

READING W. G. SEBALD WITH ALBERTO
GIACOMETTI

By Prof. Timothy Matthews

Where is Alberto Giacometti? The question seems to arise materially from an engagement with his art and the invitations it seems to extend. Much of his art is a life-long exploration of visual representation itself, of the attempt to visualise objects in a two or three-dimensional space; to place people in space. But that placing is elusive, and the places seem to dissolve, making Giacometti's idiom at once unique and beyond reach, perhaps even untouchable – and this from the creator of such tactile-looking pieces. One way of accepting this invitation to engage with an art that wonders how anything can be engaged with is to ask what it can tell us about the art of others. In this essay, I want to see what the art of Sebald can tell me about the art of Giacometti.

How does Sebald's *The Emigrants*, first published in 1993 under its original title *Die Ausgewanderten*, ever become a book about pain, about trauma, about almost unbearable loss, and the inhumanity of the Holocaust? How has Sebald's writing become appropriate to that? For those still unfamiliar with Sebald's by now widely admired writing, perhaps the reviews it has attracted would not suggest that it had such a content. Sebald was born in 1944 and died in 2001 in a car accident caused by suffering a heat attack while driving with his daughter. Here are some quotations from reviews that I have gleaned from the covers of the various editions of his books in English:

It's like nothing I've ever read [...]. A book of excruciating sobriety and warmth and a magical concreteness of observation [...]. I know of no book which conveys more about that complex fate, being a European at the end of European civilization. I know of few books written in our time but this is one which attains the sublime. (Susan Sontag)

The delicate accumulation of vanishing details of four slowly diminishing lives hints at the vast amount of life that has been irrevocably lost and forgotten. This is one of those books that is so good its sadness is paradoxically enlivening against all the odds. (A.S. Byatt)

The writing seems long distilled, intensely pre-meditated and yet utterly fresh. It has an unaffected earnestness, a loner's earnestness. (Karl Miller)

And some more other comments, some more journalistic still:

Full of moving things and happenings. One of the most important writers of our time.

Strange, mesmeric, sublimely beautiful.

So convincing; spellbindingly accomplished; a work of art.

Sebald writes about how grand events echo in the lives of individuals, and of the corrosive effects of time and memory.

Childhood, displacement, loss nostalgia and, above all, fear – the fear of history, of event, of human cruelty, of the pain of recollection – find their deepest and most brutal expression here. His art is a form of justice – there can be no higher aim.

Apart from the last one, perhaps, what strikes me about these remarks is in how appropriate they are, without necessarily engaging with anything particular or substantial about Sebald's writing. They seem appropriate to the way Sebald himself systematically avoids his own subject matter, refutes the idea that his subject *can* be said. One of the stories of *The Emigrants* begins with the narrator, easily assumed to be Sebald's first-person autobiographical self, renting a house with his wife at the bottom of someone's garden near Norwich. That landlord's history, it emerges, has been affected profoundly but in unspoken ways by European history.¹ The next one, on the other hand, starts with the narrator telling his readers about the suicide of his former school teacher at the age of seventy. But the tone has hardly changed, from the beginning of one story to the next. In this second story, the tone is still that of a conversational, though moving, report of a passing. Sebald seems to confirm this by quoting a notice from the supposed local press, 'Grief at the Loss of Popular Teacher'. Those bits of review I quoted just now capture something of how the subject of Sebald's writings is never there, pushed aside and away in the telling. And yet neither does this seem to me inspired by a post-modernist adoration of the absence of centre and the abdication of narrative dominion. For the self-dispersing subject of this writing, all the more there for its ambivalently emergent and decaying status, is pain. In another book, *Austerlitz*, first published in 2001, Sebald's intermittent interlocutor talks of the

marks of pain which, as he said he well knew, trace countless fine lines through history. In his studies of railway architecture, he said when we were sitting in the Glove Market later that afternoon, tired from our

¹ W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, translated by Michael Hulse (London: The Harvill Press Random House, 1996, 1997 paperback). Originally *Die Ausgewanderten* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Vito von Eichborn GmbH & Co. Verlag KG, 1993). Page numbers will refer to the 1997 paperback edition of the English translation.

wandering through the city, he could never quite shake off thoughts of the agony of leave-taking and the fear of foreign places, although such ideas were not part of architectural history proper. Yet, he said, it is often our mightiest projects that most obviously betray the degree of our insecurity. The construction of fortifications, for instance...²

For Benjamin, to think history as a dialectical materialist, is to 'blast open the 'continuum of history'. The past is cancelled, not only in the sense of preserved, but also forgotten.³ By emphasising those ideas of cancellation and forgetting in Hegel's idea of the *Aufhebung*, by saying that ideas are conceived on the basis of oblivion, Benjamin opens a space for a language of the trace and of gesture. In Sebald, it seems that this continuum consists in the fortifications he evokes through the voice of Austerlitz, and that once these are made to disappear, an authentic, material history of pain emerges. If not liberation from it, Sebald offers some witness to that pain, but not one that fortifies against it. Like Giacometti's, Sebald's witness to pain is made in the inability to place it, or to fix its time; either the time of the witness or the time of pain. The time of witness and the time of pain are each made in accumulation, and in Sebald, each seems to leave to other untouched. As some of those snippets of review suggest, this ability of Sebald's writing to give voice to what has been silenced and placed beyond our reach is also the source of its joy, its artistry and its sublimeness.

What I think this amounts to is witness that lacks mediation; or a witness without a position from which to witness. Or witness swamped and silenced by the variety of its mediations. Both the lack of mediation and mediation itself can be the source of alienation or pain. The loss of place is both thematic and structural in Sebald's meditations, which take the form of digression, documentation, association, conversation, narrating and reminiscing. Exile and grief on the one hand; a determined indeterminacy of narrative point of view on the other. The writing contains both leit-motifs of passing, and formal narrative constructions of it. Passing makes the voices of grief, makes the shapes and patterns of its own silencing; and this also makes for that sense of a desperate, and desperately fragile desire to live which characterizes Sebald's writing.

² W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, translated by Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2001; and London: Penguin, 2002), 16-17. Originally *Austerlitz* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2001). All page references are to the Penguin edition of the English translation.

³ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, edited with and Introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1970), p. 254. Originally in Walter Benjamin, *Schriften* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955).

One such leit-motif is a sense of aimlessness and futility that overcomes Sebald's narrators from time to time. This aimlessness drifts into all the narrators' conversations and his perceptions, covering them over with a singular textual dust all their own. I am going to concentrate on one of the stories of *The Emigrants*, which takes its name from its character, *Max Ferber*. And for the moment, I'm going to call the narrator Sebald, not because narrator and author are simply equivalent, but because in my imagination Sebald's voice is implacably consumed in its various narrative figurations; that is how it lives. So in this story called *Max Ferber*, Sebald recounts arriving as a young student in Manchester. Rather than the Manchester of the late 1980s and 90s, renewed by digital and service industries, this is the Manchester of the 60s, with its decaying heavy industry and rampant unemployment; and Sebald arrives in the early morning at a time when the city is particularly inactive and immobile. This is reflected in the stagnant atmosphere of the hotel he stays in:

The day of my arrival at the Arosa, like most of the days, weeks and months to come, was a time of remarkable silence and emptiness

he writes.⁴ This emptiness extends to the objects around him, both familiar and unfamiliar. Neither familiarity nor unfamiliarity either produces or attenuates this sensation of vacuum. This is neither nausea nor pleasurable weightlessness; it makes a series of spaces each of which is unique, each is displaced. Each object or person we find there threatened with dropping entirely from worth and value; and yet in each of these spaces renewal and re-birth might at least be imagined.

One such displaced object is the Teas-maid; which is an alarm clock and tea-making machine combined, a piece of home technology popular in the 60s, and which the owner of the Arosa Hotel provides Sebald with as a token of her welcome. Those of us who will remember the object will react differently to seeing the photo of it in Sebald's text to those who have never heard of it or seen it before. The two lots of people may well find much to discuss; or both may be bored and uninvolved; but either way, this will not produce a shared experience, it will be an experience of the unshared. Sebald includes a photo of it, a black and white one that has a graininess and general styling which impregnates it with a context, a palpable context that still resists definition. This comes over with a simplicity that is not the same as immediacy. For the photo itself, like all others in *The Emigrants* and all Sebald's other books, is unattributed. The status or the authenticity of the photo is in doubt; and of all the photos Sebald uses. Nor does Sebald say how he has come about it. Did he take it himself? The narratives in

⁴ *The Emigrants*, p. 153.

The Emigrants do not make any direct mention of his travelling with a camera. Austerlitz tells us about his life with one, but that voice is a much later one for Sebald. Who might have given him this photo of the Teas-maid, then? And why? Where *did* he get this photo? In Sebald's text, the teas-maid is suspended in space, placing it outside chronological time. The associations it carries lack a platform on which they might be brought together or made into a coherent memory. This is emphasized again by the fact that Sebald talks of the Teas-maid from the point of view of a young German lecturer just arrived in England in the 1960s; whereas in fact he is writing in the 90s. His perspective is now the one of having lived in Britain and acclimatised himself to its culture, to the point where the unfamiliar is no longer in contrast with the known but part of it. And Sebald seems to make all this self-evident; a matter of experience, rather than theory. The theory of deferral simply reflects the experience of living with forgetting.

Here is what Sebald writes about the Teas-maid:

I did not come to till almost half past three [in the afternoon], when Mrs Irlam knocked at my door. Apparently by way of a special welcome, she brought me, on a silver tray, an electric appliance of a kind I had never seen before. She explained it was called a *teas-maid*, and was both an alarm clock and a tea-making machine. When I made tea and the steam rose from it, the shiny steel contraption on its ivory-coloured metal base looked like a miniature power plant, and the dial of the clock, as I soon found as dusk fell, glowed a phosphorescent lime green that I was familiar with from childhood and which I had always felt afforded me an unaccountable protection at night. That may be why it has often seemed, when I have thought back to those early days in Manchester, as if the tea maker in my room brought to me by Mrs Irlam, by Gracie – you must call me Gracie, she said – as if it was that weird and serviceable gadget, with its nocturnal glow, its muted morning bubbling, and its mere presence by day, that kept me holding on to life at a time when I felt a deep sense of isolation in which I might well have become completely submerged.⁵

Oddly, the tea maker provides a source of security, when every effort to secure it in time and space trembles and disappears. Sebald is observing something that disappears in the observing. That seems to be the point of what he is trying to say. Emphasis emerges from aimlessness. The roving, perceiving and sensing eye seeks something to see and that might be told. Here, what is told is some ability to keep emotional collapse at bay. But that is also to acknowledge such a collapse. So this moment in the text is made of transitions. Perhaps it is like one of Winnicott's

⁵ pp. 154-5.

psycho-analytical transitional objects.⁶ But it does not have the shape or contours of an object, it is a transition that is implacably temporal. Moreover, rather than a transition towards a place in society, this is a transition towards further collapse and loss. Memories push their way back into consciousness, but are engulfed and lost again there, and memory joins forgetting.

Another example of that comes from Sebald's comparison of the tea maker to a miniature power plant. This means that the tea maker is also a miniature of the decaying industrial landscape of Manchester into which Sebald has inserted himself, and which not only mirrors but causes his sense of imminent psychic drowning. Photos Sebald puts in the book, again unattributed, show this decay; but there are other photos of the heyday of industrial wealth in Manchester.⁷ But all the photos are styled in such a way as to suggest the passing of what it is they show, which is the great canals, warehouses and factory chimneys of heavy industry in Manchester in the 1950s and 60s. For Sebald here, to show the history of these edifices is to show their passing; for that is what can be seen of them. Sebald's textual and visual polyphony does not resurrect them, the narrative point of view in the present predominates, however indeterminately; even if that point of view is one of decay. Sebald seems to have researched the edifices of Capitalist history in Manchester; describes that materially here in the text; but he has also textualised that history, developed a language for what the present continues to hide from view in the living experience of history. In Sebald's writing, to be rooted in a historical moment is to reside in a residue of gestures that seems to fit like a skin, one which stretches to fit our sensations and perceptions. Perhaps we cannot even imagine having such a discursive coating to everything we do, so naturally does it voice our responses, and so seamlessly does it weave the past as an image of the present. In such a way, Sebald shows both the loss of self and the acquisition of a style.

This style arises not so much from an unconscious made of repression, but more from an ambient, living unconscious. The unconscious in Sebald's writing is not somewhere else, as a certain strand in Freud's thought suggests; it is not a different stage as he calls it in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, on which the hidden but crucial dramas of the mind are played out, inaccessible to all but the psychoanalytical method.⁸ Here, the unconscious is more like the sum

⁶ See D.W. Winnicott, *Between Reality and Fantasy: Transitional Objects and Phenomena*, edited by Simon A. Grolnick and Leonard Barkin, in collaboration with Werner Muensterberger (New York: Aronson, 1978).

⁷ *The Emigrants*, pp. 159 and 168.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, translated and edited by James Strachey (London:

of perceptions, articulations and gestures that make up what we know and forget. Forgetting combines with various kinds of exile and grief and takes over Sebald's idiom as a whole, particularly in *The Emigrants*. But how does it interact with the voices of others, at least the others Sebald shows us in the book?

If Sebald's state of mind is stylized through his experience of industrial decay in 60s Manchester, the elements of this stylized decay also come together in the form of an event; albeit one that is tenuously placed in space and time. This dissolving event is Sebald's meeting with the painter he names Max Ferber. He introduces this event by mentioning another of his desperate meanderings in Manchester, and the reader might wonder where any new beginning, or the emphasis required for an event, is going come from. Sebald says it was a bright day, but so silent that he reports, or invents hearing sighs come out of the Great Northern Railway Company depot; a railway long since gone at the time Sebald is struggling with this narrative. Slowly in this slow paced writing, the indeterminacy of his despair is gathering expressiveness, emphasis, the sense of a difference between something being there and not being there. But what? Walking by disused gasworks, and a slaughterhouse, he begins to think of Gothic castles with parapets and battlements, and then for no reason of Nürnberg Lebkuchen, biscuits from Nürnberg and he is unable to get the name of that city out of his mind where the huge Nazi rallies were held and then the war crimes trials after the war. A reason begins to emerge after all for Sebald's desolation, the Holocaust, not a reason that is hard to find for anyone to be overcome by despair. And yet Sebald is not a witness, he was born in 1944 and he was not there. But nonetheless a reason for his despair has emerged, its self-evidence making it all the more pervasive and resistant to category or place. The chance discovery of Max Ferber's studio, and the meeting with Ferber himself, are now a further transitional object; perhaps this time Sebald will be able to move from pain to saying his pain. But if so, it will have been by inventing another voice, still another voice through which to do it.⁹

Hogarth Press, 1955-1974), volume 4, 48. *Gesammelte Werke* (London: Imago Publishing Co., 1944-52), volume 2/3, p. 51.

⁹ *The Emigrants*, pp. 158-60. I am enormously grateful to Marion Gymnich for pointing out to me a feature of this passage redolent of Sebald's general way of indicating the unconscious at work in daily life by including layers of association in his text of which he indicates no awareness nor seems to invite any. Sebald at this point is walking past the former Ordsall Slaughterhouse in Manchester, whose Gothic look is in fact reminiscent of the picture on a tin of Nürnberg Lebkuchen, although this remains unstated. Moreover, the makers of the Lebkuchen are Häberlein & Metzger, the latter name being also the word for butcher, which takes us back to the slaughterhouse, not only the one in Manchester but those of the concentration camps as well.

By the time Sebald meets Ferber in this narrative, Ferber has given up travelling and hardly ever leaves his studio. In that respect, Ferber and Sebald in the story are very different. Nonetheless, Ferber shares many of the characteristics of Sebald, including a passion for research into the otherwise irretrievable moments monuments of history. And also a passion for photography as part of that, a way for each one of them to identify a moment in its transience. Gradually, as so frequently elsewhere in Sebald's writing, the voice of the narrative is taken over from Sebald himself by another voice, and here it passes from Sebald to Ferber. Sebald is not so much in dialogue with Ferber, but his voice is taken over by Ferber's; and that is emphasized by Sebald's identification with Ferber, increasingly apparent but unspoken in the text; never more so than in its final pages, where Sebald shows himself in another hotel room, this time in the Manchester Midland Hotel much admired by Ferber, and writes of everything but his devastation at his friend's dying, the dying of his friendship and his own dying within that.¹⁰ The voice of Sebald is dissipated in the process of building up this identification in the overlapping narratives of the text. So now the text we read is made in the oblivion of Sebald's own voice; even though the text has been written and is being offered to us by Sebald himself, the writer. A writer discovering voice by inventing ways of representing the loss of his own.

So if Sebald, born in 1944, is not to be a witness to the Holocaust, will Ferber be? Rather than a voice for that emerging, it is the problems of voice and voicing that continue to engulf all the speakers, writers and readers involved in making this book. Even though Ferber is older than Sebald, he is nonetheless still a boy or a teenager in the late 20s and 30s, we are told, and so his reminiscences are filtered through his later adult interpretation of himself as a boy reading the behaviour of his parents. And there is more. Ferber's narrative voice takes over, at various points at least, from Sebald's own, as I say. But the new voice in the text keeps the style of the previous one. Ferber talks in the style that Sebald writes in. The new voice does not unequivocally take over the previous one but is then also taken over by it. The difference between here and there, mine and yours is blurred, it decomposes just as Sebald and us with him might have thought that a new departure or revelation was about to emerge. The handing over of the narrative voice combines with another loss of voice. This transition of one voice to another begins to produce an acute sense of grief, the

So the chance, 'absurd' rising of this idea to the surface of Sebald's mind is not absurd at all, in the sense of lacking an explanation; and by formal analogy with this feigned and maintained unawareness of the workings of his own text, or possibly un-feigned, Sebald shows forgetting living and breathing in everyday thought.

¹⁰ Pp. 232-3.

reason for which is clear to the extent that a voice has been lost. But the cause of this grief is still obscure, though also evident simply by mentioning the Holocaust. But that self-evidence is still out of reach to Ferber and Sebald. Though a structure has been found to show grief within this handing over of voices, grief is still without its cause and its object. To those that were not there, it is the form of Sebald's fiction that shows grief emanating from the Holocaust, not content. Or not yet. That is the witness Sebald offers.

So when he speaks in the text, Ferber's voice gradually substitutes itself for Sebald's own. But nonetheless, Sebald's voice also returns in the text, and though each is inflected by the other, the two mirror each other as well. In addition to their shared passions that I mentioned before, they also share the habit of leaving gaps in what they say. Their discourse is made up of silences as much as affirmations, and this happens sometimes for reasons that are said and sometimes for reasons that are not. In the same way that Sebald addresses his reader, Ferber in the text tells Sebald of things he himself also only now partially knows, or remembers, or can bear to think of. Here is one of the things he tells Sebald:

I still did my homework under Mother's supervision; we still went to Schliersee for the skiing winter and to Oberstdorf or the Walsertal for our summer holidays; and of those things we could not speak we simply said nothing. Thus, for instance, all my family and relatives remained largely silent about the reasons why my grandmother Lily Lanzberg took her own life; somehow they seemed to have agreed that towards the end she was no longer quite in her right mind.¹¹

The philosophy of Wittgenstein, alluded to here and for which Sebald expresses his fascination more explicitly in the long novel *Austerlitz*, combines with the psychoanalytical theory of repression, particularly the repression of trauma. The unspeakable cannot be spoken of; that is, the inhumanity we see or the pain we suffer. And neither can the passing of that into the oblivion of which the present moment consists, in all its indeterminacy. Out of that non-speaking, a language emerges nonetheless, gestural and spontaneous: it seems natural not to discuss grandmother Lanzberg's suicide, just as natural as mother supervising my homework, or walking quietly with my father in the Alps. But this is a kind of spontaneity that is also symptomatic. We are left to find for ourselves reasons why an elderly Jewish woman of whom we will hear nothing further would take her own life in the early 1930s, to piece that together by trying to remember what we've been told; about the Jewish ghettos of Europe, for example, as well as the Jewish quarter of Manchester, which Sebald tells us no longer existed at

¹¹ p. 183.

the time of his arrival there in the 60s. Or the photo Sebald says that Ferber has given him, but which in fact he must have found for himself, of the Nazi's burning books on the Kristallnacht.¹² And as we do that, we might hear again the voices we ourselves have grown up with and grown up getting used to losing. Once again, the unconscious is not somewhere else, but here. Through evoking these voices formally and structurally, and through the various temporal digressions of the narrative, Sebald takes a step closer in the dark to indicating the traces of the overpowering sense of self-decay that has characterized his language and his behaviour from the start. And from there, a further step also towards showing not what an individual might remember of the Holocaust, but that we all both remember and forget; that we forget in the remembering. As Edgar Allan Poe and Jacques Lacan together remind us, what is the most evident about what we look for and about how we see is exactly what remains invisible to us.¹³

The studio Sebald imagines for his imaginary double, for Ferber, and that he imagines discovering in the Manchester deserts, bears an uncanny resemblance to the studio of Giacometti. Like Ferber, Giacometti did not travel widely, and only ever had the one studio, his own studio in Paris which he occupied until his death in 1966. Like Ferber, he is attached to the signs of detritus, anything that can remind him brutally but also sensuously and educationally of the inevitable failure of his art. Dust is a central and overpowering feature in the psychic life of both Ferber and Giacometti, and of their studios.¹⁴ Here are some of Sebald's observations about Ferber's studio, comments which are written by imagining the memory of a conversation. Once again, this is writing in which one voice passes to another, its double, its substitution. This is what he writes:

The entire furniture was advancing, millimetre by millimetre, upon the central space where Ferber had set up his easel in the grey light that entered through a high north-facing window layered with the dust of decades. Since he applied the paint thickly, and then repeatedly scratched it off the canvas as his work proceeded, the floor was covered with a largely hardened and encrusted deposit of droppings, mixed with coal dust, several centimetres thick and thinning out towards the edges, in places resembling the flow of lava. This, said, Ferber, was the true product of his continuing endeavours and the most palpable proof of his failure. It had always been of the greatest importance to him, Ferber once remarked casually,

¹² p. 184.

¹³ See Jacques Lacan's reading of Poe's 'The Purloined Letter', 'La Lettre volée', in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966).

¹⁴ See, for example, Jean Genet's descriptions of Giacometti's studio in *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, in *Œuvres complètes*, various editors (Paris: Gallimard, 1952-), volume 5.

that nothing should change at his place of work, that everything should remain as it was, and that nothing further should be added but the debris added by painting and the dust which continually fell and which, as he was coming to realise, he loved more than anything else in the world. [...] The facial features and eyes, said Ferber, remained ultimately unknowable for him. He might reject as many as forty variants, or smudge them back into the paper and overdraw new attempts upon them; and if he then decided that the portrait was done, not so much because he was convinced that it was finished as through sheer exhaustion, an onlooker might well feel that it had evolved from a long lineage of grey ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper.¹⁵

This is the passage of thoughts and perceptions that makes up Sebald's initial immersion in this text with his interlocutor and alter ego; his friend in the making; even his reader in the imagining. It starts off with describing dust, which is the last stages of the falling apart of things. But the starting point also consists in the opposite of that, which is some lava-like build-up and solidification; quickly Sebald also introduces a progressive squeezing out over time, and the development of attachments, any place for Ferber to paint; to place his work; perhaps even to understand it. From that hybrid starting-point, the passage finds its way to the eruption of these ancestral faces and figures. This is an eruption which is itself covered in ashes and dust, the visible signs of its own decay; and yet here decay is also the stuff of revelation.

Might I think of Giacometti's figures in this way? Especially those that develop in his distinctive style from the late 1940s onwards? Interestingly Sartre in both his essays on Giacometti credits him with an anthropological power to inaugurate a new mythology; both to show and to start the beginning of culture, to develop totems and icons that represent a situation, allow it to be assumed and controlled. But like Ferber's, Giacometti's figures do not emerge from a secure place, but a complex one whose elements will not coalesce.

There is an especially stark piece, *Tête sur Tige*, made in 1947. A head is impaled on a metal rod, itself thrust into a slab; vertically, implacably: the head is a death mask, the silencing of the rattle. The date engulfs the piece in its historical moment, the time when the horrors of the Nazi camps were still coming to light, especially in France where Giacometti lived. But this is a piece that bears witness without being there; it is a witness from the time and the space of those who were not there and never will have been. For in any case seeing everything is not given to us, whether from close up or afar. Perspective seeks to bring the world under the dominion of the visible. Giacometti's piece and others from the period show the history of perspective,

and also its collapse. Representation of the cube as well as the sphere symbolise the power of perspective to place objects in space and in that way to know them. But here only one of the four uprights of a cube is left. The cube has all but disappeared that might otherwise have placed this head in time and space, show the suffering it has endured, reveal the body it has lost. The metal impaling rod kills the past while making our understanding of it; the present we can only see, the only present we can see. We see what we see and not what we cannot. Giacometti will invent different ways of showing the human form rooted in the material of its seeing, of seeing and being seen; but neither the time nor the place of the witness can be made whole. His forms allow us to imagine witness and new beginning, without making what is witnessed the graven image of the present.

Unlike Giacometti's works, Ferber's paintings do not exist and cannot be seen, only read, visualised through that mediation; but this is also a substitution of the painting by the text. We imagine the painting from the situation of not being able to see it. Of course Giacometti's art can be seen. But it is made nonetheless of the same profound doubt about place; the ability of the artist to place himself in relation to the people he represents in his two-dimensional or three-dimensional art. This is doubt about the capacity of visual representation to place objects and especially people in space; a space where we can locate them and know them. In perspective, things at a distance seem small, and the mind makes optical adjustments to see that smallness in terms of a real size, in terms of what we can spatially assume about the objects and people there in different places from our own. But for Giacometti, if we see things at a distance as small, that is because from where we see them, they *are* small. It is that quasi-literal smallness that forms the basis of his own re-investigation of the possibility of realism, the realism of showing things as he sees them. But this is only another way of saying, in fact of confirming, that what we see substitutes itself for what we cannot see and cannot know.

In his recent book *Realist Vision*, Peter Brooks talks of scale model, the miniature, the model in general, and suggests that from realist writing to the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and to Freud's psychoanalysis, the miniature is a form through which to master the world, to understand it, perhaps become free of it.¹⁶ These miniatures of Giacometti, on the other hand, form the basis of a different kind of realism, one that shows us that art does not capture or master. For Lévi-Strauss the myth-maker is able to use the miniature as a practice through which to come to grips with his or her culture, in an almost palpable and tactile way; certainly with the approach and the

¹⁵ *The Emigrants*, pp. 161-2.

¹⁶ Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 1-2 and 228.

sensation of handiwork, and by contrast to the conceptualised, abstracted approach of the applied scientist as well as the industrialist. But Giacometti's most tactile of sculptures and his immersion in the problems of scale confronts him with what cannot be touched. The figures in Giacometti's *Quatre figurines sur base* from 1950, which you can see in Tate Modern, are small not as a result of the visualisation of distance; they are neither small nor large, neither clearly here nor there; neither definitively with us nor lost to us. Nor both. Giacometti does not offer us a celebration of these various possibilities but a witness to each one taking the place of the others and substituting itself for it. A witness to the dominion of the point of view, but at the same time a resistance to its complacency. Through his representation of figures, Giacometti discovers a space for them which has no place, and which in that way testifies to his failure to represent them or to account for them; and to a special kind of grief at the loss which that entails. But it also testifies to the capacity to think what is beyond the thinking and the knowing; and to think without appropriating or colonising.

Sebald finds a way of discussing the miniature as well, and I want to conclude with that. He finds a way of discussing the miniature through his elusive mirror image, our friend the painter Max Ferber, whose first name is in fact also the nickname of Sebald himself in real life. Sebald had already alluded to the miniature by comparing the teasmade to a power plant in Manchester. But on this occasion, Max Ferber is taking pain killers that produce a combination of dream and hallucination, and in which he cannot remember when he was awake and when asleep. An indeterminate psychic space, then, made up of elements that are incommensurate with each other, but which self-evidently merge nonetheless. In amongst those states, Max's own position as an artist is further overrun by that of his father who, we are told, was an art dealer before being killed with his wife and relatives by the Nazis. And from within that space of a lost place for himself and his art, our Max who is indeterminately Max Sebald or Max Ferber, sees a Jew called Frohmann. Frohmann is carrying a miniature model he has made of the Temple of Solomon; 'and he was now travelling from ghetto to ghetto exhibiting the model. Just look, said Frohmann: you can see every crenelation on the towers, every curtain, every threshold, every sacred vessel. And I, said Ferber, bent down over the diminutive temple and realized, for the first time in my life, what a true work of art looks like.'¹⁷

But we the reader do not. No photograph here, whatever its status. This is a miniature made of invention; but also historical research. But this research survives here in the form of a fictional miniature. That is the invitation it extends to us: to

imagine what we cannot know, to engage with what is unknown or lost to us by allowing it to remain unknown, even in the witnessing of it. To attempt to remember the loss of the Jews under Hitler, the loss of life and culture daily renewed, is inevitably to contribute to that loss, to absorb it in the point of view of the present, even though the present is also an unstable place. But this is also a way of showing not so much the theory as the realism of the point of view, which is that what it seeks to show is made lost in the showing. In that way Max Ferber and Max Sebald together, each living in the loss of the other, allow those ancestral sighs of transience to be heard. That is the art that Giacometti also proposes: an unresolved plurality, a plurality of elements that do not come together, made of motion and immobility, the unseen in the seen; anthropological and present time; revelation in oblivion. Perhaps Giacometti's *Chariot*, also of 1950, suggest that the art of Sebald and Giacometti together suggest community without appropriation; and decay *with* creativity; grief *with* life.¹⁸

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¹⁷ *The Emigrants*, p. 176.

¹⁸ <http://www.electroasylum.com/giacometti/ag8.html>.