

Enthrallments

The trails of light which [the moths] seemed to leave behind them in all kinds of curlicues and streamers and spirals . . . did not really exist . . . but were merely phantom traces created by the sluggish reaction of the human eye. . . . It was such unreal phenomena . . . the sudden incursion of unreality into the real world, certain effects of light in the landscape . . . or in the eye of a beloved person, that kindled our deepest feelings, or at least what we took for them.

—W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

I.

I am the only child of two academics, one a South Philadelphia Jewish grocer's son, the other a Lithuanian gentile, a displaced person who came to this country at fourteen and never ceased feeling out of place. They both became Germanists, more or less by default. Growing up, I took the two of them as models for most things. Because we were a threesome we were, in a manner of speaking, friends rather than family; at the same time, it was a delusion to feel I could be their equals. I wasn't rebellious, like other kids, and only wanted to be as good as my parents desired me to be. Largely, this was a matter of using words well, and "well" meant both skillfully and to some moral end. Playing beneath my father's desk as a child, I'd see his hand come down and rid itself of torn paper scraps—rejected writing. (I had a game in those days of licking the scraps and sticking them to the underside of the desk, but that is another story.) Once, my mother decided to try painting in oils; she destroyed her picture in a fit of unhappiness. When I was in high school, they embarked on translation together. Sometimes I participated in their discussions and tried to help them find *le mot juste* in English. Translation, as they conceived it, was an act of humility, particularly in the face of the mind and subject matter they were engaged with. They were putting their own egos away to serve a more significant purpose, that of translating the essayist and Holocaust survivor Jean Améry.

My childhood fluctuated between two poles, the one of utter creative contentment like the trance under my father's desk and the sense of fluid accomplishment I gleaned our first year in Germany, when I learned to speak the language in under a month; the other of being wrong, out-of-place (our second year in Germany, I was rejected by the same classmates who'd embraced me at age six), inappropriate somehow, because of kids who made fun of my solitary, sensitive manner, and because my parents, too, sometimes seemed to expect more or different capacities from me than those I was able to demonstrate. I continue to live between those two poles, with the added difficulty and paradox that the superego flagellates me when I fail to stay with the first. The more I feel out-of-place, the more I feel not-good-enough, the more I think of myself as hopelessly lazy and selfish, the more I am angry with myself for having those feelings and think I "should" be fluent, productive, happy, content. Nor can I get over the feeling that this bondage to a pendulum ought to be soluble.

Last year, on a trip to Milwaukee to hear a twenty-five-year old musician friend play Mozart's fifth violin concerto, I was slowly reading the English translation of the emigré German writer W.G. Sebald's final novel, *Austerlitz*. Being at the end of an arduous college teaching year, I felt dull, congested, and mentally unproductive. At this low moment, I bookended myself between a child prodigy turned star, a woman of astonishing energy whom I idealize as you can only idealize someone a good deal younger than yourself who seems to represent your own inner potential perfectly expressed, and a writer with capacities for diligence and moral reflection far beyond my own. My even-keeled, green-eyed husband accompanied me, with his fine observations, skepticism and humor. He keeps me grounded and balanced, but also sometimes emphasizes by contrast my hypersensitivity.

My choice of book and of excursion resulted in a kind of exasperation at my own inadequacies as a writer. Like Jane Eyre, I have a “strong organ of veneration,” and am prone to seek out and worship what I consider genius. In its presence, I fluctuate: I am inspired, or I am depressed. I myself, as a writer and scholar, cannot work steadily, but either burst out or fall fallow. I suppose there are plenty like me, but I can never quite get over the notion that I was meant for greatness, and it’s about time I grew out of my fluctuations. The truly great, so I imagine, are driven by unflagging forces, and they never stop working. They’re riding a hurricane of creativity, and they’ve got the *Sitzfleisch* to stay on it. I have neither hurricane nor *Sitzfleisch*.

On the day in December, 2001, when the morning paper reported Sebald’s death, I was stunned. I had wanted to meet Sebald, had thought of sending him the poem I wrote for him; I had wished him to live long and to help in the massive, never-ending and futile task of *tikkun olam*, repairing of the world. It seemed to me he was a giant who could lift and glue many fragments at a time. He would write more, and even greater, novels, and he would be a moral spokesperson for German-Jewish reconciliation and against resurgent antisemitism. He and I would meet one day and talk about that stringent writer, Jean Améry, whom he admired. Now there was nothing to do but reread *Austerlitz* and come up against the wall of its finality.

Milwaukee was empty the first evening. I wanted to record my response to it the way Sebald records his responses to cities, and I knew I never could. I asked myself what Sebald would have written of a strange sight that startled my husband and me: a flock of gulls circling around a spotlit billboard at the top of a twenty-floor building. At first we imagined the building had burned, and ashes were bursting from its roof (this was less than a year after September 11). Then we thought of moths—kite-sized moths—before we recognized that a lakebound town attracts seagulls. But there was something sinister about the fact that the sidewalks below were empty and that seagulls were nowhere else to be seen. They swung around and around the Miller Lite billboard and made us wonder what lure or necessity enthralled them.

Sebald would have researched the history of Milwaukee, the species of seagull, and the original ingredients used in the production of Miller beer. Out of all this scrupulousness a morality is built: the writer acknowledges a responsibility to his world (also to his own feelings). Sebald would have both conveyed his own reaction to the seagulls—albeit in a self-effacing way—and made them emblematic by indicating the precise intersection of seagulls and history, at this time, in this place. All I could do was ponder a poem in which I likened the seagulls to figures in a swaying mobile. My mind stuck there, on this one metaphor.

I was further confounded the next day by a work of art that affected Neil and Leila with an excitement that eluded me. Milwaukee’s only gem, as far as we could see, was its brand new museum, designed by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. The building was right at the edge of the lake. Bright white, its central shape was a wedge with two wings attached—wings that literally opened and closed over long, rib-shaped windows reflecting dark blue lake and sky. Both my paragons, the fine, sensible drama critic and the dervish of classical music, became ecstatic at this bird-building. Briefly, I was orphaned. They had gone to heaven and I was down here with my clay feet firmly planted. Clearly, they saw something I didn’t. White, white, white, a patent leather shoe was all I could make out.

The wings were down when we first went, which is how they’re kept during the day so that the building won’t overheat. At five in the afternoon, while Leila was napping for her concert, Neil and I went back and watched them open. The light was changing, the sailboats drifted past, thin strips of cloud echoed the building’s ribs, the building stretched out its dagger beak, and I began to see the point. There was a magic in the wings’ slow movement, something bigger than ourselves, dulling the city behind us and gracing it at the same time.

Leila played beautifully that evening, dwarfing the provincial orchestra. I am not musically

schooled or able to focus on the whole of a concerto, but my ears pricked up at the “Turkish” part of the last movement, and I was thrilled by the sudden flaring of something both wild and decorous. Leila’s strength as a musician is a virtuosic wildness—an ability to get close to loss of control and still hold the piece tight. She is not a cool player, but an athletic one, a musician of strength and speed and great intensity. I am enthralled by the mystery of her talent. I am also a little vain about the fact that such a person is one of my closest friends.

We all went back at noon the next day to see the museum’s wings raised and lowered. An absurd fanfare blurted from speakers. Leila, of course, was irritated to the soul by that canned music, but found it more laughable than offensive. The huge, white, ribbed wings lifting caught her whole attention. You can feel close to a person—in this case, two people—and still not thrill to beauty with them at the same time, in the same place and in the same way. Neil and Leila were excited by the opening wings; I was more stirred by their shutting. At that point, the crane which was also a gull which was also a swan which was also a Concorde jet and a missile, all trying to take off but permanently grounded, became a far more natural spectacle: a goose closing its wings for sleep. The sight, so simple, comforted me. I wanted to be folded under those wings, against that soft goose’s body.

Leila, though, has no weakness for the vulnerability of animals. The night before, leaving the concert hall with her voluminous gown over my arm, I spotted a rabbit in the empty plaza. It scampered into the four-lane road, stopped halfway across, then skittered to the other side where it rested on a patch of grass beneath a spindly tree, its sides heaving. I pitied the rabbit greatly, but Leila barely noticed it. On the other hand, I failed to hear the birds in the walls of a parking garage or some other cadaverous building we passed after we left the museum. They were just part of city noise to me, but Leila stopped, cocked her head, and said, “Birds, lots of birds.” If you’d asked, she could have told you exactly what notes they were twittering.

I have strayed from W.G. Sebald, but I was thinking of him all weekend. The gulls flapping over the beer sign on the first night reminded me of the moths the eponymous character Austerlitz describes to the narrator, naming them as you might name schoolmates from the distant past to assure yourself that they are alive in your memory if not in actuality. Sebald’s writing is always an exercise in memory and a statement of memory’s imperatives: recall the name of this person or animal who has disappeared, or will soon slip from the world, or you will have no self! With memory, you are haunted, but without it, you are nothing but a spectre. Austerlitz is a man divided from himself, an amnesiac; the flapping moths reflect his own ghostly condition. History has forced Austerlitz to forget, but in the course of travels he recovers the memories that tell him who he is. Sebald seems to do the same. His novels represent his central quest to determine who *he* was—what it meant to be a German, an expatriate, born in 1944, transplanted to England, a listener to refugees, a man.

When Austerlitz goes to Paris to try to find out what happened to his father during World War II—how and when, exactly, he was deported to his death—he visits the new Bibliothèque nationale and manages to learn nothing. An architectural historian, Austerlitz is disgusted with everything about the new library: its irrational design, its Kafkaesque bureaucracy, its bizarre inner courtyard where birds seeing the reflection of trees fly into the windows and drop down dead as he sits reading. *Austerlitz* is in part a study of the relation of architecture to morality; it begins with the narrator’s visit to Breendonk in Belgium, the star-shaped nineteenth-century fortress where Jean Améry was imprisoned and tortured by the SS. For the poor birds, for the researching orphaned son, for memory itself, the Bibliothèque nationale is a dead end. One day, Austerlitz encounters an old acquaintance who is now a member of the staff: “we began a long, whispered conversation . . . about the dissolution . . . of our capacity to remember. . . . The new library building, which in both its entire layout and its near-ludicrous internal regulation seeks to exclude the reader as a potential enemy, might be described . . . as the official manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to

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the past.” Hence the entrapping courtyard with its fake, transplanted forest and its disoriented birds killing themselves in the frantic flight for home.

In a strange city, you look around for signposts by which to guide yourself; you keep one eye out for the sinister and the other open for what beckons, whether through novelty or through soothing familiarity. The gulls were momentarily fascinating—they cast a spell—but quickly sinister. It was as if the Miller Lite men had hidden some machine in their sign that made the birds crazy; you had the feeling they would circle all night, frenetically, until they died on the roof from exhaustion. Or perhaps they would be released from their own spell at dawn and fly toward their huge steel cousin by the lake, just closing down her wings after a night spent poised and straining toward an unattainable destination across the water.

From Milwaukee, I brought home an imperative to write some poem or story in which I illumined the buildings and birds I had seen that weekend. I wanted to make them epiphanic—which they were for Neil and Leila—and I wanted my secondhand epiphanies to be real. I was dishonest about what the gulls and the Calatrava had meant to me, trying to appropriate Neil and Leila’s ecstasies and get a little piece of art out of them. A few stanzas to hold up against Leila’s concerti, the cadenzas she wrote for herself; something to make me at least worthy to write about Sebald, if not write like him—something, perhaps, to make me immortal, too. After struggling at this for several days, I succumbed to a bad head cold and, for the time being, gave up.

II.

In *The Emigrants*, the-narrator-who-may-be-Sebald tells the story of a young Jewish millionaire, a sensitive soul, a gambler and somewhat mentally disturbed, and his German manservant and companion—the narrator’s great uncle. The two men travel around the world together during the 1920s. From the great uncle’s fictional diary, Sebald transcribes an entry from a night by the desert spring Ain Jidy (now Ein Gedi) near the Dead Sea:

Cosmo, curled up slightly, was sleeping at my side. Suddenly a quail, perhaps frightened by the storm on the Sea, took refuge in his lap and remained there, calm now, as if it were its rightful place. But at daybreak . . . it ran away quickly across the level ground . . . lifted off into the air, beat its wings tremendously fast for a moment, then extended them rigid and motionless and glided by a little thicket in an utterly beautiful curve, and was gone.

That the two men are lovers is only ever hinted, and that lightly. They live in a world that doesn’t tolerate their kind, in a time not long before one man’s country turned murderously against the other’s culture and people. In a place of clear, fresh water, in a larger place of sand, salt and deathly dryness, briefly, a bird mistakes them for its home.

Sebald’s writing insists on indelible sorrow, haunting the reader. When Austerlitz comes across a stuffed squirrel in the window of a peculiar antiques bazaar in the nearly empty town of Theresienstadt, it returns him to the innocence of his childhood; but the dead animal, grotesquely restored, evokes the deaths of that childhood, of Austerlitz’s mother and father, and the only recently unfrozen condition of Austerlitz’s own soul.

Sebald’s novels are essays of sorts, though the stories within them are what give his essayism force. Those stories are always secondhand, always told by someone else to the narrator-who-is-and-is-not-Sebald. Here is a story I have been given. Leila has remarkably strong hips and legs for a small, sinuous woman whose main work is accomplished with her upper body. In concert she bends one knee, pushes her pelvis forward, steps back firmly when resting and resumes playing with a buoyant step to the front—all her force seeming to come from below to power the arms and fingers. “The Josefowicz build,” she calls

the physique inherited from her father, born at the end of the war in a displaced-persons camp. I can't help but wonder if it was the Josefowicz build that enabled her father's mother to survive for six years in the woods, from the age of nine, when she fled the village where her whole family was murdered in one morning. Perhaps that little girl's sturdy lower body made the difference between running fast enough and being gunned to the ground, between getting to a berry bush and being defeated by hunger, between finding the partisans who took her in and dying alone from weariness and starvation. I don't know, and Leila can never know, either. But the story is part of her music; held in her legs and hips, it emerges in a tender yet furious, almost bitter, virtuosity, tingeing Mozart's sweetness with something inexpungeable.

Before me now is a photo of Neil, Leila, and the Calatrava museum bird. It perches so whitely against the blue lake, and is in the shape of a triangle, which seems appropriate to my experience of measuring myself against two people, and also to the relation between torpor, inspiration, and the form my creativity finally takes: this essay, with its divagations; or short poems—short because I run out of energy quickly. Sometimes I imagine myself impaled on the beak of that great bird, a martyr to my artistic dreams. I flail there like Chaplin in his roller skates just about to go off the edge (making art out of desperation, incapacity, I suppose). Sometimes I huddle under the wing and smell the goose's body. It's a nonflying goose, so I don't climb on its back. I stay down here ruminating; also, appreciating the company of those two people and free, for the time being, of enthrallment.

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