

In Memoriam Max Sebald

(1944-2001)

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It's nearly midnight. We are sitting in his elegant, spacious drawing room of a former Victorian vicarage, our profiles reflected in the panes of imposing bare windows, while outside in the dark the scarcely perceptible outlines of trees sway in the wind. His black labrador Maurice is asleep on a sofa. Max offers me a glass of Laphroig, my favourite "Western" whisky with a characteristic "medicinal" flavour distilled from spring waters permeated with the essence of peat.

Max usually enjoyed alcohol in small doses: a Spritzer perhaps, or a small beer, so the stiff drink had to portend a significant revelation. After a second round he began his story. In childhood, in his parents' house, he would peep into a coffee-table album full of photographs of cottages and farm outbuildings in flames, but no one in the house, including his father, could provide him with a key to those disturbing scenes. He found the answer years later. Taking part in the September campaign in Poland, his father had photographed the buildings he burnt, so as to present this record in an album to his wife as a Christmas gift.

Winfried Georg Maximilian Sebald settled in Britain to distance himself from his countrymen, who—he maintained—still remained ideologically infected. Was this why he took an interest in the establishment in 1896 of Józef Sebald's Photographic Workshop at 12 Batory Street in Cracow? Is that also why he cherished our friendship until his death in a car accident in December 2001 on the way home from nearby Norwich? When I came to know him, he was already in his forties, a little-known author of the narrative poem "Nach der Natur". But by the time of his death, he was being pursued by international fame, from which he would hide in Swiss hotels.

The orphaned Maurice died soon after, and in conformity

with a melancholy symmetry, our own silky golden labrador Meg perished, struck by a car. She lingered for a couple of days, watching me in silence with her soft gaze. “Only animals are capable of boundless love”, Canon James Coutts explained.

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During my schooldays an enormous volume of Gustave Doré’s engravings made an appearance in our refugee Nissen-hut. Father no doubt bought it in some antiquarian bookshop, but its main role was to raise the seat of our piano-stool. In time I discovered its contents: illustrations of the Old Testament, the *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner”, Baron Münchhausen’s *Marvellous Adventures by Land and Sea*, Chateaubriand’s *Memoirs from beyond the Tomb*, as well as many other fantastic and phantasmagoric works.

JM rented the steward’s old cottage in Ditchingham Park, Lord Ferrers’ estate. Tourists descended on it, convinced this was where Chateaubriand had stayed during his exile in Britain. In summer I used to attend chamber concerts with her at the church in Cratfield. Almost an hour’s drive would lead first through the town of Bungay, then through a tangle of Suffolk lanes amongst vast flat cultivated fields and pastures. Along the way we would pass through the hamlet of Ilketshall St Margaret, to which on Sundays at the end of the eighteenth century pastor Ives would travel from Bungay; he had entrusted his maturing daughter’s education to the French exile. A great romance was in prospect. Years later Chateaubriand will wonder whether he was right to sacrifice happiness with Charlotte, who was infatuated with him. Max quotes him in *The Rings of Saturn*:

It is probable that I should never have written a single word. In due course I should have even forgotten my own language. How great would France’s loss have been, if I had vanished into thin air like that? And would it not, in the end, have been a better life? Is it not wrong to squander one’s chance of happiness in order to indulge a talent? Will what I have written survive beyond the grave? Will there be anyone able to comprehend it in a world the very foundations of which are changed?

Precise and inquisitive as ever, Max also reports that Lord Ferrers, the then owner of Ditchingham Park, was sentenced by the

House of Lords to death by hanging from a silken rope for the murder of his steward. His descendant's gamekeeper, says JM, tried to terminate her lease by aiming at her from an antique arquebus, which killed her cat.

The Rings of Saturn is the record of its author's convoluted wanderings through the towns, villages, meadows, forests, beaches, parks, churches, graveyards, ruins, libraries, and museums of East Anglia. Descriptions of nature are interwoven with fragments of the region's social and cultural history, in which Chateaubriand figures alongside Sir Thomas Browne, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Teodor Józef Korzeniowski, and many others.

Max knew the area thoroughly. I was able to ascertain this when during our long walks with Maurice, he revealed to me remote corners of Norfolk and Suffolk. He made me a gift of an old edition of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, in which the usually placid Maurice had clawed several pages; his gift of an eighteenth-century engraving with a panorama of Warsaw hangs in my house; on my shelves stands a copy of his *Die Ausgewanderten* ("Für Adam hertzlich, Max") which brought him wide renown, There I read that:

Helen Hallaender was an independent-spirited, clever woman, and furthermore her waters ran deep. And in those waters Paul liked to see his own reflection. Mme Landau could not tell me exactly what became of Helen Hallaender. Paul had preserved a resolute silence, possibly because he was plagued by a sense of having failed her or let her down. As far as Mme Landau had been able to discover, there could be little doubt that Helen and her mother had been deported probably to Theresienstadt.

For special reasons these words had a particular significance for me. And when I read this passage aloud in the original, Max called out amused: "Your Slavonic accent betrays you!"

And in due time, another of Max's sentences, snatched from his notebook, acquired a fitting significance:

Er wird Dich bedecken mit seinem Gefieder und unter seinem Flügel dann ruhest Du aus... and you will find peace beneath his wing.

(Translated by Iain Higgins)