W.G. Sebald and the Tasks of Ethical and Moral Remembrance

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My purpose in this essay is two-fold. I would like to help introduce our field to what I take to be the philosophically and educationally rich ramifications of the work of W.G. Sebald, a scholar of literature who undertook a profound inquiry into the possibility of a formative human relation with difficult legacies from the past. I will offer a sketch of his oeuvre later in this introduction.

At the same time, I also hope to contribute to an emerging literature in our field that addresses questions of historical consciousness, remembrance, and education. In two recent PES essays, for example, Mario Di Paolantonio and Ann Chinnery elucidate important perspectives on education and remembrance. Chinnery questions the power of personal testimony to move today's students to establish a morally responsible relation with the past, especially when that past is marked by social injustices.[1] She asks about the efficacy of testimonial writing and witnessing in an image-saturated, confessional zeitgeist in which people seemingly pour out their souls on television, radio, the Internet, and in print. Chinnery argues that hard-hitting historical facts can often be more effective in dislodging students from comfortable moral stasis. If presented well and at timely moments, facts can render students receptive to the voice of historical testimony and position them to *feel* the difference between serious-minded, reflective testimony as contrasted with the shallowness of so much that bombards persons today. A school curriculum that artfully fuses fact and testimony, Chinnery suggests, stands the best chance of helping young people cultivate an historical consciousness saturated with a sense of shared moral responsibility.

Di Paolantonio argues that today's "prevailing modes of reception" to the past reduce to what he calls spectacle, rapidity and repetition.[2] For Di Paolantonio, the presentation of history in schools and in public culture often lacks the pedagogical sensibility to which Chinnery points us. Instead, it converts the past into phenomena, "over there" at a safe existential distance, and "back then," having no lessons for how people might conduct themselves in the here and now. Today's media flash the past in people's faces like flickering lights, numbing moral responsiveness. Media repeat the same images and tropes until the past becomes a grey and lifeless zone, disconnected from the colorful present. Like Chinnery, Di Paolantonio wonders about the prospects for educating the young to embrace a moral connection with the past. He argues, among other things, that well-taught works of art that address historical phenomena can slow down time for students and position them for the effort of remembrance. Both authors concur, as I read them, that the absence of moral remembrance menaces the possibility of justice.[3]

I hope to add to these suggestive studies by elucidating the value of ethical remembrance in its organic affinity with moral remembrance. These terms of art capture aspects of a single undertaking, but it is useful to consider them separately.

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If moral remembrance has to do with how, in interaction with others, I respond to a collective past in which I am implicated, ethical remembrance denotes the process of getting there. Put another way, ethical work leads to and supports moral work. Here I make use of an ancient notion of ethics as encompassing how persons cultivate their aesthetic, moral, and reflective capacities.[4] This idea of ethics-as-self-cultivation appears in Confucius' *Analects* where he discusses why "the humane man (Ch. *ren*) puts difficulties first, and success in overcoming them second."[5] Another early expression can be found in Plato's *Alcibiades* where Socrates explicitly states to the youth that both of them need "self-cultivation" (Gr. *epimeleia heautou*) if they are to become just members of the polis.[6] Ethics takes on an inward dimension in the sense of the individual working on her or his capacities to attend, to listen, and to respond to the reality of different values and outlooks. The moral points to outward association with respect to how persons regard and treat others, including the deeply important Other represented by the past. Thus the ethics of remembrance —how persons work their way individually into an abiding connection with the past — helps make possible moral remembrance: that animating sense of social responsibility for the legacies of the past to which Chinnery and Di Paolantonio rightly point the educational community.

To flesh out this dynamic fusion of ethical and moral remembrance, I will focus on the work of W.G. Sebald (1944–2001). Sebald was a professor of European literature at the University of East Anglia in England. He emigrated from his native Germany in 1966 because he felt suffocated by what he regarded as that country's massive silence about its Nazi past.[7] While devoting himself to Germanic literature and to questions of literary translation, Sebald turned to non-academic writing in a major way in his mid-forties. In a series of unclassifiable books that have drawn widespread international acclaim, he examines the often-tortured history of Europe and its impact on the world across the last several centuries. He does so through an unnamed narrator who, in a sometimes-quixotic quest for understanding, travels through countless places and, figuratively speaking, wanders through an astonishing array of works of culture, economy, education, and politics from roughly the seventeenth century through the present. The narrator is haunted as well as absorbed by the background and events of the Shoah, although in his central works Sebald never uses that term (or the term Holocaust).[8] The narrator encounters and spends considerable time with individuals dispirited, or de-souled, by historical events. He meditates on the unfathomable mysteries in trying to comprehend the past and one's fellow human beings, and subjects his own moral capabilities to withering examination. I will try to show how he provides educators a vivid example of how a person's ethical work on the self can make possible a moral relation with the past, and with that, a deeper moral relation with the present.

Sebald's Ethical Artfulness

The unnamed narrator's journeys and sensibility resemble those of Sebald himself. However, while Sebald's own life experiences are never far from the texts, they are not merely disguised modes of autobiography. In my view, they incorporate Sebald and the reader into the human *tableau* he sketches. It is as if he and the reader

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become threads in the living history he weaves. Sebald fuses dimensions of numerous genres of writing: those of the novelist, archivist, literary critic, diarist, philosopher, journalist, and historian. He includes photographs, sketches, maps, and other materials that often have an ambiguous place in the texts. They are caption-less and sometimes appear to be unrelated to the prose. Through these mechanisms Sebald activates a wide array of responses in the reader. In teaching his work over the years, I have found that his accounts generate moral momentum and have a cumulative impact. They leave many students speechless, at first, wondering both what sort of text they have been reading and what sort of world they actually inhabit. Sebald calls upon the reader to speak again, or perhaps to speak for the very first time, about her or his relation with the past.

Time and again, Sebald alludes to two guiding lights in his craft: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Franz Kafka. He shares with both figures an intense moral objection to bureaucratic and other hardened rationalities and logics that disfigure the human. Sebald's narrator and the individuals featured in his work feel the pull, and the weight, of conventional ways of thinking about, imagining, and remembering people and events. The reader witnesses the narrator struggling with how to describe justly what he sees, hears, and reads. The narrator sometimes feels his sensibility compressed, flattened, and emptied out the moment he begins to enunciate himself. In response he turns to fine-grained description of exactly what people say and do. Precision becomes not the royal road to truth but the only road he knows that can help him avoid fogging things up. Mark Anderson writes:

> Unobtrusively, his identity shrunk to a bare minimum, the narrator [in Sebald's work] seems to present these lives without mediation, not as they "really happened," but as they were "really reported" to him, without making them a mere foil for his own story. And yet he is the secret center, the thread that holds these narrations together in an implicit gesture of solidarity and identification that is all the more effective for being unstated.[9]

Sebald's gaze as a writer is turned toward the past. However, he does not adopt the point of view of what Walter Benjamin called "the angel of history," whose "face is [also] turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise."[10] Sebald acknowledges that history can seem like nothing "but a long account of calamities" (*RS*, 295), and his writing offers little consolation. Nonetheless he aspires to enter the past, to walk back into it just as he walks endlessly through fields, villages, cities, and ruins across Europe. At times, Sebald's narrator endeavors to re-inhabit the past, as if life's secrets, or its redemption, or its only tolerable form, reside there. At other times, Sebald writes of the past, of its people and happenings, as if it stood before him alive and vulnerable, unsure and wondering what he will say of it, how he will treat it, whether he will show respect for it. The past speaks. Will and can Sebald listen? Can he even hear? And if he can hear and listen, what will he say in reply? What will be the tone, the substance, the trajectory of his witness?

Clinical and humane, scientific and artistic, standing apart and standing in, systematic and spontaneous; the tensions between these terms, all of which pertain

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to Sebald's ethical endeavor, mirror the tension in his sentences as he tries to hold in hand the past in a way that will not damage or disintegrate it. As has so often been said: Enough harm has been done. Enough has been lost. Therefore it becomes incumbent upon him not to injure people and things again. Sebald is obsessively concerned not to trespass wrongfully (*EM*, 29) into the past and the lives of those about whom he writes, so much so that his narrator ends up in hospital with what amounts to a spiritual and physical collapse. He has broken down under the strain of his self-imposed strictures about representation, and under the sheer weight of so much destruction across history to which he has born witness. In figurative as well as literal terms, he has risked his footing in the world, and has taken a serious fall.

Students with whom I engage these works often feel like the narrator. Some are deeply saddened and shaken by the human portraits Sebald meticulously paints. Some are tearful as they confront the moral lineaments of his witness. I have found that with careful questioning many students give themselves over to Sebald's own ever-present questions about remembrance and understanding. In a manner I am still not sure how to describe, they come to trust Sebald. They grasp that he is not brow-beating them for their sometimes shallow historical consciousness but aspires, instead, to awaken it while showing that it can have an issue, that it can make a difference in conduct, just as he believes that the practice of writing in which he participates can have a moral impact. In a lecture at the opening of the House of Literature in Stuttgart, in 2001, Sebald stated that "only in literature … can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship."[11] He observed that while literature cannot bring an end to suffering and catastrophe, it does allow for an enduring response rather than mute acquiescence. Literature is educative. Among other things, Sebald implied, it helps us to remember *how* to remember in an ethical and moral spirit.

Ethical Work in Hand with Moral Work

Sebald renders in a transparent, tension-laden fashion the ethical work he undertakes to heed the voice and presence of the past. Let me illustrate the difficulties and ambiguities in this work by turning to several moments in his panoramic *oeuvre*.

The final chapter of *The Emigrants* pivots around the narrator's extended encounter with Max Ferber, a Jewish émigré painter living in Manchester, England, who as a boy had been flown there by his parents in 1939 just before the Nazi state closed in upon them. Toward the chapter's close, the narrator finds himself in an old, neglected Jewish cemetery in the German town where Ferber's mother Luisa had lived before the war. The narrator has travelled there after reading the mother's lengthy, hand-written memoir of her childhood and youth, which she composed in the few shorts years between sending her young son to safety and her death in a concentration camp. The memoir had ended up in her grown son's hands, and he has passed it on to the narrator. It is a loving, beautiful, almost unbearably heart-breaking portrait of what was without doubt a seamlessly fused Jewish-German, German-Jewish family life, so much so that those qualifiers fall away as the reader turns each

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page. It is a tale of profound rootedness that contrasts with the existential vertigo that Sebald and many of his interlocutors often express.[12] Moved by Luisa Ferber's account, the narrator seeks further traces of her life and soon finds himself, alone, in an untended cemetery.

The narrator cannot articulate why he is there, or what he should do. He pays his respects, to use the odd English expression. "It was not possible," he observes, "to decipher all of the chiseled inscriptions" on the gravestones.

> [B]ut the names I could still read — Hamburger, Kissinger, Wertheimer, Friedländer, Arnsberg, Auerbach, Grunwald, Leuthold, Seeligmann, Frank, Hertz, Goldstaub, Baumblatt and Blumenthal — made me think that perhaps there was nothing the Germans begrudged the Jews so much as their beautiful names, so intimately bound up with the country they lived in and with its language. A shock of recognition shot through me at the grave of Maier Stern, who died on the 18th of May, my own birthday; and I was touched, in a way I knew I could never quite fathom, by the symbol of the writer's quill on the stone of Freiderike Halbleib, who departed this life on the 28th of March 1912. I imagined her pen in hand, all by herself, bent with bated breath over her work; and now, as I write these lines, it feels as if I had lost her, and as if I could not get over the loss despite the many years that have passed since her departure. (*EM*, 224-225)

The narrator wanders for hours in the abandoned cemetery. Just before leaving, he finds a recent gravestone that includes the name of Luisa Ferber, who had become a writer albeit unpublished — that is, until *The Emigrants* recounts her narrative in a visible act of remembrance. An inscription says that Luisa and her husband were deported in November 1941. "I stood before it for some time," the narrator reports, "not knowing what I should think; but before I left I placed a stone on the grave, according to custom" (*EM* 225).

These passages, along with others in his work, lend credence to Susan Sontag's characterization of Sebald as "a writer in mourning."[13] His narrator laments human forgetfulness in the same breath as he suffers human loss. He has absorbed the mourner's ethos so fully in his odyssey that he participates in a custom, placing a rock on a gravestone, which could be seen as remote from his straightforwardly secular life. He gives himself over to it. He mourns Luisa Ferber, whose writing he knows, and Friederike Halbleib, whose writing he does not. This witness is more than a requiem. I believe the narrator intuits, in an inchoate fusion of sadness and moral recognition, that the sheer fact there is something called writing to do, and the role of writer-witness to take up, is due to his precursors, including those who wrote in German but whose right to be German had been stripped from them during the Third Reich. He now sees that his forbears include a forgotten writer buried in a forgotten Jewish cemetery in a nation (a world?) pathological and self-destructive in its forgetfulness.

Through his sculpted descriptions Sebald aspires to attain what Wittgenstein called a "perspicuous representation." For Wittgenstein, such a representation "makes possible that understanding which consists just in the fact that we 'see the connections.' Hence the importance of finding intermediate links."[14] Sebald provides intermediate links even between his intermediate links in order to assist the reader, and himself, to "see" his way about in the maze of emotions, memories,

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uncertainties, and yearnings that so often mark the human as a being embedded in time. He does not explain what he sees, but rather presents things in such a way that understanding can emerge if one is attentive.

At the same time, the history of silk weaving that Sebald recounts in order to connect the myriad parts of another work, *The Rings of Saturn*, constitutes a reminder that particular sorts of descriptions, like particular framings of memory, can lead to self-cocooning on the part of individuals and societies. Sebald's use of ambiguous photographs complements his plurivocal method of constantly juxtaposing voices from past and present, as well as changing tenses and the referent to "I." These tactics disrupt a word spinning that in its soundlessness might beguile and occlude. Thus a dynamic aspect of the ethical work we witness in the narrator's experience is his persistent examination of the means of remembrance. I referred previously to the spiritual breakdown the narrator undergoes, which is described at the start of *Rings*. An additional cause of his collapse may have been an unshakeable sense of failure in rendering things right from a moral point of view.

The narrator stays the course in his pilgrimage, which, like the term odyssey, becomes yet another motif of ethical inquiry that informs these pages. Time and again, his quest pulls him back on his feet. In *The Emigrants*, the narrator recalls his primary school teacher, Paul Bereyter (who is the center of the book's second chapter), shunting aside the required textbooks and using in their place narrative tales of the Rhineland intended for reading at home. What the narrator most remembers from the tales are "the words said by the passing pilgrim to the woman who kept the Baselstab Inn: When I return, I shall bring you a sacred cockleshell from the Strand at Askalon, or a rose from Jericho" (*EM*, 38). A cockleshell, discernible in many church carvings, has long been a symbol of the pilgrim, the traveler from distant shores, the seeker after truth. In more ancient traditions the cockleshell was a symbol of birth, as captured in Botticelli's famous painting, *The Birth of Venus*. Askalon refers to a landing spot for pilgrims who had arrived in the Levant. Botanists sometimes call the rose of Jericho the Resurrection Plant. During a prolonged drought it looks dead, but with the first watering it springs back to life. Sebald returns from his endless wanderings bearing many such roses: lives and occurrences lost and forgotten, now reborn and brought literally into our lives through the nourishment of his prose.

At the same time, Sebald would be disquieted by another association with the idea of "resurrectionist," namely as applied in eighteenth and nineteenth century England to grave-robbers who sold corpses to doctors and anatomists. Is that also what Sebald is? Is that how he is uncovering the past? Are we readers his paying customers? Sebald's unsettlement about the matter perhaps accounts for why, in the first chapter of *Rings*, the narrator addresses Rembrandt's famous painting, "The Anatomy Lesson." Rembrandt immortalized the celebrated anatomy lessons, given to students and a paying public, by Dr. Nicolaes Tulp in seventeenth century Amsterdam. Sebald reads the painting as a powerful moral indictment by Rembrandt of an emerging rationalism in science and society. While Dr. Tulp appears to be

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addressing the audience, forceps in hand, his colleagues and students surrounding him are not even looking at the dead body — that of a petty thief named Aris Kindt ("child" in English) who had been hanged but an hour beforehand, and who is now being wounded for a second time, symbolically speaking, as the doctor makes his incisions. Tulp's confreres are riveted by a diagram off to the side, "a schematic plan of the human being" which the narrator emphasizes would have been of great interest to René Descartes, a budding amateur anatomist who may well have been present at the lesson, and whose "philosophical investigations," he adds, "form one of the principal chapters of the history of subjection" (*RS*, 13). For the narrator, newly released from hospital after taking in the "horror" (*RS*, 3) of so much destruction across modern history, Rembrandt's gaze alone rejects violence and "Cartesian rigidity" (*RS*, 17).

The reader notes yet another play here on the title of Wittgenstein's well-known (and decidedly non-scientistic) book, *Philosophical Investigations*, and recalls how often the narrator describes his own inquiries into the past as "investigations." These inquiries are at once linguistic, anthropological, self-reflective, scientific, and metaphysical. But Sebald wonders, in his incertitude about how to engage the past and the lives of others, whether they resemble the project of Dr. Tulp and his fellow anatomists.

On the Challenges to Ethical and Moral Remembrance

In his unusual *oeuvre*, Sebald demonstrates that ethical work is unpredictable, complicated, and never finished. He shows that because it can be difficult emotionally and spiritually, people need the support of a community undertaking the simultaneous journey toward moral remembrance. As Chinnery and Di Paolantonio suggest, with the right effort that community can emerge in the classroom at school or in the university.

Teachers and students can learn to discuss and meet the challenges together, for they are real. What makes Sebald's work so valuable to the educator concerned about issues of historical consciousness and remembrance is not only the narrative power of his witness, infused as it is with fact, testimony, and self-inquiry, but also how he spotlights the fine line between two forms of "wrongful trespass" (*EM*, 29) that can sunder the prospect of ethical and moral remembrance. On one side is the danger of sentimentality, self-consolation, and the power of the ego to slant reality to its own bent. Sebald's narrator realizes that these possessive proclivities will distance him from the truth of the past and of other people's lives. It becomes noteworthy that Sebald often refers to heights in his writing: mountain vistas, the view from towers and high buildings, and scenes looking out an airplane window. In some of the very same passages he emphasizes closeness to the ground. His first encounter with Henry Selwyn, another émigré featured in *The Emigrants*, is when the man is laying on a lawn counting blades of grass, just as Sebald himself does, in effect, in his absorption with the apparent minutia of human lives. Using this periscopic method, Sebald models for the educator how ethical and moral remembrance requires a circumspect step, an acute attention to detail, awareness and respect for distance, and

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a commitment to steer clear of emotional assimilation (not to be confused with the absence of emotion). For the narrator, these demands call for a method of investigation that embodies modesty and that is ever-responsive to all that he encounters.

The other form of wrongful trespass into the human is to apply an unselfconscious, rationalistic method of organizing, classifying, and summing up whose logic provides the inquirer safety from the travails of self-examination. Sebald resonates strongly with Wittgenstein's view that understanding others and the past constitutes an ethical rather than purely epistemic affair. In his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, Wittgenstein takes the famed anthropologist James George Frazer to task for producing volumes of alleged "explanation" of so-called primitive customs, both ancient and contemporary, that, for Wittgenstein, leave the reader baffled by how "peculiar" other cultures seem to be. In his drive to explain unidirectionally, rather than opening his self-understanding to criticism, Frazer transforms others and the past into objects. He resembles the anatomist Tulp, at least as Sebald interprets Rembrandt's intent. Frazer will not put aside his schematic framework, at least for a time, and try to see the body of the past as a living inheritance, as a body posing questions to us, as a body calling for a moral response rather than for a scalpel. Thus he fails to assist the reader, and himself, in coming to grips with how the people he investigates actually saw and experienced the world.[15]

Sebald discovers that though his methods of inquiry are limited and limiting, they help him render artfully what he has witnessed. They help him describe human realities ungraspingly and systematically, with patience and with sympathy. He realizes that moral remembrance embodies an ethical undertaking of working on the self even while aspiring to discern the truth in past lives and events. Sebald works his way into an *experience* of ethical and moral remembrance, and, in so doing, escorts the teacher and student to the threshold of that same possibility.

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1. Ann Chinnery, "'What Good Does All This Remembering Do, Anyway?' On Historical Consciousness and the Responsibility of Memory," in *Philosophy of Education 2010*, ed. Gert Biesta (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011), 397–405.

2. Mario Di Paolantonio, "Guarding and Transmitting the Vulnerability of the Historical Referent," in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2010), 129–137.

3. See also recent studies of memory, remembrance, and moral life by Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Roger I. Simon, *The Touch of the Past* (New York: Palgarve Macmillan, 2005); and Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

4. For discussion, see John Ambrosio, "Writing the Self: Ethical Self-Formation and the Undefined Work of Freedom," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 3 (2008): 251–267; Darryl M. De Marzio, "The Care of the Self: *Alcibiades I*, Socratic Teaching and Ethics Education," *Journal of Education* 187, no. 3 (2007): 103–127; Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, ed. F. Gros, trans. G. Burchell (New York: Picador, 2004); Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. A.I. Davidson, trans. M. Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); David T. Hansen, *The Teacher and the World* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Christopher R. Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); and Michael A. Peters, "Truth-telling as an Educational Practice of the Self: Foucault, *Parrhesia* and the Ethics of Subjectivity," *Oxford Review of Education* 29, no. 2 (2003): 207–223.

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5. Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. R. Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Book 6.22, 22.

6. Plato, "Alcibiades," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. D.S. Hutchinson, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), s. 124d3–4, 581.

7. See his recollections in Lynne Sharon Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010).

8. The texts I touch on here are W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* (New York: New Directions, 1996) and *The Rings of Saturn* (New York: New Directions, 1998). These works will be cited as *EM* and *RS*, respectively, in the text for all subsequent references.

9. Mark Anderson, "The Edge of Darkness," *October* 106, no. 1 (2003): 107.

10. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

11. W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2005), 205.

12. Another of Sebald's unclassifiable books is entitled *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 2000), which is a study of the wanderings of several literary figures including Kafka. Also see *Austerlitz* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), Sebald's final work where he continues his quest to the heart of ethical and moral remembrance.

13. Susan Sontag, "A Mind in Mourning," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 25, 2000. Also see Eluned Summers-Bremner, "Reading, Walking, Mourning: W.G. Sebald's Peripatetic Fictions," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 34, no. 3 (2004): 304–334.

14. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, ed. R. Rhees, trans. A.C. Miles, rev. R. Rhees (Harleston, UK: Brynmill Press, 1993), 9e.

15. Ibid., 2e.

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