

## W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* – Points of Entry & Discussion Questions

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### ***What else is a novel but an unheard-of event which has actually happened?***

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to his friend and archivist, Eckerman, 1827

Dear Students: as you engage these large questions in our class discussions and notebook, you may want to take a look at the links on Sebald's work we posted on our syllabus page. As with all questions, please anchor your answers in specific passages in the text.

Some suggestions up-front:

- No question you might want to ask in class is too small—they are all relevant. Please raise each and every question you want us to consider for our discussion.
- It might be worth your time to look at a detailed map and see where the various characters live, where they traveled from and to, and what sights they visited.

- **What's in a Name? What's in a Title?**

Why is *The Emigrants* called what it is? Why not *The Immigrants* (which, I feel – being a guest in this country, linguistic and otherwise – is a word much more commonly used in American English and an American context, right)? What's the difference between the two? Are there different forms of emigration and immigration? If immigration and emigration are terms that depend on one's point of view, can you think of spaces in between or on the margins (what goes by the term "liminal" spaces)?

- **What's in a Genre? Novel, Stories, Non-Fiction Prose**

A well-known thinker once said that all great works of art transcend their traditions. They found a new genre by dissolving or complicating what has gone before. How – assuming you agree – does *The Emigrants* fit that bill? What were your expectations as you started reading the book, and how did your expectations – your anticipations of what is to come – change and evolve as you continued reading? What, if anything, makes this book different from most or all you have read before? How would you characterize that difference? If we are in the business of making meaning out of what we read, how do you "interpret" a book like *The Emigrants*?

- **Photographs and Writing #1**

Sebald has often been asked about the relationship of the photographs that are embedded in his writing and the writing itself, and what the boundaries between the fictional and the factual are. (More on that further down.) This is what he once said: “The process of writing, as I drifted into it, was in many instances occasioned by pictures that happened to come my way, that I stared at for long periods of time and that seemed to contain some enigmatic elements that I wanted to tease out. So they did form the instigation for trying to write this kind of thing. Because of that, they have kept their place. It eventually became some sort of habit, of including these pictures. I think they do tell their own story within the prose narrative and do establish a second level of discourse that is mute. It would be an ambition of mine to produce the kind of prose which has a degree of mutedness about it. The photographs do, in a sense, help you along this route.” How did/do you react to the photographs (virtually all in black & white) while reading? Do they (as a visual text) reinforce what is written (the written text)? Do they comment on, detract from, or complicate the writing? What, do you suppose, does Sebald mean when he says that an ambition of his would be “to produce the kind of prose which has a degree of mutedness about it”? Speculate and theorize, as Picard says to Data.

- **Fact and Fiction, Documentation and Invention, Memory and the Imagination**

*The Emigrants* is certainly “about” the Holocaust, “about” memory, and “about” negotiating the boundary between what is considered fact and fiction. Sebald has said that he is trying “to precisely point up that sense of uncertainty between fact and fiction, because I do think that we largely delude ourselves with the knowledge that we think we possess, that we make it up as we go along, that we make it fit our desires and anxieties and that we invent a straight line of a trail in order to calm ourselves down. So this whole process of narrating something which has a kind of reassuring quality to it is called into question. That uncertainty which the narrator has about his own trade is then, as I hope, imparted to the reader who will, or ought to, feel a similar sense of irritation about these matters. I think that fiction writing, which does not acknowledge the uncertainty of the narrator himself, is a form of imposture and which I find very, very difficult to take.” How do you react to that statement personally, and how does it determine your reading of the book? Are the narratives of history and fiction, in that sense, both fiction—invention, crafted from witnessing and memory, but fundamentally (“epistemologically”) identical?

- **Genocide, Atrocity, and Indirection**

You don’t see any concentration camps and mass murders in *The Emigrants*, yet the book, in a sense, is, if not all, then largely about the Holocaust and its generational repercussions. Many of the references are oblique and tentative, lateral and subdued. Why, do you think, might Sebald have chosen that “approach.” What are the risks and dangers writers incur when they “appropriate” such catastrophic events as the Holocaust (or 911) ethically and aesthetically?

Sebald also noted that it was clear to him that “you could not write directly about the horror of persecution in its ultimate forms, because no one could bear to look at these things without losing their sanity. So you would have to approach it from an angle, and by intimating to the reader that these subjects are constant company; their presence shades every inflection of every sentence one writes. If one can make that credible, then one can begin to defend writing about these subjects at all.” Can you unpack that observation with specific references to our text? Would filmmakers say the same about their work—say, disaster films, war films, and the like? What other books and films about the Holocaust do you know, and how do they present the subject matter? Are they as restrained as Sebald asserts art can (or has to) be? How can the two art forms—including photographs—be different?

- **Morality and Literature**

Sebald: “The moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory. To my mind it seems clear that those who have no memory have the much greater chance to lead happy lives. But it is something you cannot possibly escape: your psychological make-up is such that you are inclined to look back over your shoulder. Memory, even if you repress it, will come back at you and it will shape your life. Without memories there wouldn’t be any writing: the specific weight an image or phrase needs to get across to the reader can only come from things remembered not from yesterday but from a long time ago.” How does this claim play out for the characters and the narrator in *The Emigrants*? What are some of the moments of intense experience that, after decades of repression (or amnesia?), seem to return to the surface – and sometime with a vengeance?

- **Questions Big and Small—Abstraction and Detail**

*The Emigrants* prompts its reader to think about the Big Questions, such as memory, trauma, ethical responsibility, and the act of (his/her)story telling—to be human means telling stories, after all—among others. At the same time, the book is full of observed details so rich that it, at times, reads like a veritable catalogue of objects and materials. The pages of the book often feel like a richly decorated space that seems to map particular historical moments down to level of (overabundant) detail which might, to other eyes, go unnoticed or be deemed negligible. What do you make of this tension or contradiction, if these are the right terms? How do small details and big questions go hand in hand?

- **(American) Literature & Amnesia**

Sebald rightly notes that “in the history of postwar German writing, for the first 15 or 20 years, people avoided mentioning political persecution—the incarceration and systematic extermination of whole peoples and groups in society. Then from 1965 this became a preoccupation of writers—not always in an acceptable form.” Today, as you may know, Germany is fortunately

known for, in time, having been willing to confront its dark past in full force without any sense of denial or repression. Precise documentation, mourning, and historical responsibility seem to be part of a national equilibrium—a way of accepting the past without necessarily feeling guilty for what the generation of your grandparents did or didn't do. The Holocaust is routinely taught in schools, carefully documented in history and other books, and the subject of numerous novels and films. The question: what are, or would be, the blind spots in American (national, regional, or local) history that, to this day, have been repressed from public view (while living a life underground) or that are now in the process of being confronted in all their fullness? How are they retrieved from historical oblivion? What is the role of literature in such a process of unearthing or retrieval? Do you know of instances in other national histories that repress their Darth Vader moments?