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Translating W.G. Sebald, with and without the author

Time and chance, said Ecclesiastes, happeneth to [us] all. The Preacher was of course in his usual gloomy frame of mind and meant it pessimistically, but a translator's life is full of chances, on account of the sheer variety of interesting work that comes one's way, and for me it was a particularly happy if also rather alarming chance to be asked to translate W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*.

I speak with some diffidence at this fascinating conference, because I have read the abstracts of *all* the titles of the papers given in the parallel sessions, and I should think everyone would have wanted to attend all of them. I am not, like many of their authors, an academic myself, but a general translator working on a wide variety of material. So this is a personal outline of the pleasures and some of the practicalities of translating Max's work, first with him and then, after his tragic and untimely death, without him, hence the title I have given to this paper, but more of that later. And perhaps, I sometimes feel, translators ought to apologize for existing at all. We are notoriously insular in the English-speaking countries as far as the reception of literature in other languages is concerned, and as I write this in September 2008, there have been various pieces in the press recently about the redundancy of literary translators and their translations. In *The Times* this year, first David Baddiel and then only the other day Michael Gove wondered what is the point of literature in translation, then Michael Gove was induced to retract at least in part by Tony Briggs, the distinguished translator of *War and Peace*, then along came Matthew Parris saying no, Michael Gove was right, why bother with translation at all? And yet the *Independent* last week, looking forward to this occasion, said of Max Sebald, 'The most influential author to come out of the UK in recent years wrote not in

English but in German.' I am sure those of us who knew him have often been asked why he didn't in fact write in English, or translate himself into English. I think I can see the answer to the first question: the great affinity of his thinking with his native language. As for the second, up to the time of his death Max of course worked closely with his translators.

And I definitely ought, I think, to explain how I came to be one of them. When I was first approached I had no idea I was being asked to be involved as a translator with his new novel, or as some would prefer to put it his new narrative, since Max Sebald's narratives were often some way from conventional fictional form. I will add, however, that *Austerlitz* has always seemed to me to be more of a novel as the term is usually understood than its predecessors. It is even a double novel, with the framework chapters in which the anonymous but typically Sebaldian narrator describes his acquaintanceship with the eponymous Jacques Austerlitz, and the inner core of the book, Austerlitz's own account of his life.

However, it was about another book that I first heard: in the summer of 1999 Max Sebald's then publishers, Harvill, were – or so I was given to understand – thinking of forging ahead in some haste with the English publication of his lectures delivered in Zürich and published in German as *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, together with his reflections on the reactions and correspondence that they had provoked. To make the material up to book length, he had added his essay on Alfred Andersch. The rationale at the time for the sudden wish to bring the project of the book's translation forward, again so I understood, was its topical relevance; the publishers felt that the Allied fire bombing of German cities in the Second World War, so graphically described by Max Sebald and the eyewitnesses of the time whom he invokes, had an echo in the NATO bombing campaign in Kosovo in the first half of 1999. Topicality, of course, can die down as quickly as it arises, but that, I

was told, was the general idea, and I was also told that Max's regular translator was too busy to do it. Translators do not, as a matter of principle, try to poach authors from other translators, and I needed the reassurance. Michael Hulse was the translator of the beautiful English version of *Die Ringe des Saturn,* which I knew well. I'd read the book in both English and German, and it had particularly attracted me because I grew up in its East Anglian setting, and it was fascinating to see Max's melancholy, cultivated, Central European mind bent on the scenes of my childhood.

So I was one of three translators invited by Harvill to submit sample translations from *Luftkrieg und Literatur*; I learned afterwards, from Max, that there were three more commissioned by the editor of an architectural magazine. After that no more was heard for months, and anyway the topical factor had presumably evaporated with the end of the NATO operations in midsummer that year. I was therefore taken by surprise when in December Max's new agent got in touch to ask me to translate not just *Luftkrieg und Literatur* but also the next novel, *Austerlitz*, not yet completed. I was in fact placed in what I felt then, and still do, was an awkward situation, but you do not say no to translating an author of Max's stature, especially when you have already submitted a sample, even if it was from a different book.

The idea was that initially I should translate some thirty pages of *Austerlitz*, to be offered around by the agent. Max was in touch with me – we had already met now and then at translation seminars held by the BCLT, his own brainchild – and we went ahead. I treasure our correspondence for the next two years, cut short like so much else by his tragic death in late 2001. His letters were beautifully handwritten; notoriously, he was not a man for modern electronics, and when a computer was delivered to his room at the UEA it remained unplugged in. I cheerfully embrace as much electronic aid as I can get, so mine were typewritten, for in any case it is unkind to expect anyone to read my

handwriting. It was with this sample that we began our working method, which was for me to send my draft translation, in batches, to Max by post (again, no email attachments for him), he wrote his comments on it and sent it back. We might continue to discuss some points over several exchanges of letters – one point ran to six or so letters between us – but meanwhile I would be drafting the next batch of chapters, ready to send them in turn to max for his comments.

At first, however, I had seen only the *Austerlitz* sample for publishers, which I remember I translated over Christmas and the New Year at the turn of the millennium. It was what I have always thought of as the Welsh idyll; the young Austerlitz's visits to his school friend Gerald's home, with its beautiful natural scenery, its quirky oddities (those cockatoos) and equally quirky human characters (Great-Uncle Alphonso in particular). The agency quickly found new publishers in the shape of Hamish Hamilton in the UK and Random House in the US. Max was still working on the novel, and said sometimes with great modesty that he wasn't sure if it was any good. When at last I received the entire manuscript I was in no doubt about that. It arrived, by another happy chance, on a beautiful summer's day in June, and I sat in the garden to read it, entirely spellbound by the concept, the two narratives, perhaps above all by that inimitable Sebaldian style in which you rediscover the pleasures of classical German and the joys of the subordinate clause in a complex sentence. After the translation of *Austerlitz* was finished, I remember, the next book on my schedule was a novel by an author in the more modern German style, short sentences, a snappy style of dialogue: a good novel, but the contrast was almost comical.

Before I received the full manuscript of the novel, however, I had also been going ahead with the draft of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Although for a long time Max was still referring to it in English as *Air War and Literature*, as far as I remember the change of

title for the English-language version was at least in part his own idea. Nothing was ever going to reflect the alliteration of the German title. And in the mention at the end of the first lecture of Solly Zuckermann's plan, never realized, to write a report for the journal *Horizon* on what he had seen in the ruined city of Cologne after the Allied bombing raids of the Second World War, was the useful phrase that was ultimately pressed into service: Lord Zuckermann had been going to call his account 'On the Natural History of Destruction', but, he said in his autobiography, he shelved the project because, 'My first view of Cologne called for a more eloquent piece than I could ever have written.' With Max Sebald's approval that phrase became the title of the English version. Its aptitude was further proved by the subtitle of Max's essay first published in 1982 in *Orbis literarum*, 'Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte: Über die literarische Beschreibung totaler Zerstörung' ('Between History and Natural History. On the literary description of total destruction'), which covers some of the same material. It was included in the final, posthumous volume of Max Sebald's essays with his sketches for a book based in Corsica, *Campo Santo* (no title problems there, any more than there had been in *Austerlitz*)

For the English edition of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Max had also chosen to add his essays on Jean Améry and Peter Weiss. That could have made for complications in *Campo Santo*, the German edition of which printed the Améry and Weiss essays. Fortunately, it is quite an extensive book, comprising I assume about everything he ever wrote that had seen publication but not before in book form, mainly in academic journals but some in other periodicals, for instance 'Kafka Goes to the Movies', published as 'Kafka im Kino' by the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, which began as a review of a book entitled *Kafka geht ins Kino* by Hanns Zischler (1996), English version tr. Susan

Gillespie (2003). Even without the Weiss and Améry essays, then, we still had quite enough left material for the English edition.

I had the pleasure and privilege of working closely with Max Sebald until just over half-way through those last three prose works of his. Our work on *Austerlitz* in particular remains vivid in my mind, and always will. Perhaps because of his own excellent English, he was prepared to believe me if I was absolutely sure that a certain phrase was right: for instance, a 'fancy waistcoat', which he queried, wondering if it should be 'a fanciful waistcoat'. I am not now sure that I was also right in the passage where Austerlitz, describing himself in Prague during the childhood there that he blotted out of his mind on coming to England, tell us how he gave an account to his nursemaid Vera of the tailor in the building over the road eating his supper and, in English, saying, 'Now he's taking a long drink from his glass.' Max suggested 'draught'; I argued that in the mouth of a child, it would appear too literary. The fact is that children *do* pick up unexpected literary terms and use them, as I said, but I felt at the time that it depended on the *perception* of such a word by the adult reader as odd in the mouth of a child. I'm still not sure.

Again because of Max's excellent English, I was disproportionately pleased when I could introduce him to anything he didn't already know, such as the vernacular English name for the *Waldrebe*, the wild clematis, *Clematis vitalba*, or 'traveller's joy' – 'What a lovely name!' he wrote in on my draft translation. I could also, of course, have offered him 'old man's beard', which might in retrospect have better suited the mood of the framework narrator in *Austerlitz,* seeing its grey seed heads from the train on his way to London for an eye examination, but Max liked the term 'traveller's joy' anyway.

His interest in natural history is evident in his books; there are the homing pigeons in *Austerlitz*, kept by Gerald (and indeed Max himself kept pigeons). And of course there

were his moths. They came into *The Rings of Saturn* and again into *Austerlitz*, when Gerald's Great-Uncle Alphonso, a keen naturalist, sets a moth trap so that the boys, on holiday at Andromeda Lodge, can observe a wide variety of those nocturnal insects. Max was considerably amused when I confessed, in the course of our correspondence, to having suffered all my life from a moth phobia (it is not quite as widespread as classic arachnophobia, but is fairly common all the same), and he told me in turn something I did not know, that Graham Greene had had a bird phobia. In fact my moth phobia came in quite useful; I knew a great many vernacular English names of moths from the time when I tried to cure myself of my phobia by the 'cognitive' method of slow familiarization with the object of the phobic's irrational dread, first using pictures. I had to give up my attempt after a while; it was perhaps making me a little more comfortable with moths, but oddly enough less comfortable with butterflies (which fly in what, to the phobic, is a less sinister way). But in the course of my vain efforts to cure myself, I had studied books on lepidoptera and collected up a great many of the beautiful English vernacular names of the creatures. Translators as well as scientists owe a great debt to Linnaeus and the other taxonomists: if you have a vernacular name from the plant or animal kingdom in one language, and do not know its precise equivalent in the language of translation, you can find its scientific Latin name and trace it from there. *But* not all languages have a vernacular term for every plant or animal. When it came to translating the moth passage of *Austerlitz*, not quite all the names had precise English vernacular equivalents to the German moth names, and I sent Max my list of pretty names for the insects. It is a tribute to the power of his writing that, although I would have fled the scene of Great-Uncle Alonso's moth trap in real life in the mindless panic known to all phobics, I rather enjoyed translating this moth passage. Max, incidentally, decided to leave out the death's head hawkmoth altogether because, he said, it seemed to sound much nastier in English

than German *Totenkopf*. Had I inadvertently conveyed to him something of the horror that the mere name of the largest moth in the British Isles conjures up in me?

In fact he did some rewriting in general for the English edition, especially in the account of life at Theresienstadt, where in the original he made effective use of the appalling jargon employed in Nazi terminology. It was going to be very tricky to get just the same effect in English, and he made a few alterations there – although the nine-page sentence still occupies its nine pages. In my very first draft I put a full stop about two pages into this passage, and then immediately took it out again; I knew without being told that it must remain one long, continuous sentence in English, tumbling clause after tumbling clause, to convey the mindless, busy haste of the régime in the camp as it is prepared to put on a show of being a happy holiday camp for Jews in order to impress a visiting Red Cross delegation. The sentence is sufficiently punctuated by the occasional 'said Austerlitz' – recurrent of course throughout those passages of the book that are his and not the framework narrator's first-person narrative. Max, I remember, was a little worried about this phrase, but to me it felt, and I said so, like the return of a piece of music now and then to its home key.

I think that this passage, and indeed others, must have given the designers at Hamish Hamilton some difficulty in the placing of the odd little illustrations and photographs for which Max was well known in his fictions. That, fortunately, was not my own problem; I simply indicated the place where a picture should come as closely as possible to a certain passage of text. It must have been something of a jigsaw puzzle. Similarly, there are some of these little pictures – not illustrations, more like an occasional gloss on the text – in the earlier part of *On the Natural History of Destruction*. That also included, in the German, a photograph of Andersch. If Max had lived, I think the publishers might have asked if he wished to include pictures of Améry and Weiss in

the essays on those writers, or even, if it was available, a reproduction of the picture by Weiss himself described in some detail at the beginning of the essay.

Austerlitz appeared in English in the early autumn of 2001. By that time I had already drafted most of the translation of *On the Natural History of Destruction*. Max had been through these parts of the book, and a little later I sent him my draft of the three essays on Andersch, Améry and Weiss. And then, on 14 December that year, came the car crash that so tragically killed him. The shock to everyone who knew and worked with Max was great. And this is where the part of my work on his books without him had to begin.

I had only recently sent him back my version of that first part, revised in line with his recommendations. I wondered whether I would be crossing in the post with his revisions of the second part, and did not know just what to feel about the prospect. Nothing arrived until just after Christmas; then his revisions of the Andersch essay, which he had just finished making before his death, were found on his desk and sent on to me. I spent a long, wintry January Sunday going through the essay, adding them. As usual, Max had been thoughtful of the English reader who would not know his German original, and had, for instance, changed and slightly cut some of his remarks on Andersch's style. Here and there he felt it infelicitous. I had quoted from the published translation of the Andersch novel he was discussing in the late Ralph Mannheim's English version; Ralph would never have been infelicitous. Max had seen the difficulty here, and made adjustments. As I went through the Andersch essay, it was an extraordinary feeling to be in mental communication with him, so to speak, for the last time. I felt I must finish the work in a single day, because it would be so hard to return to it next morning.

After that I was on my own. It will be appreciated that I approached my own revision of the Améry and Weiss essays with the utmost trepidation, wondering the whole time what Max would say to this or that phrase. When the book came out, I was extraordinarily grateful to Irène Heidelberger-Leonard, the authority on Améry, to say she had liked my version of the essay on him.

In these two essays, as in the whole of *Campo Santo*, I could only do my best to second-guess what Max Sebald himself would have said of a certain passage. The critical essays included in *Campo Santo* are fascinating in themselves, although of course they presented some problems to me and to the editors on both sides of the Atlantic (but after all, a translation without any problems would more than likely be a superficial version of a book). It is more usual these days for 'that' to be the relative of choice rather than 'which', but Max had a definite preference for 'which', and when I mentioned the fact to copy editors they respected what I felt would have been his wishes. For the quotations from Günter Grass in the essay on Grass and Wolfgang Hildesheimer ('Constructs of Mourning'), for instance, I naturally used in English the published translation, again by Ralph Manheim, of *From the Diary of a Snail* – and one quotation, hard as I might search at what had to be about the right place in a book, as I could deduce from the German page numbering, simply was not where it should have been, close to the opening of the novel, or indeed anywhere else. Only when at last my eye spotted the publisher's note at the beginning of the English edition, telling readers that some passages had been omitted in the translation 'for legal reasons' (not explained further), was the problem solved. I could translate the quotation myself , but when it came to the Notes on that essay copy editors and proofreaders both sides of the Atlantic naturally kept asking for a page reference to a published English version. I explained over and over again to a British and American copy editor, and then a British and American proofreader, that no such thing existed –

which threw out the whole note numbering by one in comparison with the German version of the essay.

I particularly enjoyed the shorter pieces towards the end of the collection: on Max's friend the artist Jan Peter Tripp, on Bruce Chatwin, on Kafka, on Nabokov. But most of all, one regrets that the Corsican book was never completed, although I understand that it was set aside so that Max could concentrate on *Austerlitz*. It seems that we could not have both. However, the four passages from the book on Corsica are Max in his later mood, melancholy, lyrical, and with those touches of dry humour that, although it is not a quality of his so often remarked upon, is also typical of his writing.

Translating *Campo Santo* was, again, a farewell to a part of my professional life that I had especially appreciated. I would have liked to be able to talk or write to Max himself about it, as I kept doing in my mind; the translator is always, as it were, playing a part like an actor, trying his or her hardest to *become* the author of the original of the translation. That, of course, is impossible; but we have to do our best to make the pretence convincing and to walk what I have called elsewhere the tightrope of illusion – the illusion being that the words before the reader are the author's own. If we do not even try, then we must give up the attempt to give Anglophone readers literature from other languages entirely, and try some other line of work, which I for one wouldn't find half so enjoyable. And working on Max's wonderful German prose for that brief period was an especially pleasurable episode in my professional life.

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