Die Ausgewanderten* – a book he had warmly recommended to the publishers, Harvill⁷ – appeared in 1996, and was arguably instrumental in establishing Sebald's reputation in the English-speaking world. Meanwhile, in the early 1970s Sebald had submitted his PhD thesis on Alfred Döblin in English at UEA, where he had recently been appointed to an Assistant Lectureship in German Language and Literature. Having initially intended to have the thesis translated from the German, when – as seems likely – this incipient collaborative undertaking proved too complex and time-consuming (as anyone who has ever attempted to save time and effort by 'just translating' something they have already written in another language will no doubt agree), he resorted to writing it in English and having it checked over by native speakers.⁸ He also, on rare occasions, undertook paid translation of colleagues' work in the late 1970s and early 1980s, translating Richard Evans' book *Sozialdemokratie und Frauenemanzipation im deutschen Kaiserreich*⁹ and checking and revising the substantial editorial Afterword (over 150 pages!) to Richard Sheppard's two-volume edition of *Die Schriften des Neuen Clubs 1908-1914*.¹⁰

Naturally, as a university teacher of German, W.G. Sebald (always known to friends and colleagues as Max) also encountered a range of translation classes and workshops in the course of his career, and he was acutely aware, through friends and colleagues – not least Michael Hamburger – of the actualities and hardships of a translator's life, as Stephen Watts

⁶ See also Michael HULSE's account of 'Englishing Max', in *Saturn's Moons*, pp. 195-208; Anthea BELL's account of 'Translating W. G. Sebald – with and without the author' follows at pp. 209-15. See also the 1999 Melbourne radio interview with Michael Hulse: Michael HULSE and Jill KITSON, 'Beyond translation' (28 August 1999): <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/linguafranca/beyond-translation/3558708>.

⁷ HULSE, 'Englishing Max', in *Saturn's Moons*, pp. 195-6.

⁸ These included the then PhD student Steve Giles (latterly professor in Nottingham) (conversation with Steve Giles, Norwich, 19 March 2015).

⁹ Richard J. EVANS, *Sozialdemokratie und Frauenemanzipation im deutschen Kaiserreich*, Aus dem englischen übersetzt von W. G. Sebald unter Mitarbeit des Verfassers. Berlin, J.H.W. Dietz Nachfolger, 1979. According to Richard Sheppard, Max Sebald undertook this translation to help pay for renovations on the dilapidated home (The Old Rectory, Poringland) which he had recently acquired (see Richard SHEPPARD, 'W. G. Sebald – A Chronology', *Saturn's Moons*, pp. 619-54 (p. 627)).

¹⁰ W.G. SEBALD, trans., 'Nachwort des Herausgebers', Richard SHEPPARD (ed.), *Die Schriften des Neuen Clubs 1908-1914*, 2 vols, Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1980-83, ii, pp. 419-577. In his 'Primary Bibliography' in *Saturn's Moons* (pp. 446-96) Richard SHEPPARD lists this under translations at M.B.2 (p.496); however, Sebald's name does not appear as a translator in the volume itself. Rather, his input is acknowledged by Sheppard in the acknowledgements in the 'Vorwort' to Vol 2 of *Die Schriften des neuen Clubs*: "meinem Kollegen Dr. Max Sebald (Norwich), der das Nachwort durchgesehen und wesentlich ausgebessert hat" (op. cit., p. 7).

has also noted.¹¹ It is not clear which of these factors may have predominated when, in 1989, he decided to set up the BCLT at UEA.¹² The creation of this Centre went hand in hand with the establishing of the pioneering MA in Literary Translation, one of the first such programmes in the British Isles, thereby placing the University, and hence Norwich, squarely on the ‘translation map’. Sebald also devoted considerable energy to raising consciousness about literary translation in particular, campaigning long and hard for its recognition and validation as “proper” research at both the local and national level.¹³

As Founding Director of BCLT, Max Sebald was able to obtain initial funding for an annual Translator in Residence:¹⁴ firstly Polish writer and translator Adam Czerniawski, who went on to become Associate Director,¹⁵ followed in 1992-93 by Anthony Vivis (†2013), best known for his translations of modern German drama. The latter wrote in 2011 of the way Sebald’s attitude to translation shifted as he became known as an author whose works were in turn translated:

In the course of time, as Max’s literary work became better known, his attitude to translation – especially of his own work – changed. With characteristic diligence, Max used to check through various translations into or from languages he knew, putting his “shoulder to the grindstone” so conscientiously that he reckoned he worked as many hours as a stonemason or the kind of sweating labourer Ford Maddox Brown painted in “Work”. Then, as before, Max understood and sought just returns for the dedication and attention to detail shown by such gifted translators as [Michael Hulse], Anthea Bell, and Michael Hamburger. In all cases, Max wanted the English which a translator wrote to represent responsibly the original text, whatever its genre or source language.¹⁶

As his reputation as a writer grew, W.G. Sebald went on to contribute to a number of events concerning translation and with translators, both at UEA and beyond. At UEA he also taught regularly on the “Case Studies” module for the MA in Literary Translation, using translations of his own works as examples, as well as participating in one of the early BCLT Translation Summer Schools. Further afield, in the winter of 1997-98 he attended a British

¹¹ Stephen WATTS, ‘Afterword: Max Sebald: A Reminiscence’, in *Saturn’s Moons*, pp. 299-307.

¹² This venture was supported by the then Vice-Chancellor of UEA, Derek Burke: Cf. letter from Derek Burke, *Times Higher Education* No. 2,018 (29 September – 5 October 2011), p. 37. Sebald was also inspired by the model of the Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium (EÜK) in Straelen, near the Dutch border in Germany, part of a network of translation centres across Europe – for example in Arles, France, and Looren in Switzerland. The present author remembers Sebald giving a presentation on European translation centres to a packed MA workshop at UEA in the mid-1990s.

¹³ See SHEPPARD, ‘W.G. Sebald: A Chronology’, p. 642 (3 March 1995).

¹⁴ The scheme was subsequently replaced for a number of years by a series of Translation Bursaries, partly funded by the EU. See WATTS, ‘Afterword’, p. 299.

¹⁵ See ‘Among Translators’, *Saturn’s Moons* p. 191 (Fig. 7.1). Cf. also Adam CZERNIAWSKI, ‘In memoriam W.G. Sebald 1944-2001’, *Metre*, 16 (Autumn 2004), 136-38.

¹⁶ Jo CATLING, Anthony VIVIS, Christine WILSON, Stefan TOBLER, ‘Among Translators: W.G. Sebald and Translation’, *In Other Words* 38, Winter 2011, 111-120.

Council seminar on Translation at Walberberg near Cologne, accompanied by Michael Hulse, who had already proposed him to the British Council in 1996;¹⁷ among the other participants, by coincidence, was poet and translator Iain Galbraith, who has since translated Sebald's early poems collected in *Über das Land und das Wasser*, which appeared in English as *Across the Land and the Water* in 2011.¹⁸ In November 2000, Sebald participated in an *atelier* at the Maison Rose in Wolxheim near Strasbourg with his French translator Patrick Charbonneau, the author Robert Bober – proposed by Sebald, who wished to meet him¹⁹ – and Bober's German translator Thomas Scheffel,²⁰ as well as Jan Peter Tripp. This encounter is documented by Irène Kuhn and Sibylle Muller under the evocative title “Traducteur – Bricoleur” in the volume *Mémoire. Transferts. Images.* edited by Ruth Vogel-Klein, including a characteristic portrait of Sebald at “une sorte de table-ronde informelle”:

Max parle ... avec un humour tout britannique de la traduction, de l'art de traduire, des grandeurs et servitudes du métier de traducteur. En conclusion, il insiste d'un air pince-sans-rire sur l'avantage, la nécessité même pour les traducteurs d'avoir deux métiers: la traduction, et un métier alimentaire, ce que nos étudiants savent déjà, pour nous l'avoir souvent entendu dire, mais Max poursuit – de préférence – celui du boulanger: on se lève très tôt, et il reste donc du temps, beaucoup de temps, pour traduire!²¹

Finally [Et puis], in February 2001 Sebald participated in a two-day literary translation symposium on the subject of “Übersetzen als geistige Migration” at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin, overlooking the Wannsee, which also included his first Italian translator Gabriella Rovagnati,²² the publisher Klaus Wagenbach, and writers and translators Joachim Kalka and Harald Hartung. Translator Stefan Tobler, who attended the symposium while still

¹⁷ HULSE, ‘Englishing Max’, p. 207; see also ‘Among Translators’, Fig. 7.5, *Saturn's Moons* p. 194.

¹⁸ W.G. SEBALD, *Über das Land und das Wasser* (Munich: Hanser, 2008); *Across the Land and the Water*, translated by Iain GALBRAITH (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011).

¹⁹ ‘Très spontanément il nous propose Robert Bober, il aimerait justement faire sa connaissance’. Irène KUHN et Sibylle MULLER, ‘Traducteur – Bricoleur. W.G. Sebald à Strasbourg: la question de la traduction’, *Mémoire. Transferts. Images./ Erinnerungen. Übertragungen. Bilder.* dir. Ruth VOGEL-KLEIN *recherches germaniques* h.s. No.2, Strasbourg: Université Marc Bloch, 2005, 187-191 (p. 188). Two books of BOBER's were found in Sebald's library: *Quoi de neuf sur la guerre ?* [1993] Paris, Gallimard (folio), 1999 and *Berg et Beck*, Paris, P.O.L, 1999 and are now in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. Cf. Jo CATLING, ‘A Catalogue of W.G. Sebald's Library’, in *Saturn's Moons*, pp. 377-441 (p. 408).

²⁰ Robert BOBER, *Was gibt's Neues vom Krieg?*, tr. Thomas SCHEFFEL, Munich, Verlag Antje Kunstmann, 1995; *Berg und Beck*, Tr. Thomas SCHEFFEL, Munich: Verlag Antje Kunstmann, 2000.

²¹ KUHN ET MULLER, ‘Traducteur-Bricoleur’, p. 188. Sebald would frequently give the same advice to would-be writers, citing Kafka as an example. See Luke WILLIAMS, ‘A Watch on Each Wrist’, *Saturn's Moons*, pp. 143-52 (p. 146); and the interview with Jens MÜHLING, ‘The Permanent Exile of W. G. Sebald’ [interview with W.G. Sebald, University of East Anglia, April 2000] in *Pretext 7*, Spring-Summer 2003, pp. 15-26; available online in three parts at <https://sebald.wordpress.com/2008/02/19/the-permanent-exile-of-wg-sebald-part-1/> and in French translation, as ‘L'exil perpétuel de W. G. Sebald, entretien de J. Mühling’, tr. Pascal HELLEU, in *Face à Sebald*, dir. Mathieu LARNAUDIE and Oliver ROHE, Paris, éditions inculte, 2011, pp. 365-382.

²² W. G. SEBALD, *Gli emigranti*, tr. Gabriella ROVAGNATI (Milano: Bompiani, 2000), with a ‘Postfazione’ by Gabriella Rovagnati, pp. 235-44.

a student, notes how impressed he was by what he calls Sebald's "thoughts on the ideal type of translator", though his account seems quite typical of Sebald's at times rather ambivalent attitude to translation:

Sebald's appreciation of literary translation was, it has to be said, rather grudging. The highest praise I heard all weekend from Sebald was in a discussion of – what else? – the challenge of translating long German sentences into English. Sebald was adamant that these long sentences can be translated. What really annoyed him was when the beginnings of clauses used 'that' rather than 'which' as a conjunction, a failing he found in the new collected translations of Borges. Yet as proof that translators can find the right mechanisms to delay the end of the sentence's flow he cited the translations of Heinrich von Kleist into English, saying they were 'sehr ordentlich' ['comme il faut/ à propos'].²³

"In spite of this", Tobler continues, "Sebald drew a picture of the ideal translator" as:

someone who comes to translation by chance, perhaps. It would be a passion, the translator would have lots of previous experience, a very good general education and a deep memory for past generations' words. ...Without saying as much, his ideal type was of course a portrait of his new translator for *Austerlitz*, Anthea Bell. She is surely the ideal translator not only for all Sebald's reasons, but also because she can 'do', chameleon-like, different voices and texts.²⁴

This 'chameleon-like ability', which one might also liken to ventriloquism, is a *sine qua non* for Sebald's multilayered and complex texts, as will be shown in what follows.

SEBALD ON TRANSLATION

Sebald himself commented on various occasions on both the difficulties faced by the translator of his texts and those encountered by the author during this process. In his case, this was a highly collaborative one, particularly with regard to the English translations, where his input into the translation process was at its most intense. Here, as with Patrick Charbonneau's French translations, the experience of translation also allowed the author to make revisions to the text in order that it should sound, and read, better in translation.²⁵ As Lynn Wolff explains, "[s]uch alterations are not mere corrections but examples of the author re-ordering, re-phrasing and rewriting so that the English text sounds right. Sound was indeed very important to Sebald."²⁶ In a discussion following a reading at UEA in 1999, after the publication of the English translation of *Die Ringe des Saturn*, Sebald's colleague Jon Cook

²³ The reference is probably to Heinrich VON KLEIST, *Selected Writings*, edited and translated by David CONSTANTINE, London, Dent, 1999. CATLING, VIVIS, WILSON, TOBLER, 'Among Translators: W. G. Sebald and Translation', p.119.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

²⁵ Some examples of such 'ajustements' are given by Patrick CHARBONNEAU, 'Correspondance(s). Le traducteur et son auteur', in *Mémoire. Transferts. Images.*, pp. 193-210 (pp. 197-8); reprinted in *europe* 91 (2013) No. 1009 (Mai 2013), 200-218. - Michael Hulse and Anthea Bell also comment on this process: Michael HULSE, 'Englising Max', in *Saturn's Moons*, pp. 195-208; Anthea BELL, 'Translating W.G. Sebald – with and without the author', *Saturn's Moons*, pp. 209-15.

²⁶ Cf. Lynn L. WOLFF, *W.G. Sebald's Hybrid Poetics: Literature as Historiography* (Berlin/ Boston: de Gruyter, 2014): - Chapter 6: Translation as Metaphor and Conservative Innovation, p. 216-45 (p. 225).

asks the question a translator always dreads, as to “what [you think] is lost in translation?”: “[I want to ask] what, for you, is entailed in the question of translation, because I know you involve yourself quite strongly in the translation of your work, although Michael Hulse is your translator.”²⁷

Sebald’s answer, quoted here *in extenso*, throws light both on the method of revision and rewriting employed in the first English translations of his books – a painstaking and evidently at times laborious process – and on some of the problems his style and technique raise for the translator:

I think some of the finer grain vanishes in translation, inevitably. I mean you can make small gains in the process of translation also, but, on the whole, I think you tend to lose some of the finer grain, particularly as regards shadings of earlier forms of German that are no longer current but which were about in the 1920s, say, or ’30s and that is, of course, very, very difficult to move across. There are also certain regionalisms because most of this is set in southern Germany and there are quite a number of words that keep coming up, a whole range of them, which you won’t find in any dictionary, for which it is then very difficult to find English equivalents. So I think some of the fine grain vanishes and possibly the whole thing is slightly flattened as regards amplitudes of the thing.

On the process of translation, or rather of being translated, Sebald has this to say:

But the process of translation itself, I think, is something, with a fairly complicated text, that simply needs a lot of patience; and I discovered this only gradually, because I was, as it were, pitched in at the deep end and, like the publishers, I thought that once a translator is found, then the whole thing unravels as one expects it and you get a decent translation at the end. As it turned out, it had to go through a complicated pattern and what generally happens is that the translator produces a draft, which I then work through in detail [...] It’s the tiny details that often make a lot of difference accumulatively. When that is done, it goes off to the Harvill editor, who has a look at it and then it goes back to the translator. He then fits all this in and sometimes writes back and says, well, I agree with most of your suggestions but not with this one. When the text is then extant, it gets read again two or three times, so it goes through a lot of phases and is very time-consuming.²⁸

He then relativizes this apparent impatience with reference to the French translation:

But I think the lesson of that is that it is not important for a book to be instantly translated, as so often happens now [...] For instance, the French translation of *The Emigrants* has only just come out in Paris [...], and the book still had a very good reception, so it doesn’t matter whether it takes seven or eight or fifteen years, but the translation has to be as good as it can be.²⁹

This last point is crucial, and is indicative of Sebald’s exactitude when it comes to his own texts. Charbonneau cites a letter from Sebald of 20 May 1999 in which the latter insists that

²⁷ ‘Three Conversations with W.G. Sebald: Lost in Translation? Conversation with Jon Cook (Norwich, 1999)’, *Saturn’s Moons*, p. 358.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 359. This is echoed in a letter to Patrick Charbonneau: “il y avait ... diverses choses à ajuster. Mon grief n’est pas qu’il faille procéder à de telles corrections (qui sont tout à fait normales), mais que ces gens presque toujours se rabattent sur l’auteur parce qu’il n’y a plus personne dans les maisons d’édition que puisse prendre le temps d’assurer ce travail de correction précis, ni qui soit assez compétent pour cela...” Charbonneau, ‘Correspondance(s)’, p. 194 where the German original is also cited.

²⁹ ‘Three Conversations with W. G. Sebald: Lost in Translation? Conversation with Jon Cook (Norwich, 1999)’, *Saturn’s Moons*, p. 358.

rather than a slavish adherence to the original, «[l]e principal est que le texte français ne donne pas l'impression d'être faussé ou emprunté...».³⁰ Charbonneau comments:

sa vigilance restait toujours en éveil. Une vigilance qu'il exerçait aussi bien vis-à-vis du texte allemand publié [...] que de lui-même et de son propre travail [...]. Sa prose devait être à la hauteur de ses exigences et il plaçait la barre très haut. Il n'était que naturel qu'il attendît la même rigueur de ses différents traducteurs.³¹

TRANSLATING SEBALD/ SEBALD TRANSLATED

«*Complex issues for a translator*»³²

Such painstaking attention to the minutiae of translation, as well as the particular features of his German style commented on above, represent a serious challenge in translation, as acknowledged in a conversation on translation at UEA (part of the annual “Sebald lectures” on translation) between poet and translator David Constantine [DJC] and Sebald’s first publisher, poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger [HME]:

DJC [Sebald] wrote then, in German, and was translated into English and wrote, I hope you don't mind me saying this, a German that was increasingly refracted away from what had become the standard German, deliberately. A mannered German. Again, I don't mean that in the least disparagingly. There's clearly a benefit in [...] taking yourself out of your own native language, even to write in it.

HME: It was also, perhaps, an attempt, stylistically speaking, at decontamination because he felt that his whole childhood, his youth, he was exposed to a kind of German which was contaminated, and so his style corresponded to his emigration.³³

The dimension of ‘expatriate writing’,³⁴ referred to by Julia Kospach as ‘Sprachexil’, is an important one for Sebald, informing all levels of his work, and is both expressed in and intimately linked to the heteroglossia of his texts.³⁵ Interviewing Sebald for the Austrian journal *Profil* in 2001, Kospach comments:

Der hohe Ton von Sebalds eigenwilliger Sprache erinnert an die großen Erzähler des 19. Jahrhunderts. [...] Er schreibt gleichsam aus dem Sprachexil. ... Durch seinen Heimatdialekt und das altertümliche Deutsch seines Großvaters, vermutet Sebald, ist auch er “empfänglich geworden für seltsame Wörter,

³⁰ Patrick CHARBONNEAU, ‘Max et le bélier hydraulique’, *europa* 91 (2013) No. 1009 (Mai 2013), 89-91 (p. 91).

³¹ Charbonneau, ‘Correspondance(s)’, pp. 195-6.

³² HULSE, ‘Englishing Max’, p. 199.

³³ Hans Magnus ENZENSBERGER, ‘Peregrinations of Poetry’ (Sebald lecture 2006, in conversation with David Constantine), *In Other Words* 29 (Summer 2007), pp. 39-52 (p. 47).

³⁴ Cf. W.G. Sebald: *Schreiben ex patria/ Expatriate Writing*, dir. Gerhard FISCHER, Amsterdam/ New York: Rodopi, 2009.

³⁵ See also Jo CATLING, ‘W.G. Sebald: ein “England-Deutscher“? Identität – Topographie – Intertextualität’, in *W. G. Sebald: Intertextualität und Topographie*, dir. Irène HEIDELBERGER-LEONARD et Mireille TABAH, Berlin, LIT, 2008, pp. 25-53.

Wendungen und Tonfälle“, für alle Sprachphänomene abseits des Neudeutschen, das für ihn “ganz furchtbar“ klingt.³⁶

Not only is Sebald’s a self-consciously literary style, then, but it is one as we see also marked by regionalisms and local colour (both topographical and historical), situating the text or character in a particular time and place: “le rendu subtil des idiolectes des personnages... caractérisé[s] par leur langue, plus populaire ou marquée par un “régionalisme” qui n’est pas celui du narrateur-auteur.” Noting that « une des difficultés pour ‘traduire Sebald’ tenait à l’emploi de régionalismes et de termes dialectaux, d’une part, de mots rares ou très peu fréquents, de l’autre », ³⁷ Patrick Charbonneau goes on to give examples of a number of further points the Sebaldian translator must bear in mind: « citations »; « syntaxe et rythme »; « le ton »; « compensation, surtraduction ».³⁸

One of the complexities of translating Sebald, then, is the way his texts are constantly playing with ideas of strangeness and familiarity, which is just the line the translator always has to negotiate. A related challenge, albeit one rarely commented on,³⁹ is the frequent use of a range of foreign terms in the German text, particularly English ones, as many of the stories are located in Britain and as it were “take place” in English, but also in French (Austerlitz in Prague), Italian, Dutch, Czech...⁴⁰ – an extension of “régionalisme”, but also a form of citation, and at times a hidden translation. Elcott goes so far as to claim that “Sebald’s German narration is always already in translation”.⁴¹

Decisions and dilemmas, or the “truth” of the text

³⁶ Julia KOSPACH, ‘Der Spurensucher’, *profil* 8, 19 Februar 2001, 122-25 (p.123). - A number of critics have also noted aspects of Sebald’s ‘unconventional’ German, in particular Matthias Zucchi, who lists seven categories in Sebald’s prose fiction: “Neologismen; orthographische Abweichungen; veraltete Formen; grammatikalisch-syntaktische Eigenheiten; semantische Eigenheiten; oberdeutsche Formen bzw. Austrizismen; Fremd- und Lehnwörter.” Matthias ZUCCHI, ‘Zur Kunstsprache W. G. Sebalds’, in *Verschiebebahnhöfe der Erinnerung: Zum Werk W. G. Sebalds*, dir. Sigurd MARTIN et Ingo WINTERMEYER, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007, pp. 163-81 (pp. 177-81).

³⁷ CHARBONNEAU, ‘Correspondance(s)’, pp. 199; 202-208.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

³⁹ Notable exceptions are Noam L. ELCOTT, ‘Tattered Snapshots and Castaway Tongues: An Essay at Layout and Translation with W. G. Sebald’, *Germanic Review* 79.3 (Summer 2004), 203-23; Florian RADVAN, ‘Vom Sodiunglanz ferner Städte: W.G. Sebalds literarische Erinnerungen an *Die Ausgewanderten*’, in *Im Krebsgang: Strategien des Erinnerns in den Werken von Günter Grass und W. G. Sebald*, dir. Rüdiger SAREIKA, Iserlohn, Institut für Kirche und Gesellschaft, 2006, pp. 55-70; Lynn L. WOLFF, ‘The “solitary mallard”: On Sebald and translation’, *Journal of European Studies* 41:3-4 (2011), 323-40; and Merete STISTRUP-JENSEN, ‘Le Spectre des Mots: Austerlitz de W.G. Sebald’, in *Citer la langue de l’autre: Mots étrangers dans le roman, de Proust à W.G. Sebald*, dir. Daniëlle PERROT-CORPET et Christine QUEFFELEC, Lyon, Presses Universitaires, 2007, pp. 203-15.

⁴⁰ Cf. STISTRUP-JENSEN, ‘Le Spectre des Mots’.

⁴¹ ELCOTT, p. 209.

In addition to the usual challenges of translation, the translator of Sebald is constantly confronted with dilemmas, often of an ethical nature. Focussing on the ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ of Sebald’s superficially “documentary” texts, with their unique blend of invention, quotation, allusion and illustration, Michael Hulse comments on the dilemma in dramatic terms: “This conflation of sources and blurring of distinctions naturally has implications for critical interpretation; for the translator – who gives a text its closest of all readings, for it is impossible to translate what has not been fully understood – the experience can be like walking across a minefield.”⁴²

As Hulse writes, what drew him to *Die Ausgewanderten* [*Les Émigrants*] – the first work of Sebald’s to be translated into English – was not only the intricate and ample prose style, but also “the ethical awareness that the act of remembering, of naming and detailing, is the one sure way to show respect to the past.”⁴³ When he came to translate the book, Hulse adds, “the essential respect for the moral as well as writerly greatness of *Die Ausgewanderten* would remain.” However, the intertextual patterning and the crossover between fiction and documentary truth which he perceived in the work provoked an ethical dilemma: “my own reading of [your texts]” he writes in a letter to Sebald, “depends to a substantial extent ... on my feeling that what matters in them is true”, seeking to establish “where the literal truth stops and your imaginative re-creations or additions begin.”⁴⁴ While, theoretically, it might be possible to translate a text without consideration of such matters, as [puisque] the translator is the first and closest reader, it follows that, as Miguel Sáenz, Sebald’s Spanish translator for Adelphi, notes, “[t]ranslating is the most respectful form of reading”.⁴⁵

In his reply to Hulse, in defence of his method of ‘fictionalization’, Sebald claims that

what I did was no more than extending the vectors a little. Fictionalization, as I see it, is in this text, not a matter of substance, that is to say it has nothing to do with making up characters, events that befall them & complicated plots. Rather, the sense of fiction, the feeling that one is at a level removed, by a notch or so, from reality is meant to come out of adjusting the “Sehschärfe” [focus] of the telescope one looks through, so that some things seem very distant & others (especially those which are in the past) quite close & immediate -

– an answer which, Hulse felt, “though canny and perhaps even wily, marked a genuine attempt by Max to address what he realised was, for me, potentially a moral rather than an

⁴² HULSE, ‘Englishing Max’, p. 205.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 196.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 197.

⁴⁵ Miguel SÁENZ, ‘On the natural history of translating Sebald’, online at <http://kosmopolis.cccb.org/en/sebaldiana/post/sobre-la-historia-natural-de-la-traduccio-de-sebald/>

aesthetic dilemma raised by his writing; his answer nonetheless foregrounded aesthetic criteria.”⁴⁶ As Sebald writes in *Unheimliche Heimat*, “Es geht [...] im Bereich der Ästhetik letzten Endes immer um ethische Fragen“ [“In the field of aesthetics it is ultimately always a question of ethics“].⁴⁷

“The troublesome business of the quotations”

The ethical dilemma confronted by Hulse is further highlighted by Sebald’s extensive use of citation and literary sources, sometimes overt, more often not. Hulse finds himself troubled by Sebald’s use of the various Conrad ‘sources’ in *Die Ringe des Saturn* (a dilemma with which his other translators will no doubt identify). Sebald responds to his concerns on 7 May 1997: “Over the troublesome business of the quotations (Browne, Conrad etc.), you must have cursed me more than once because of the ‘unreliable’ way in which I deploy them. I often change them quite deliberately. [...] But I am grateful to you for pointing out what are clearly involuntary lapses [...]”⁴⁸

The central dilemma here, for the translator, and perhaps also for the reader, is identifying what is a deliberate change, and what an “involuntary lapse”; the question of ‘fidelity’ here becomes a vexed one, as Hulse notes:

Two sets of ethics meet at a moment like this. One is the author’s: the author makes a decision which balances concerns about aesthetic impact and concerns about answerability to the verifiable facts of historical record. The other is the translator’s: the translator makes a decision which balances concerns about fidelity to what the author has written and concerns about answerability to the verifiable facts of historical record. My own instinct is always that whatever exists as a historical document should not be falsified; at the same time, as a translator I believe that in cases of doubt the author has the final say, and it was that principle that I followed here. In general, I probably accepted about ninety per cent of Max’s suggestions.⁴⁹

Faced with what he had identified as an apparent translation from Conrad in the German text – an author whose works are clearly more familiar to the English reader than the German one – Hulse takes a moral position:

My policy at such points was to restore the original [...], on the one hand because re-translating a translation intrinsically made no sense, on the other because it was a way of silently prompting Max to consider whether his adaptation of texts for German readers remained appropriate when re-conceived for an anglophone readership far more conversant with the work [of Conrad].⁵⁰

⁴⁶ HULSE, ‘Englishing Max’, p. 198.

⁴⁷ W.G. SEBALD, ‘Ein Kaddisch für Österreich – Über Joseph Roth’, in *id.*, *Unheimliche Heimat*, Salzburg and Vienna, Residenz, 1991, pp. 104-17 (p. 115).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

This example highlights neatly the problem of intertextuality and hidden quotation – indeed hidden translation – within Sebald’s texts, an issue which, from the translator’s point of view, is no less relevant – though arguably less ethically problematic – for his essays than for his fictional work. In his account of translating Sebald, ‘Correspondance(s)’, Patrick Charbonneau phrases the problem thus: “Une autre difficulté... tient au rôle éminent que joue chez notre auteur la citation cryptée, fidèle ou approximative, textuelle ou détournée, la réminiscence littéraire, en un mot, l’intertextualité.”⁵¹

Such quotation is of course an integral part of the unique fabric and texture of Sebald’s writing⁵² and a further reflection of the heteroglossia – all writing is quotation, of course, but Sebald, like Proust (indeed possibly in tribute to Proust?)⁵³ takes this to extremes, and indeed is highly conscious of it, saying in an early interview of *Schwindel. Gefühle. (Vertiges)* that:

the text is one big homage to Kafka, an author whom I read ceaselessly. But [the text] involves a large number of much smaller tributes to other authors. These tributes take the form of quotations that have casually crept into the text. I cite Robert Walser and Peter Weiss, authors who mean a great deal to me. By citing them, I pay them tribute beyond the grave.⁵⁴

De la musique, avant toute chose...

As has been frequently emphasised, W. G. Sebald set great store by the question of cadencing, the rhythm of his prose, and this is a point which recurs frequently with regard to the process of translation. Asked about the experience of being translated by a poet [Michael Hulse] and whether “poets have a greater sense of rhythm when it comes to translation”,⁵⁵ Sebald comments

I don’t think that poets have a better ear necessarily than prose writers. I think that there are poets who have better ears or sense of rhythm than prose writers but it is also the other way round. This is an area where I often have to make considerable changes: the rhythm in the German text is very carefully maintained and I always try to see to it that the sentences, which are often very long, are properly

⁵¹ CHARBONNEAU, ‘Correspondance(s)’, p. 202.

⁵² Cf. “Ein Fleckerlteppich“. Interview von Ruth Vogel-Klein mit Gertrud Th. Aebischer-Sebald’, in *Mémoire. Transferts. Images.*, pp. 211-20 (e.g. p. 217).

⁵³ Richard Bales refers to such “manifestations of intertextuality” in both authors as “imperceptible slidings in and out”: Richard BALES, ‘Homeland and Displacement: The Status of the Text in Sebald and Proust’, in *W.G. Sebald: Schreiben ex patria/ Expatriate Writing*, 461-74 (p. 453) cf. also BALES, “L’Édifice immense du souvenir”: Mémoire et écriture chez Proust et Sebald’, in *Mémoire. Transferts. Images*, pp. 129-37.

⁵⁴ ‘Three Conversations with W. G. Sebald: Echoes from the Past: Conversation with Piet de Moor (Brussels, 1992)’, *Saturn’s Moons*, pp. 350-54 (p. 353).

⁵⁵ Cf. also Michael Hulse’s comments on not translating poetry in the 1999 Melbourne radio interview: Michael HULSE and Jill KITSON, ‘Beyond translation’ (28 August 1999): <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/linguafranca/beyond-translation/3558708>.

scanned because otherwise they cannot be sustained. You need the syntactical structure but you also need, as it were, the organic rhythm around the structure.

Optimistically, perhaps, Sebald was convinced that

[t]his is something that can be achieved; this is really the level of craft in translation. There are other areas in translation where you do need competence more, or ingenuity even, but the question of getting the rhythm right is just a question of fiddling and changing and adding and shaving things off and it's very much a craft-type of work. There I'm often astonished how careless translators are — when it's clear in the source text that there is a distinct rhythm, which drives towards a certain point — that they somehow don't see that or hear it. I can only conclude that perhaps they never read it out aloud; I think it's quite important, even as you write, to mutter under your breath quite a lot of the time.⁵⁶

There is of course a serious point beneath the undoubted humour and irony in this answer, and the importance of “sonorité” is reiterated in Sebald's exchanges with Patrick Charbonneau about the of the draft translation of the last pages of *Vertiges*:

Max prit le téléphone pour me dire qu'il n'était pas satisfait de la sonorité. [...] Il me donnait, me dit-il, toute liberté par rapport au sens, pourvu que l'évocation soit onirique et rythmée. J'ai donc repris [...] les deux derniers pages, et le résultat me valut ce commentaire [...] : « Ce n'est pas la même musique, mais c'est aussi une belle musique.⁵⁷

High praise indeed. It turns out that the rhythmic, ‘poetic’ quality of the prose, which as Sebald says is “not of this time”,⁵⁸ is also an echo, quotation or tribute to some of Sebald's literary sources, prompting a later interviewer, Michael Silverblatt, to comment that : “The prose has the breaths and cadences of poetry, and I wanted to begin by asking, were you influenced by German poetry?”⁵⁹ Sebald's reply – possibly somewhat disingenuous, given the traces of Hölderlin and German baroque poetry to be found in his works – runs as follows:

No, not at all by German poetry. The influence came, if from anywhere, from nineteenth-century German prose writing, which also has prosodic rhythms that *are* very pronounced, where prose is more important than, say, social background or plot in any manifest sense. And this nineteenth-century German prose writing even at the time was very provincial. It never was received outside Germany to any extent worth mentioning. But it's always been very close to me, not least because the writers all hailed from the periphery of the German-speaking lands, where I also come from. Adalbert Stifter in Austria, Gottfried Keller in Switzerland. They are both absolutely wonderful writers who achieved a very, very high intensity in their prose. One can see that for them it's never a question of getting to the next phase of the plot, but that they devote a great deal of care and attention to each individual page, very much the way a poet has to do.

⁵⁶ ‘Three Conversations with W.G. Sebald: Lost in Translation? Conversation with Jon Cook (Norwich, 1999)’, *Saturn's Moons*, pp. 356-63 (pp. 362-3).

⁵⁷ CHARBONNEAU, ‘Correspondence(s)’, p. 210.

⁵⁸ See Michael SILVERBLATT, ‘A poem of an invisible subject’ (Bookworm Interview, KCRW, Santa Monica CA, 6 December 2001) in *Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, dir. Lynne Sharon SCHWARTZ, New York, London etc., Seven Stories Press, 2007, pp. 77-86 (p. 78); [French version, ‘Une poésie de l'invisible, entretien avec Michael Silverblatt’, in *W.G. Sebald: L'Archéologue de la mémoire. Conversations avec W. G. Sebald*, dir. Lynne Sharon SCHWARTZ, trad. Delphine CHARTIER et Patrick CHARBONNEAU, Arles, Actes Sud, 2009, pp. 81-91.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

What they all have in common is this precedence of the carefully composed page of prose over the mechanisms of the novel such as dominated fiction writing elsewhere, in France and in England, notably, at that time.⁶⁰

Commenting further on these “favourite authors” in an interview with Sarah Kafatou for the *Harvard Journal* in May 1998, Sebald gives, with his comments on Hebel’s prose style, a suggestion of what he too is trying to achieve:

[WGS] Il y a des écrivains français du XIX^e siècle, et certains Allemands: Adalbert Stifter, Gottfried Keller, Johann Peter Hebel.⁶¹ Connaissez-vous son œuvre? C’est merveilleux: c’était un écrivain totalement dépourvu de vanité. Un pasteur de Karlsruhe. Il faut que vous vous procuriez dès demain son *Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes*. Ça a une certaine légèreté. La musicalité de sa prose vous donne presque l’impression de quitter le sol. Comme la syncope en musique nous rapproche de la lévitation.⁶²

In *Logis in einem Landhaus*, indeed, Sebald’s descriptions of the individual prose styles of these writers often seems to hint at an oblique comment on his own style of writing, as when he says of Hebel : “The highly wrought language which Hebel devised especially for his almanac stories makes use of dialect and old-fashioned forms and turns of phrase precisely at those points where the rhythm of the prose demands it”,⁶³ while noting Walser’s “painstaking process of elaboration”, his “playful – and sometimes obsessive – working in with a fine brush of the most abstruse details”, or his use of “regionalisms, redolent of things long fallen into disuse”.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 77-78.

⁶¹ Stifter is the subject of two essays in *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*, while Hebel and Keller both feature in *Logis in einem Landhaus/ Séjours à la Campagne*, where the emphasis on prose style is paramount.

⁶² Sarah KAFATOU, ‘Un entretien avec W.G. Sebald’, tr. Philippe et Emmanuelle ARONSON, in *Face à Sebald*, pp. 15-22 (pp.19-20).

⁶³ W.G. SEBALD, *Logis in einem Landhaus. Über Gottfried Keller, Johann Peter Hebel, Robert Walser und andere*, Munich and Vienna, Hanser, 1998, p. 21 (“Die hochentwickelte Kunstsprache, die er sich eigens für den Kalender schuf, bedient sich dialektaler und demodierter Wendungen und Strukturen immer nur dort, wo es der prosodische Rhythmus erfordert“); id., *A Place in the Country. On Gottfried Keller, Johann Peter Hebel, Robert Walser and Others*. translated and with an introduction by Jo CATLING, London, Hamish Hamilton, 2013, p. 17; Id., *Séjours à la Campagne*, trad. Patrick CHARBONNEAU, Arles, Actes Sud, 2005, p. 23 (« La langue extrêmement sophistiquée qu’il s’est forgée spécifiquement pour son calendrier n’a recours à des tournures et à des structures dialectales et démodées que là où l’exige le rythme prosodique »).

⁶⁴ Id., *Logis*, p. 142 (“Elemente der Elaboration, deren Walser sich befließigt“); ibid., p. 143 (« Das spielerische, bisweilen auch verbohrtete Auspinseln absonderlicher Details “); ibid., p. 142 (“die an längst außer Gebrauch gekommene Dinge erinnernden Regionalismen“); id., *Séjours*, p. 135 (« les éléments de la graphorrhée à laquelle Walser s’adonne » ; « S’attacher à dépeindre en se jouant, ou en y mettant parfois de l’acharnement » ; « les régionalismes évoquant des choses d’un usage oublié depuis longtemps »).

TRANSLATING SEBALD'S ESSAYS

Logis in einem Landhaus / A Place in the Country / Séjours à la Campagne

As we have seen, Sebald's own prose writing is suffused and infused with his own reading of literature. Although on the face of it the 1998 volume *Logis in einem Landhaus/ Séjours à la Campagne* is a 'critical' rather than a 'creative' text, the essays it contains are very illuminating on Sebald's predilections and methods, and the intersection of languages and cultures in what is, after all, a region of many borders and transitions, is reflected, too, in the fabric of Sebald's text, where, in keeping with the characteristic features of his creative prose, his carefully crafted German sentences are shot through with quotations and allusions, some French, some English, some even in Hebel's Alemannic dialect, as will be discussed below.

Before looking at a few examples of the specific challenges of translating these and Sebald's other academic essays, it may be useful to say a few words about his "non-literary" or non-fiction/non-creative works (genre definition is always problematic when it comes to Sebald's work), and specifically about the essay volume *Logis in einem Landhaus* (translated into French by Patrick Charbonneau as *Séjours à la Campagne* [Arles: Actes Sud, 2005]) which appeared in my English translation with the title *A Place in the Country* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013; New York: Random House, 2014).

The original, almost untranslatable German title – *Logis in einem Landhaus* – of this collection of six short prose pieces (or long essays) on writers and artists who come from that loosely-defined, multilingual, almost-Alpine, "Alemannic" region – on the fringes of which Sebald himself grew up – comprising South-West Germany, Alsace, and parts of Switzerland, itself exemplifies that intertextual *mise-en-abîme* quality which characterizes so much of his writing, whether fictional or academic (if in his case the two can indeed be separated), 'creative' or 'critical'. This immediately recalls one of the main challenges of translating Sebald discussed above, namely that of quotation, intertextuality and literary allusion. In a multilayered pattern of references and resonances, barely discernible to the non-specialist reader who does not share Sebald's own barometric antennae for the inflections and echoes of a phrase, the title "Logis in einem Landhaus" is in fact a quotation from the opening of a short work by the Swiss writer Robert Walser entitled *Kleist in Thun*, and so arises from the improbable conjunction of the tormented, melancholic Prussian author

Heinrich von Kleist (who ended his life by the Wannsee) with a rural, “Rousseauesque” retreat in an Alpine landscape (more precisely on an island in the river Aare): “Kleist hat Kost und Logis in einem Landhaus auf einer Aareinsel in der Umgebung von Thun gefunden.”⁶⁵ [‘Kleist found board and lodging in a maison de campagne ?? on an island in the Aare near Thun’].⁶⁶ Indeed, the longest essay in *Logis* is devoted to Walser, but carries the title “Le promeneur solitaire”, a reference to Rousseau: while the essay on Rousseau is a quotation from the *Confessions*: ‘J’aurais voulu que ce lac eût été l’Océan.’⁶⁷

Such largely unacknowledged references (“la citation cryptée”, as Patrick Charbonneau puts it)⁶⁸ – intertexts, but also intratexts, if one will – assume a high level of awareness of the German and European literary tradition on the part of the reader, and are of course also a notable feature of Sebald’s works of prose fiction – and indeed of his poetry. As Sebald’s comments in the essays and in interviews show,⁶⁹ it is in large measure the language of Hebel, Keller or Walser which attracts him to their works: the distinctive regional colours of Hebel, reminiscent for Sebald of his beloved grandfather, the unrolling of the narrative journey of Keller’s *Der grüne Heinrich* “sentence after lovely sentence”⁷⁰ or the sheer quirkiness and inventiveness of Robert Walser’s use of the German language. Naturally enough, then, the essays in *Logis* also contain extensive quotations from the authors which form their subjects, interwoven – in a manner which parallels Sebald’s prose fiction – with the authorial voice which, in this collection, is not quite that of the objective critic one expects to encounter in literary criticism, given that Sebald immediately, in his preface, declares his own ‘fondness’ for the authors he discusses,⁷¹ and his wish to ‘pay his respects’: “Diese immer constant gebliebene Vorliebe [...] war es, die mich auf den Gedanken brachte,

⁶⁵ Robert WALSER, ‘Kleist in Thun’, *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze. Geschichten. Aufsätze* [= *Das Gesamtwerk* I], dir. Jochen GREVE, Genève et Hamburg, Kossodo, 1972, pp. 174-85 (p. 174).

⁶⁶ See also SEBALD, *Logis*, pp. 162-63; *Séjours*, pp. 153-56, with a double-page spread of the “belle photographie sépia de la maison sur l’île de l’Aare ... au milieu des buissons et des arbres” (*Séjours* 156), which Sebald framed with an excerpt from Walser’s text and which can currently be seen in the Literaturmuseum der Moderne (LiMo) in Marbach-am-Neckar, Germany.

⁶⁷ Jean-Jacques ROUSSEAU, *Les Confessions*, 2 volumes, Paris, Gallimard/ folio, 1979-80, Vol II, p. 424. The lines « Je m’éloignais ainsi jusqu’à demi-lieu de la terre : J’aurais voulu que ce lac eût été l’Océan » are marked in Sebald’s copy in DLA, and « l’Océan » is circled.

⁶⁸ CHARBONNEAU, ‘Correspondance(s)’, p. 202.

⁶⁹ Cf. SILVERBLATT, ‘Poem of an invisible subject’, p. 77 (quoted above).

⁷⁰ SEBALD, *A Place in the Country*, p. 102; id., *Logis*, p. 111-12; id., *Séjours*, p. 107.

⁷¹ Il s’agit de Rousseau, de Johann Peter Hebel, Eduard Mörike, Gottfried Keller, Robert Walser et le peintre contemporain allemand Jan Peter Tripp.

ihnen, eh es vielleicht zu spät wird, Habe die Ehre zu sagen” (Cette prédilection inchangée ... m’a inspiré l’idée de leur rendre hommage avant qu’il ne soit peut-être trop tard).⁷²

Indeed, much of Sebald’s essayistic work, including some of his academic articles – the vast majority of them written in German – crosses over from traditional *Germanistik* into the more Anglo-Saxon genre of ‘literary criticism’ or *belles-lettres*.⁷³ Rather like the four stories which make up *Die Ausgewanderten* [*Les Emigrants*], or the Stendhal and Kafka sections in *Schwindel. Gefühle. (Vertiges)* – or, rather, the Henri Beyle and Dr K. sections, as the authors are, significantly, not named in the fictional text – Sebald’s essays are both biographical ‘narratives’ and at the same time critical appreciations. This blurring of genre boundaries is reflected in the places of initial publication, which frequently favour broadsheets like the weekly *Die Zeit*, or literary journals like the Graz-based *Manuskripte*, over the more conventional academic journals. They thus may be said to occupy a middle ground between academic or literary essay and the – ostensibly – fictional stories of Sebald’s creative prose (early versions of which, as well as the three parts of *Nach der Natur*, were also published in *Manuskripte* in the 1980s).⁷⁴ Thus Sebald’s twin activities as writer and critic are not hermetically sealed but co-exist (and cross-fertilize) throughout most of his career.

Capturing the “Sebald-Sound”

The translator of Sebald’s essays, then, faces a set of challenges which both intersects with and differs from those of translating his prose fiction. If the essays in *Logis* offer a glimpse into the writer’s workshop, with passages from favourite writers and considerations of how they achieve their effects of ‘light and dark’, the narrative thrust, carried in the prose fiction and to an extent in *Logis* by ‘the unrolling of the narrative sentence after lovely sentence’ (as Sebald writes of Keller’s *Der grüne Heinrich*)⁷⁵ is replaced by the rigours of the – albeit often idiosyncratic and iconoclastic – academic argument, which naturally the

⁷² SEBALD, *Logis* p 5; *Séjours*, p. 9.

⁷³ Accordingly, in *Logis in einem Landhaus*, by contrast to e.g. *La description de la malheur*, Sebald dispenses (with a single exception) with the usual scholarly apparatus of footnotes and bibliography.

⁷⁴ Between 1981 and 1988 Sebald published a total of 9 pieces in *Manuskripte*: four essays (on Kafka, Herbeck, Stifter/Handke and Gerhard Roth) between 1981 and 1986; the three parts of *Nach der Natur* (*D’Après Nature*) from 1984 to 1987; and the first sections of, respectively, *Schwindel. Gefühle. (Vertiges)* and *Die Ausgewanderten* (*Les Émigrants*) in 1988. (For full publication details see *Saturn’s Moons*, pp. 461-66; 474; 476-77).

⁷⁵ SEBALD, *A Place in the Country*, p. 102; id., *Logis*, p. 111-12 (“[auf] ihrer schönen, Satz für Satz vor uns aufgerollten Bahn”; id., *Séjours*, p. 107).

translator also has to follow, and preserve, whether or not – as a scholar of these same authors, a familiarity with whom suddenly becomes imperative – he or she may necessarily agree with it. A further consideration, genre issues aside, is that anyone embarking on the translation of Sebald’s academic work, in the wake of the international reception of his literary oeuvre, is now faced with translating not purely an ‘academic’ book, but a book for an implied readership with a clear conception of what a work by Sebald should or will sound like in the respective language, regardless of who the present translator may be.⁷⁶

For the earlier essays on Austrian literature contained in the volumes *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* (1985: The Description of Misfortune) and *Unheimliche Heimat* (1991: Strange Homeland)⁷⁷ where the language is arguably more conventionally academic, this might seem at first glance to be a lesser concern – but in these essays too, particularly where they examine the prose style of, say, “dem von W.G. Sebald bewunderten und scharfsinnig analysierten Adalbert Stifter”⁷⁸ (as we have seen, one of his favourite authors precisely on the basis of what is achieved by the style) one can hear what is later identified as the “Sebald Sound” coming through, defined by Sebald’s former PhD student Florian Radvan thus:

Nicht nur *Die Ausgewanderten*, sondern auch die späteren Prosatexte prägten den so genannten Sebald-Sound [...], mit dem das langsame, etwas mäandernde Sich-Annähern an Personen, Orte und ihre Geschichten bezeichnet wird. [...] Auf mikrostilistischer Ebene fallen in *Die Ausgewanderten* die langen syntaktischen Einheiten sowie die anachronistisch wiederkehrenden oder nur für bestimmte Regionen typischen Ausdrücke auf [...]. Nicht zuletzt durch diese Wortwahl ergibt sich ein – bisweilen etwas elegischer – Erzählton, vergleichbar einem Gemälde im altmeisterlichen Stil, verschnörkelt und maniert, geschult an den großen Erzählern des 19. Jahrhunderts [...]. Der Sebald-Sound prägt auch viele seiner wissenschaftlichen Texte.⁷⁹

As far as my own practice as a translator of Sebald is concerned, in trying to capture the elusive “Sebald sound”, I have chosen not to read Sebald in the work of his other English translators before embarking on my own translations, but rather to adhere, in particular where translating *Logis* is concerned, as far as possible to the rhythm of the text and the echo of

⁷⁶ The present author is, for example, the fifth English translator of Sebald, following in the distinguished footsteps of Michael Hulse, translator of the first three works of prose fiction; Anthea Bell – *Austerlitz*, and the volumes *On the Natural History of Destruction (Luftkrieg und Literatur)* and *Campo Santo*, and Michael Hamburger and Iain Galbraith for the volumes of poetry.

⁷⁷ W.G. SEBALD, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*, Salzburg and Vienna, Residenz, 1985; id., *Unheimliche Heimat*, Salzburg and Vienna, Residenz, 1991. A translation into English (to be published as *Silent Catastrophes*, Penguin/ Random House 2022*) is in preparation by the present author.

⁷⁸ RADVAN, ‘Vom Sodiumglanz ferner Städte’, p. 62 [v. note 38].

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

Sebald's own voice in my head, *pour ainsi dire*⁸⁰ (and if one heard him read his work aloud in German, all of the long sentences, which sometimes seem difficult on the page, simply fell naturally and spellbindingly into place in the rhythm of his diction). Only when my own translation was almost complete did I, on those rare occasions when another translation of a particular essay exists, consult it for alternative readings and solutions in particularly thorny passages, for example in the essay in *Logis in einem Landhaus* on Jan Peter Tripp, "Wie Tag und Nacht - Über die Bilder Jan Peter Tripps" ("As Day and Night ... On the Paintings of Jan Peter Tripp")⁸¹ which the British and US publishers chose to include as a kind of Afterword to *Unerzählt/Unrecounted* [*Nul encore n'a dit*]⁸² in Michael Hamburger's translation, under the very different title 'As Day and Night, Chalk and Cheese: On the Pictures of Jan Peter Tripp'.⁸³ I did, however, find it very useful to be able to consult in particular Patrick Charbonneau's translation of *Logis/ Séjours*, as well as Ria van Hengel's Dutch and Ada Vigliani's Italian editions, in order to see how particular editorial decisions (see above), and the placing of the images, had been handled by the respective publishers.⁸⁴

As with Sebald's prose fiction, there is a need in the essays for the different "voices" (cf. Tobler above)⁸⁵ of the text to be preserved in translation. While there are no "characters", such as do occur in the prose fiction, nor such finely modulated distinctions as are found between the narratorial and protagonist's voice in *Austerlitz* – themselves made up of a mosaic of literary resonances and quotations – one nevertheless detects in the essays subtle contrasts between the authorial/narratorial voice, the voice of the author quoted, and

⁸⁰ Or as Anthea Bell puts it, on revising her translation of essays from *On the Natural History of Destruction* after Sebald's death, "with the utmost trepidation, wondering the whole time what Max would say to this or that phrase", and trying to respect "what I felt would have been his wishes". Anthea BELL, 'Translating W. G. Sebald – with and without the author' *Saturn's Moons*, pp. 209-15 (p. 214). The present author was a close colleague of W.G. Sebald's at UEA from 1993 until his death in 2001.

⁸¹ SEBALD, *Séjours*, pp. 163-81.

⁸² W.G. SEBALD et Jan Peter TRIPP, *Unerzählt. 33 Texte und 33 Radierungen*, Munich and Vienna, Hanser, 2003; id., *Unrecounted*, translated, with a note, by Michael HAMBURGER, London, Hamish Hamilton, 2004.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 78-94. Michael Hamburger comments on this choice of title in his Translator's Note: (Ibid., pp. 7-12 (p. 10). After some consultation with the publishers, it was decided to use the title 'As Day and Night... On the paintings of Jan Peter Tripp' for my own translation in *A Place in the Country*.

⁸⁴ On the particular frustrations regarding the appropriate placing of the images in each edition, see for example Martine WACHENDORFF-PÉRACHE, 'Éditer W. G. Sebald en France', *europa* 91 (2013) No. 1009 (Mai 2013), 194-99: 'La fabrication d'un livre de W.G. Sebald nest un processus plus complexe que celle d'autres publications littéraires. ... Pour Sebald, ces images n'étaient pas des "illustrations" mais un élément du texte. Elles avaient autant d'importance pour lui que les phrases, les lignes blanches, les virgules, les guillemets, les citations en langue étrangère, les italiques... (p. 197). - Persuading publishers and typesetters of this can cause not a few headaches at proof stage as one attempts to place the image relative to the text which inevitably has a different mise-en-page to the original – and may differ for each edition. The gatefold pages colour spreads in *Logis* were particularly problematic (and resolved differently by the UK and US publishers).

⁸⁵ CATLING, VIVIS, WILSON, TOBLER., 'Among Translators: W. G. Sebald and Translation', p.120.

the (sometimes heavily ironized) voices of earlier or contemporary *Sekundärliteratur*: all form part of the layering of the text. Another similar challenge is represented by the passages, in several of the essays, where Sebald appears, in his musings on the difficulties of the artist's life, also to be commenting on his own style – a kind of identification or quasi-hidden self-portrait, such as may also appear from time to time in his works of prose fiction – for example in passages such as the extended description of Robert Walser's style.⁸⁶

There are various ways of attempting to preserve this polyphony in the target text: sometimes it can be done by quoting from an existing English translation (or indeed reverting to the original, albeit with caution, as Hulse's experience with Sebald's acknowledged habit of "unreliable" quotation shows) – always assuming that one exists and that the quality and register of the translation are commensurate to the [original] text as cited by Sebald.⁸⁷ Perhaps the best example here is the essay on Robert Walser, 'Le promeneur solitaire', where – insofar as it was possible to identify the sources in Sebald's text, since the essays in *Logis* do not specifically reference them⁸⁸ – I was able to draw on the excellent English translations by Susan Bernofsky. However, ethical questions aside, this method has to be used with caution, as there is always a danger that some of the stylistic features which Sebald so admires, and which indeed form an intrinsic part of the attraction the subjects of the essays hold for him, may not carry the same emphasis or resonance within the overall context of the published translation.⁸⁹

One particularly striking example of a translational and editorial dilemma, arising from Sebald's emphasis on "regionalism" and the echoes he finds in Hebel and Walser of the language and *habitus* of his grandfather, is presented by the extensive quotation in the essay on Johann Peter Hebel ("Une comète dans le ciel") of the latter's dialect poems in the original Alemannic, without further gloss or translation. For the German reader, it is just about possible to follow the original. The translator's dilemma is to find an equivalent in the target language without losing the particular regional flavour of the text. For the English

⁸⁶ SEBALD, *Logis* pp.141-3; id., *Séjours*, pp. 134-36. Similar examples may be found in the description of Sir Thomas Browne's prose style in id., *Die Ringe des Saturn*, Frankfurt am Main, Eichborn, 1995, p. 28 /*The Rings of Saturn*, trad. Michael HULSE, London, Vintage, 2002, p. 19.

⁸⁷ This is further rendered problematic by Sebald's self-confessed habit of "unreliable" quotation (see above).

⁸⁸ The nature of Walser's numerous short texts, often with overlapping titles, does not make this task an easy one, although it helped that I was able to locate and consult the edition used by Sebald where the passages cited are, helpfully, often marked or annotated. Sebald's own text contains only a single footnote, giving the date of a newspaper article cited in the essay on Hebel.

⁸⁹ Sometimes, indeed, passages are omitted in the English: see BELL, 'Translating W.G. Sebald', p. 214.

edition, various possibilities were considered, for example commissioning a Scottish poet and translator to render the dialect poems into Lowland Scots.⁹⁰ In the end this was rejected: for one thing, it risked proving utterly baffling to much of the non-UK English readership; more pertinent were the social-cultural differences which rendered this an arguably inappropriate equivalent, since the specific regionalism of Hebel, and the proximity of his diction to that of Sebald's beloved grandfather, is crucial to the piece. (There is also the risk, in the English socio-cultural context, of the written reproduction of dialect producing an unwanted comic effect). Fortunately, there were already two extant English translations of the Hebel poem in question ('Die Vergänglichkeit'), one in verse, one in prose, and at quite a late stage the decision was taken, in consultation with the UK publisher, to retain the Alemannic verses in the main body of the text – as with Mörike's German poems in the essay on that writer – and to follow it with the prose translation used in the *Penguin Book of German Verse*.⁹¹ This left a snippet of rather doggerel-like verse by Hebel quoted in the Corsican episode of the essay on Rousseau, which I managed to render into a rhyming English couplet to follow the quoted text in the original dialect. It is interesting to note the different solutions arrived at in the various other translations. In the French version, Patrick Charbonneau has translated the dialect poems into French verse equivalents, giving the originals in the notes at the end. Ria van Hengel's Dutch translation follows a similar procedure, but concludes with a separate section at the end of the volume containing the original text of the poems; while Ada Vigliani's Italian edition dispenses with the reproduction of the originals, but makes use of existing translations where available, listed in an editorial note at the end – the latter practice being one also employed in my own English translation.⁹²

There is, indeed, a surprisingly wide variation between the various editions in different languages of *Logis in einem Landhaus*, including the use and indication of annotations and other editorial material, which are almost indispensable for an Anglophone audience very familiar with Sebald but otherwise largely ignorant of 18th and 19th century German literature. Thus my edition includes an Introduction, Notes and a Bibliography, in

⁹⁰ This is a solution employed, for example, in the Penguin translation of Grimm's *Märchen*: Jacob and Wilhelm GRIMM, *Selected Tales*, translated with an introduction and notes by David LUKE ; Scots translations by Gilbert MCKAY; Irish translations by Philip SCHOFIELD, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982.

⁹¹ *The Penguin Book of German Verse*, introduced and edited by L. FORSTER. With plain prose translations of each poem. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1957 (and reprints). - Sheenagh PUGH, *Selected Poems*, Bridgend, Seren, [c.1990], repr. 2008; Hebel translations also online at sheenagh.webs.com/translatingnotquite.htm. For the publishers, Penguin, using the Forster translation also avoided any copyright issues.

⁹² W.G. SEBALD, *Logies in een Landhuis*. Schrijversportretten, trad. Ria VAN HENGEL, Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 2012; id., *Soggiorno in una casa di campagna*, trad. Ada VIGLIANI, Milano, Adelphi, 2012.

which, on the basis of my own academic research on Sebald, I was able to indicate both translations of the works cited, and a note of the editions used by Sebald. However, while some translations include a translator's note and annotations, this seems the exception rather than the rule, and there are also a number of differences between the UK and US editions in this respect.⁹³

The texts of Sebald's essays are, then, like his prose, dense and complex, and the danger for the translator is of overcomplicating and over-elaborating, perhaps also over-explaining, while seeking to preserve verbal echoes and favourite turns of phrase – which in *Logis* recur from essay to essay – without resorting to a 'flat' and neutral academic style, or trying too hard to unravel the complexities of sometimes very dense, layered German for a 'plain English ear' – something which is all too likely to result in the "flattening" Sebald notes in the interviews quoted above.

By way of conclusion we may return [revenons] to Sebald's own view on the pitfalls of translation, where in one his last interviews, with Steve Wasserman in Los Angeles, he responds with characteristic humour and irony to the perennial question from the interviewer, faced with a German writer and an Anglophone audience, as to "what is lost in translation". Summing up his own idealism and scepticism with regard to translation, and speaking from his hard-won experience as both a 'translatee' and committed collaborator in translations, and as a critical reader of translations of his own and others' works, Sebald replies:

There may be the odd passage where English manages to render things more felicitously than German, but, on the whole, you lose a little bit. Well, it's very easy to lose everything, it doesn't take much: if the prosodic rhythm is not maintained, if the text has two or three blunders or half-blunders on every page, readers very soon get irritated and they don't quite know where it comes from, the problem. But they find they're not inclined to read on, if it's 'bumpy' in any sense. ... So it needs a great deal of care and patience, and in principle it's always possible: if you find the right person to do it, it's possible. But even the right person has to be watched very closely [audience laughter].⁹⁴

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⁹³ The US publishers, Random House, for example chose to preserve the integrity of the text by omitting numbers for the endnotes for example. The electronic versions of the respective English editions followed those editions as closely as possible while of course allowing scope for further editorial decisions.

⁹⁴ 'Three Conversations with W. G. Sebald: In This Distant Place: Conversation with Steve Wasserman (Los Angeles, 2001)', *Saturn's Moons* pp. 364-75 (pp. 371-2).