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Kathy Behrendt  
kbehrendt@wlu.ca

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KATHY BEHRENDT

## SCRAPING DOWN THE PAST: MEMORY AND AMNESIA IN W. G. SEBALD'S ANTI-NARRATIVE

THERE HAS BEEN A recent and refreshing anti-narrativist backlash in the philosophy of personal identity. Led by Galen Strawson, the anti-narrativist view of the self rejects the picture of a person's life as having or needing a certain shape, unity, direction, and completeness, as modelled on stories or literary narratives. The novels of German author W. G. Sebald have apparent relevance here for the anti-narrativist. They incisively depict lives that resist a narrativist model, and so provide concrete illustrations of non-narrative possibilities. At the same time Sebald's works cast doubt on a recurring motif in Strawson's anti-narrativist outlook, namely the insignificance of memory to the self. This throws into question a presumed dichotomy within the narrativist/anti-narrativist debate: one that places concern for memory on the side of the narrativists and permits the anti-narrativist to reject or downplay memory's significance. Sebald's work cuts through this dichotomy. It exemplifies narrative skepticism while conveying a profound sense of memory's importance.

### I

Narrativism about the self is a broad-ranging set of views found in both philosophy and psychology. No single author or claim sums it up. Even Daniel Dennett's oft-cited pronouncement that, "we are all virtuoso novelists. . . . We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story"<sup>1</sup> can be questioned from within the narrativist camp on several counts (including "all," "virtuoso" and, perhaps, "good"). Nevertheless some common themes and variations can be noted.

The narrativist outlook portrays the self as viewing or actively fitting the events of life into some coherent and meaningful form, pattern, or story, where the meaning yielded takes us beyond a mere chronology of events. The nature of this story, if discussed, is often construed along conventional lines as involving a traditional narrative trajectory, including some form of closure: “A self is just a kind of life that has a beginning, a middle, and an end that are connected in a traditional storylike manner”;<sup>2</sup> one’s life is a story that is “understood as a conventional, linear narrative.”<sup>3</sup> Sometimes the narrative in question is classified generically, as saga or hagiography, tragedy or comedy, or (for the particularly unfortunate amongst us), farce.<sup>4</sup> Many narrativists also treat the self as literally the product that results from this endeavor, and narrative as a condition of self-understanding.<sup>5</sup> Hence, “A person’s identity is created by a self-conception that is narrative in form . . . constituting an identity requires that an individual conceive of his life as having the form and the logic of a story” (Schechtman, p. 96), and it is a “basic condition of making sense of ourselves, that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*” (Taylor, p. 47); narrative is the “essential genre” of self-representation, “and not merely . . . one normative ideal among others” (Flanagan, p. 149). This self-constructing, meaning-generating picture of narrative is sometimes accompanied by a view to the effect that the narrative impulse is basic and is the means by which we experience the world’s goings-on in general: “Narrative is not the work of poets, dramatists and novelists reflecting upon events which had no narrative order before one was imposed by the singer or the writer; narrative form is neither disguise nor decoration” (MacIntyre, p. 211), and we “seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of a narrative” (Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” p. 12).

This rough characterisation captures what we might call the “strong” narrativist outlook. Other, more moderate supporters of the view treat the narrative impulse as potentially beneficial to self-understanding, but they do not promote, and sometimes actively discourage, any literal reading of the claim that we are the authors of our lives. Nor do they insist that we cannot but see the world through a narrative lens (as opposed to sometimes imposing such structure retrospectively on our experience).<sup>6</sup>

Memory is undeniably important to any narrativist approach to the self. Personal (sometimes called “experiential” or “episodic”) memory is a minimal condition for narrativity whether or not the self literally depends on the act of self-narration. One has to remember one’s past

in order to tell the story of one's life. This is not to deny that other things contribute to the self, but simply to acknowledge memory as a primary factor. Even narrativist Marya Schechtman, who recognizes the power of the subconscious in shaping the self, admits that "the narrative self-constitution view does not allow a person's self-narrative to remain entirely subterranean" (p. 114). Our self-narratives must to some considerable degree be explicit to ourselves. A large part of this explicit self-narrative will inevitably consist in remembered experiences; they form the main material of the story. Hence personal memory is of clear interest and value for narrativist accounts of the self in general.

Skepticism about narrativist approaches to the self (especially in their more common, stronger incarnation) has been expressed by a significant minority. But Galen Strawson's provocative "Against Narrativity" is the primary catalyst for the current debate.<sup>7</sup> In that paper he contests many of the above-mentioned claims. He rejects the narrativist view as a psychological description of how we all in fact regard our lives, and he condemns it as a normative prescription of how we ought to think of ourselves and our lives. Viewing our lives as stories and ourselves as characters in them does not enhance our self-understanding, our well-being, or our metaphysical credentials as selves.

In the context of this attack, Strawson, seemingly in passing, makes some intriguing remarks about memory. He suggests that while one's past is clearly important in shaping one's present self, the value of personal memory is often over-rated. We do not need explicitly to recall our past experiences in order for them to form who we are. For the "past can be alive—arguably more genuinely alive—in the present simply in so far as it has helped to shape the way one is in the present" ("AN," p. 432). This is a complex statement that, in this particular version of it, pertains to Strawson's episodic view of the self, which is strongly related to but nonetheless distinct from the anti-narrativist stance. However, Strawson reiterates these claims about memory in the context of articulating his position against narrativity (see "AN," pp. 433 and 438), and the appeal of the point to the anti-narrative camp is in any case evident; the less inclined one is to excavate one's past through memory, the more resistant to self-narrations one will be, lacking as one does the material for their construction. While this by no means demands that the anti-narrativist divest herself of all attachment to memory, the message is clear: absence of any such attachment, or indeed weakness of memory itself, is not a fault and not an obstacle to self-constitution or self-understanding.

Strawson calls on a musical analogy to illustrate his point about the

unimportance of memory. The musician's countless hours of past practice are for the most part no longer remembered but nevertheless clearly inform his present performance ("AN," p. 432).<sup>8</sup> A more Sebaldian comparison might be the painting technique of artist Frank Auerbach, on which Sebald partly modelled the character of Max Ferber in his novel *The Emigrants*.<sup>9</sup> For Auerbach/Ferber, a finished painting is the result of multiple previous versions, each of which is scraped down and started over. The final version is ultimately a product of the whole process. Although no longer available as items that can be explicitly referred to, the past versions clearly help determine the final product. So it is with our own past, on Strawson's account: we needn't remember or dwell on it in order for it to form what we are now. He believes that this non-conscious "shaping . . . is the deepest continuance of memory" ("Blood and Memory"), and "it is only the present shaping consequences of the past that matter, not the past as such" ("AN," p. 438). He is fond of quoting the Earl of Shaftesbury's proclamation: "The *now*: the *now*. Mind this: in this is all."<sup>10</sup> Hence, he claims to have no "great or special interest" in his past ("AN," p. 433).

## II

The genre-defying nature of the works of W. G. Sebald ought to endear him to the anti-narrativist movement. Alternately classed as fiction, history, travelogue, and sometimes biography, Sebald's "prose fiction," as he called it,<sup>11</sup> fits comfortably within none of these categories. The resistance of these works to generic classification, the absence of determinate or conventional plot, and the oblique and open-ended course of the accounts, along with Sebald's steadfast refusal to speak as another (instead he reports his "characters'" words, however curious or incomplete their accounts may be, in the voice of a narrator who always bears a striking resemblance to W. G. Sebald)—all these things would seem to ally Sebald to an anti-narrativist outlook.

However, there is one potentially jarring point of dissimilarity between Sebald and the anti-narrativists. Whereas vanguard anti-narrativist Galen Strawson vehemently downplays the significance of memory and the past to the self, memory is of overwhelming importance to Sebald. The major themes of his novels are loss, trauma, displacement, and the imperative but elusive grip of the past. So much of his work consists of the narrator reporting the memories of others. This respective antipathy and propensity toward memory is explicit in Strawson and Sebald's more

personal statements on the matter. Where Strawson (on the heels of proclaiming his own utter lack of narrative sensibility) states, nor “do I have any great or special interest in my past” (“AN,” p. 433), Sebald has said that there “is something terribly alluring to me about the past”; it’s “the desire, almost, or the temptation that you might throw yourself into it, as it were, over the parapets and down” (*Emergence*, p. 57). If memory marks a dichotomy within the narrativist/anti-narrativist debate, with the narrativist accepting and the anti-narrativist doubting its significance, and if this dichotomy proves indispensable to the debate, then Sebald’s memory-laden works cannot be taken to express or illustrate an anti-narrativist outlook.

Perhaps this discrepancy in attitudes towards memory can be explained. Strawson is only speaking of his past, qua Galen Strawson the human being, whereas Sebald is clearly concerned with a past beyond personal experience, as is consonant with his persistently expressed interest in history. When Strawson speaks of having no “great or special interest” in his past, he is speaking only of personal memory. He is by no means suggesting that the apprehension of the past *per se* is of little value or interest in understanding the present. He is certainly not condoning *historical* ignorance or indifference (i.e. that we cease to remember or care *that* certain things happened in the world). However, while this may help to explain the difference between Sebald and Strawson’s attitudes toward memory, it also points to shortcomings with the latter. Strawson’s indifference towards personal memory may inadvertently nudge him (and any anti-narrativist who follows him on this point) towards a more troubling historical ignorance. This can be made apparent by appealing to Sebald’s use of history.

Sebald is interested in history as filtered through the lens of those whose own pasts colour their historical concerns, to the extent that personal and propositional memory often cannot be easily prised apart and treated separately. Strawson invites the anti-narrativist to ignore these relations, by presenting indifference towards one’s past as a reasonable option and one with little in the way of personal, social or moral consequences.<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, this is not uncontroversial. But it stands some chance of being defensible if we treat it for what it is: a point about personal memory as taken in isolation from propositional memory of an historic nature (herein “historical memory”). The real difficulty arises when we consider whether personal memory can be treated in such isolation. Several of Sebald’s novels call attention to the possibility of those for whom lack of interest in the personal past is, ethi-

cally and perhaps psychologically speaking, not optional *because* it is tied to historical memory often of a traumatic nature (in particular, those historical facts that are commonly entrusted to communities of collective memory). This is a circumstance that runs throughout Sebald's four novels. It is especially prevalent in *The Emigrants*, as I will discuss, but is nowhere more explicit than in his final work of fiction, *Austerlitz*.

### III

*Austerlitz* concerns the tormented present and fragmented past of a Czechoslovakian Jewish man, Jacques Austerlitz, who was brought to Britain as a young child on the *Kindertransport*, raised in a Welsh Calvinist family under a different name, and only later came to know of his true identity. Austerlitz's past together with his ongoing attempt to recover his lost memories of it, and his quest for information pertaining to his birth family, are recounted to the unnamed narrator of the book over a series of meetings between the two of them that span the course of many years.

Halfway through the novel we are presented the following striking piece of information: our protagonist, despite the fact that he was born prior to WWII, lives in London, is Oxford-educated, and a professor of Art History, claims to know "nothing about the conquest of Europe by the Germans and the slave state they set up, and nothing about the persecution I had escaped, or at least . . . not much more than a salesgirl in a shop . . . knows about the plague or cholera. As far as I was concerned the world ended in the late nineteenth century." We learn that such information did of course come his way in some form, but that, as Austerlitz himself would have it, "I was clearly capable of closing my eyes and ears to it, of simply forgetting it like any other unpleasantness."<sup>13</sup>

We know by this point in the novel that Austerlitz has deeply buried memories of his own wartime childhood experiences prior to being sent to Britain from Prague. Virtually all personal memories from this time period are lost to him. This aspect of Sebald's novel is a relatively familiar story of trauma, and subsequent repression and dissociation of memory, followed by an extended account of its recovery and the effects of that on Austerlitz's already-tenuous sense of identity. Austerlitz's loss of early personal memory is understandable and we have many clinical and anecdotal models by which to comprehend it. It is apparently excusable; he is hardly to be blamed for forgetting the experiences of his early

childhood, only pitied. But this new piece of information concerning a broader perhaps altogether different sort of amnesia (an historical amnesia, as it were—the loss of propositional, non-experiential memory, concerning more widely-known historic events) is not so immediately or obviously pardonable. This is forgetting of a quite different order and magnitude. It is surprising and disturbing, even (as one reviewer of the book would have it) shameful.<sup>14</sup> For it places Austerlitz perilously close to those who, for entirely different reasons, are guilty of forgetfulness about this time, such people being the target of some of Sebald's most vitriolic assaults elsewhere. Thus *Austerlitz* draws attention to something that some philosophers of the self are apt to neglect, concerning the relation between personal and propositional (in this case historical-factual) memory.

Austerlitz prompts us to question the possibility of retaining adequate historical memory in the face of substantive personal forgetting. He makes salient the plight of those for whom personal memory is bound up with factual, historical memory and knowledge, such that the two may stand or fall together. As Austerlitz explains, when attempting to account for his ignorance of the German conquest, "I realized then . . . how little practice I had in using my memory, and conversely how hard I must always have tried to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to my unknown past" (p. 197). In other words, he had to forget the relevant historical information that came his way in order to continue to keep painful personal memory at bay. But this casts a pall on his otherwise innocuous personal amnesia and our tolerance of it. Thus personal amnesia gets caught up in the whole net of the larger recent past, and the various injunctions against forgetting that past.

What are we to say when the pardonable loss of personal memory is sustained by a potentially reprehensible bout of historical amnesia? Whatever we may think of Strawson's indifference towards explicit recall of past experience, it becomes pernicious if we extend it beyond personal memory, to include historical memory and awareness. It is not enough that past historical events merely shape the present in ways we are not aware of. We often demand their presence be more explicit. The model of scraping down past memories and effacing them from explicit consciousness is not a palatable option for historical memory. It calls to mind historical blindness, in the form of regrettably familiar cases of collective amnesia concerning atrocities. And if personal amnesia is somehow promoted or sustained through historical-factual forgetting it



is likewise tainted by it. Thus Austerlitz must recover his early personal memories in order not to run the risk of being party to one of the more notorious outbreaks of collective amnesia of our times.

So while it may be one thing to ask whether Austerlitz's historical amnesia is explicable (it is, and suffering and trauma are in large part behind it), there remains considerable scope to question whether it is ethically tolerable. As it happens, we have reason to take Austerlitz at his word when he claims to be at *fault* for his previous ignorance of the history of persecution of the Jews (p. 279). This apportioning of some of the responsibility for historical memory to the victim is not an idiosyncratic notion on Sebald's part; it is a recurring theme in the burgeoning field of the ethics of remembering.<sup>15</sup> If we follow the view that certain strands of historical memory are morally imperative for all concerned, then Austerlitz is indeed in the midst of a crisis. Whatever psychological mechanisms motivate the repression of Austerlitz's personal memory, they also hinder his ability to fulfill an imperative of recognizing certain historical facts. While this is a situation that we may lament, it is not one we can endorse.

We cannot therefore neglect the relation between the personal and the broader historical past. In an effort to distance himself from the rival narrativist position, Strawson has not taken into account these particular potential repercussions of downplaying the importance of personal memory, viewing it as he does in isolation from historical memory. The case of *Austerlitz* provokes the question of whether we can entirely isolate the personal from the historical in memory. In so doing, it casts doubt on the wisdom of downplaying memory's significance in the anti-narrativist account. But it does not, I will argue, thereby undermine the anti-narrativist account.

#### IV

*Austerlitz* may well appeal to the narrativist, not just because of its deep concern with memory, but its embedding of personal histories within their larger social and historical contexts. Pioneering narrativist Alasdair MacIntyre, in contrast with Strawson, is highly attuned to the connection between personal and historical memory when framing his view. He claims that a non-narratively-inclined self "can have no history." Upon the narrativist outlook, on the other hand, "the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity," and this social identity coincides with historical

identity (p. 221). Indeed, MacIntyre cites the case of a German born after 1945 who feels the war has no moral relevance for his present life, as a prime example of culpable, individualistic, anti-narrative detachment (pp. 220–21). For MacIntyre, personal narrative and historical sensibility go hand in hand. *Austerlitz* might be taken as an illustration of MacIntyre's point.

I think any attempt to affiliate Sebald with a narrative view of the self such as MacIntyre's is misguided for several reasons. If Strawson suffers from a disregard of the connection between personal and historical memory, MacIntyre is guilty of extreme optimism concerning the benefits of that connection. For him, mindfulness of the larger historical context of one's life story helps the narrative quest for the unity of a life. This in turn is ultimately a quest for the good—a concept which itself depends on a notion of *telos* and closure (pp. 218–21). Once again, however, Sebald's work provides a striking set of counter-examples, in which the recovery of personal together with historical memory leads not to self-completion but to self-dissolution. *Austerlitz* is an extreme case in point. His uncovering of the surfeit of possible meanings, clues and connections related to the past results in what has aptly been called “an inversed *Bildungsroman*”—one that leads to “perpetual wandering and not to a resolution, the discovery of the self, personal growth, or the comfort of home.”<sup>16</sup> But there are many other occasions in Sebald in which the pursuit of memory, both personal and historical, is tied to a depletion of identity.

Recollection and recounting tend to result in bewilderment, despair, and sometimes suicide amongst the host of Sebald's rememberers. Those who survive the ordeal of recollection gain no gratification or enhancement from it. Indeed the very act of conveying their past to the narrator is often depicted as not so much a sharing of a personal history as a relinquishing of it. Nowhere is this more apparent than among the various characters that populate *The Emigrants*, another of Sebald's novels of exile, memory, and the resounding costs of WWII. *The Emigrants* concerns four German or East European exiles and the resonance that the past continues to have in their later lives. In different ways the past catches up with each of the four men, and proves to be their undoing.

The first émigré we encounter, the aging Henry Selwyn, kills himself soon after recounting his hitherto long-buried past to the narrator, and this sets the tone for much of what is to follow. In a later section, the narrator's great-uncle, Ambros Adelwarth, succumbs to the effects

of electro-shock treatment, having divested himself of his memories by relaying his past to a relative, in a process described as being “as much a torment to him as an attempt at self-liberation” (p. 100). “The more Uncle Adelwarth told his stories,” we are informed, “the more desolate he became,” until he could “no longer shape a single sentence, nor utter a single word” (pp. 102–3). And in the final section of the novel, after a painful dredging up of his childhood, the émigré German-Jewish painter Max Ferber surrenders his mother’s diary to the narrator, proclaiming the “work” of remembering to be heartbreaking (p. 193). Recollection and retelling in *The Emigrants* is often a protracted affair, and one more likely to result in self-dissolution than self-understanding. The painting analogy takes on a more sinister form here. Memory—the ground for self-understanding in narrativist terms—is also the instrument of self-destruction, as each attempt at a complete picture is effaced and overlaid with another one.

Contrary to MacIntyre’s assumption, expansion of personal stories to encompass their broader historical context does not alleviate but only exacerbates this state of affairs. A grasp of the past self within its larger familial and historical landscape contributes to the pain of Austerlitz and of many of the emigrants. The diary of painter Max Ferber’s mother, quoted at length at the end of *The Emigrants*, provides not merely insight into its author but evokes in meticulous detail an entire pre-WWII German-Jewish community, now irretrievably lost. The broader scope of the diary’s import colours and enhances Ferber’s “heart break.” Similarly, another character in *The Emigrants*—the perpetual émigré Paul Breyter—finds himself repeatedly and fatally drawn back to the town in Bavaria where he worked as a schoolteacher before losing his job as a result of the anti-Jewish laws. He takes increasing interest, in later life, in the facts surrounding his family’s persecution. While his own maltreatment was undeniable, it is only after these broader explorations that he comes to find his situation intolerable, and he too commits suicide. And in *Austerlitz*, it is not just the protagonist’s recovery of the details of his own childhood but his visit to Theresienstadt and his first full exposure to the facts of the Holocaust that precedes his second breakdown. From all of this we can gather that, in Sebald’s world, when interest and care about the past are present, even imperative, at a personal and at an historical level, narrative unity and completeness by no means follow; if anything, they are all the more impeded by the weight of history.

The task of slotting one’s personal past into any larger historical context is further impaired by the problematic status of that larger

context. MacIntyre's view of history is as narratively oriented as his view of individual lives. For him it is merely a matter of how broad the range one's narrative can and should be; it is all one big story. "Narrative history," he writes, "turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions"; and here MacIntyre is referring to individual narratives *and* the "history of the setting or settings to which they belong," including "the social and the historical" (p. 208). But Sebald exhibits an extreme skepticism about history, and his ambivalence transfers over to any enterprise involving the recovery, by individuals, of historical property.

Historical representation is disparagingly portrayed time and again in Sebald. It "requires a falsification of perspective," as the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* proclaims while surveying the Waterloo Panorama, because our apparently privileged position of viewing "everything from above" and "at once" elides the details, which remain unknown to us.<sup>17</sup> A further point is made by Austerlitz's sympathetic history teacher who, when discussing the battle of Austerlitz, remarks that while we may think we can capture every detail of an event, in fact we invariably end up recounting "set pieces": the harder we try to "reproduce the reality . . . the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us. . . . Our concern with history . . . is a concern with pre-formed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere undiscovered" (p. 101). These remarks are strikingly reminiscent of the narrativist debate in the field of historiography; Hayden White, who chronicles this trend, discusses and criticizes the impulse to encode historical events into "story-types" and understand them in those terms.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Sebald's own narrator does not escape the trap of superimposing a misleading or uninformative pattern over individual, unique events. The narrator's attempts to understand the past repeatedly result in its falling apart in his hands: "The more images I gathered from the past . . . the more unlikely it seemed to me that the past had actually happened in this or that way, for nothing about it could be called normal: most of it was absurd, and if not absurd, then appalling."<sup>19</sup> For Sebald, the past as either absurd or appalling is the conundrum of historical knowledge. His treatment of the past is as of a struggle between the two possibilities of meaninglessness or catastrophe. We often find his narrator (in a hospital or a hotel room) attempting to extricate himself

from a state of unspecified, melancholic torpor, in order to gather and synthesize various fragments of information he has accumulated. But the attempt to impose order and meaning on disarray often overshoots its mark, resulting in the different events resolving themselves into the same pattern: that of destruction or entropy, of an all-encompassing nature that does not even respect the distinction between natural and manufactured disaster (so the rape of the Congo, the firebombing of German cities, the English hurricane of 1987, the frightening solar eclipse of 1502—to name just a few—are all somehow on a par in Sebald, all of them both catastrophic and inevitable). If this is the form-finding or pattern-seeking narrative impulse in action, it has arguably overstepped its purpose here by reducing everything in its purview to the same pattern and thereby, ultimately, depriving us of the possibility of any meaningful insight into individual events. It is the inevitably failed attempt to impose standard patterns of order on events often too unique (and uniquely terrible) to admit of any such reduction.

For all these reasons, placing one's past in its historical context does not tend to illuminate that past for Sebald's narrator or his characters. If this seems a bleak construal of the effect of historical memory, it is not excessively so, given the events in question. Yet this simple fact seems neglected by both narrativists and anti-narrativists alike: much in the past is painful, traumatic, in some cases, indeed, appalling, and does not yield without distortion to clear explanation or comprehension. Partly for that reason we are compelled (morally, perhaps also psychologically) not to forget it or mentally place it to one side. But also, and again partly for that reason, we should not expect it to contribute to a greater sense of self-unity, understanding, or completeness; that is asking either too much, or asking the wrong thing altogether.<sup>20</sup> And we can curtail any narrativist suggestion that the normative aspect of the thesis still holds for Sebald—that Sebald's characters would be better off if only they could have succeeded in piecing the fragments of their past into some narratively coherent and complete order. Not even within the tenuous realm of fictional possibility is this a likely option; meaning, coherence, and closure are all things that could only be achieved by falsification, elision, or reduction to set-pieces, and no self-respecting narrativist would allow for self-enhancement to be wilfully founded on delusion. Thus Sebald reinforces that while indifference to memory (historical, and by association, one's own) is not an option, nevertheless an interest in it need not push one any closer to a narrativist outlook.

## V

Sebald's work exemplifies narrative skepticism while conveying a profound sense of the importance of memory. This cuts through the false dichotomy that places concern for memory on the side of the narrativists and treats the anti-narrativist as free to reject or downplay memory's significance. The implications for the narrative debate about selves are several. One is that the evident importance of memory to narrativism is no assurance that those who value the importance of memory will embrace the narrative outlook. Sebald offers a stark alternative to this outlook—one in which the past and one's personal connection to it make closure, completeness, and self-unity remote, even inappropriate, aspirations. But conversely, the anti-narrativist needn't feel compelled to advocate the unimportance of memory in order to sustain her position. There is a host of reasons for believing that a deep and compelling interest in the past is not merely the jurisdiction of the narrativist. In this respect Sebald's work is illuminating and perhaps liberating for the anti-narrativist. She need not feel constrained to ally herself with Strawson's own down-playing of the importance of memory.

This sense of liberation, however, may be diminished by the thought that it has been achieved through an arguably highly pessimistic treatment of the themes of memory, history, and their relation to self-identity. Does Sebald's treatment of these themes amount to a counsel of despair? If we are compelled, perhaps morally obligated, to participate in collective memory of certain historical events and also—in so far as it is inextricably connected—to sustain a degree of personal memory, are the options open to us merely the absurd or the appalling? If this is indeed the outlook Sebald wishes to convey, that is his prerogative as a writer of "prose fictions." The philosopher can grant him this licence without endorsing it as an accurate view of human history or of the prospects for recovery and retention of historical memory. The anti-narrativist may wish to part company with Sebald on this point, distancing herself from a view of memory as largely an instrument of destruction. Nonetheless, Sebald's pessimism—if that is what it is—serves as a genuinely useful antidote to MacIntyre's aforementioned optimism about personal and social narratives, even if it comes with its own biases (and ones which are perhaps more readily accommodated under the auspices of literature).

Sebald reminds us that personal memory cannot be isolated and

treated separately from historical memory, and that the moral weight of history remains inviolable. But an obligation to remember contains no promise of a greater sense of self or of history. Hence the necessary but heartbreaking work of memory.

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY

1. Daniel Dennett, "Why Everyone is a Novelist," *Times Literary Supplement* (Sept. 22, 1988).
2. Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 149.
3. Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 96.
4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), chap. 15.
5. See Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research* 54 (1987): 11–32; "The 'Remembered' Self," *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative*, ed. Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 41–54; Dennett, "Why Everyone is a Novelist"; MacIntyre, *Virtue*, chap. 15; Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*; Oliver Sacks, "A Matter of Identity," *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 108–15; Schechtman, *Constitution*, chap. 5; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 1–25.
6. See Peter Goldie, "Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and Planning," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009): 97–106; "One's Remembered Past: Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and the External Perspective," *Philosophical Papers* 32 (2003): 301–19.
7. Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* 17 (2004): 428–52; hereafter "AN."
8. An earlier version of the same point is made in Galen Strawson, "Blood and Memory," review of *The Ethics of Memory* by Avishai Margalit in *The Guardian* (Jan. 4, 2003).
9. W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Harvill Press, 1997).
10. Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, "Philosophical Regimen," in *The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen of Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury*, ed. Benjamin Rand (New York: Macmillan, 1900); cited in Strawson, "Blood and Memory" and "AN," p. 438.
11. W. G. Sebald, interview by Eleanor Wachtel, *Writers & Company*, CBC Radio, April 18 1998; reprinted in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), pp. 37–61, at p. 37.

12. See Galen Strawson, "Episodic Ethics," *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, ed. Daniel C. Hutto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 85–115; see also "AN," p. 434.
13. W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2001), pp. 197–98.
14. Daniel Mendelsohn, "Foreign Correspondents," review of *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald and *Flights of Love* by Bernhard Schlink in *New York Magazine* (Oct. 1, 2001).
15. See Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
16. Karin Bauer, "The Dystopian Entwinement of Histories and Identities in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*," *W. G. Sebald: History—Memory—Trauma*, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 233–50, at p. 235.
17. W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Harvill, 1998), p. 125.
18. Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23 (1984): 1–33.
19. W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Harvill Press, 1999), p. 212.
20. See Frank B. Farrell, *Why Does Literature Matter?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) for the suggestion that, rather than any advancement into "what might seem a more mature phase," obsessive and perpetual mourning or dwelling on loss in Sebald is the "proper reaction," morally speaking, to the "terrible nature of the loss" (p. 199).