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Research Paper Proposal: The Post-Exotic Condition in W.G. Sebald's Novels

The late German-born author W.G. Sebald said once that he would “much rather have half a dozen places that mean something to me than to say, at the end of my life, ‘I have been practically everywhere’” (Lubow 21). This remark seems more or less to me to sum up Sebald's relation to travel and serves as a useful starting point for this short discussion of post-exoticism in Sebald's work. Sebald's novels, translated into English, have received an unusual amount of critical attention in recent years, for an author who only passed away eight years ago in 2001. Each of his novels attests to his ongoing commitment to travel, place histories, and the apprehension of the meaning of these place-histories through textual and photographic documentation. At times, as in the instance of the disappointing pilgrimage to Jerusalem figuring at the approximate narrative center of *The Emigrants*, Sebald's novels even dramatise and parody the clichés and pitfalls associated with the experience of commercial travel for pleasure (tourism) so prevalent in the late twentieth century. More importantly for this study, though, his work renders through precise detail and subtle narrative perception the powerful force of exotic attraction that neglected, decaying places exert upon visitors. The experience of traveling through and the coming into contact with the *pathos*-laden aura of these places, which include fortresses, postindustrial zones, decaying manors, underground stations, museums, cemeteries, zoological exhibitions, abandoned gardens, and forgot-

ten health spas, more often than not provokes on the part of Sebald's narrators fascination as well as an overwhelmed feeling of dislocation and vertigo.

To my knowledge, no critic has yet discussed this effect of disorientation in Sebald's work by having recourse to the notion of "exoticism." Doubtless, this is so because his novels and his poems seem to be only tangentially or incidentally concerned with the ethnographic or anthropological encounter between European and non-European cultures that the word "exoticism" is usually understood to connote. An "idea without a future" (Bongie), the notion of the exotic is furthermore a somewhat outmoded concept, always on the wane and intrinsically bound up with its own decline. To contextualize and define this key concept, my proposed study will make use of writer, ethnographer, and archaeologist Victor Segalen's (1878-1919) attempt to cleanse and reinvigorate the term by replacing its degraded, ethnographically specific overtones with its more broadly-ranging etymological sense. For Segalen, exoticism was nothing other than "the notion of difference, the perception of Diversity, the knowledge that something is other than one's self" (19). Yet he also recognised that exoticism is a disappearing concept, because one's experience of it is always threatened by the spread of hegemony, in tourism, mechanised travel, colonisation, and imperial domination, and in other developments which Segalen does not predict, such as the spread of multinational capitalism and businesses, the "international style" in architecture, and the integration of technology into virtually every aspect of modern life.

Now, to adapt the notion of the "exotic" to Sebald's work, one must make a crucial distinction: for his narrators, what is at stake is not an encounter of a supposedly ethnological or anthropological nature with some tropical, "Oriental," or exotic land (al-

though his books do abound with displaced world travelers (including Jews, circus performers, cosmopolitan authors, and gypsies)); rather, the experience of the exotic occurs as an ontological and *spatio-temporal encounter* with the narrator's *own* civilization's history, via the decaying architecture of Europe's distant past. In stark contrast to the ostensibly anthropologically-motivated "exoticism" practiced by wealthy Europeans and Americans on their Grand Tours through the East or through Africa during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Sebald's post-exoticism routinely deploys the *topoi* of the "dead city" (necropolis) and of abandoned, decaying, depopulated architectural spaces (ruins) as a means to awareness of the vulnerability and the perishability of our civilization. Through the writing of place and architecture, Sebald's post-exoticism achieves a symbolic reinvestiture of the exotic experience in an era in which economic, technological, and ideological developments render it almost impossible.

Making use of Sebald's textual descriptions of former resort spas and of the dominant carcerality motif in *Austerlitz* (with which Sebald subtly links together the Breendonk fortress, the Nocturama, Terezin, and the French national library), I will work towards a definition of the post-exotic in relation to Sebald's work, briefly addressing French-language author Antoine Volodine's conceptualization of that same condition. In light of Chris Bongie's definition of exoticism as a "nineteenth-century literary and existential practice that posited another space, the space of an Other, outside or beyond the confines of a 'civilization'" (4-5), my research project will describe post-exoticism, in Sebald's novels and elsewhere, as a literary and existential practice that melancholically laments the insidious and corrosive effects of industry, empire, and colonization upon (bio)diversity and human life, while recognising that Western civilization, in the absence

of any longer having a space outside of itself, now has virtually the structure of a slowly decomposing prison-like or fortress-like architectural totality. Somewhat paradoxically, exoticism surges forth yet once again in the back spaces and the peripheral regions of our fortress-like civilisation at the end of the twentieth century.

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