

NETTING THE BUTTERFLY MAN:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV
IN W. G. SEBALD'S *THE EMIGRANTS*

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In his essay "Dream Textures: A Brief Note on Nabokov," W. G. Sebald (1944–2001) comments on the metaphysical quality of the work of Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977): the observance of unusual phenomena; the mysterious coincidences and chance meetings that occur; and especially, the invisible observers that haunt his narratives—"fleeting, transparent beings of uncertain provenance and purpose" (*Campo Santo* 147). The invisible observer in Nabokov's fiction, Sebald writes, may be an emissary of some other world, and appears to have a better view not only than the characters in the narrative but than the narrator and the author who guides the narrator's pen. It is curious, then, and quite revealing, that Sebald should employ a similar figure in his second work of prose fiction, *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992, Eng. tr., *The Emigrants* 1996),¹ and that this figure should prove to be Nabokov himself, who turns up in the guise of the "man with the butterfly net"—a spectral, rather than an invisible, observer. Sebald's text is composed of four tales, each of which depicts the life of an émigré who has been affected in some way by the calamities of the Second World War. *The Emigrants*, like Sebald's other work, problematizes the concept of genre by blurring the lines between fiction, biography, travelogue, memoir, intellectual speculation on history and architecture, and photographic journal. The characters whose lives Sebald documents in each of the four stories—the retired country doctor, Henry Selwyn; the schoolteacher, Paul Bereyter; the butler and valet, Ambros Adelwarth; and Max Ferber, the exiled Jewish-German painter—are all based on real life people, only Sebald has intervened in the telling of the tales and has subtly altered the details.² Into this intricate arrangement of the fictional and the factual flits the man with the butterfly net, who crosses paths with two of

the characters and touches their lives. Sebald's narrator does not question the recurrence of this enigmatic figure, but leaves the reader to deliberate over it. Is it a simple homage on Sebald's part? An example of postmodern irony? Or is there perhaps something more that we can infer from the presence of Nabokov in *The Emigrants*, something that binds the two authors together and is informed by their respective artistic projects?

One thread that connects the lives of Nabokov and Sebald is that of the Shoah, the Jewish Holocaust,³ and we believe that this tacit (and previously unobserved) link may lay at the heart of Sebald's inclusion of Nabokov in *The Emigrants*. "Ghosts and writers meet in their concern for the past," writes Sebald in the same essay, "their own and those who were once dear to them" (149–50). Both Nabokov and Sebald were indelibly marked by the events of the Shoah, though they were one step removed from it, either by time or by place. Nabokov lived in Berlin for fifteen years (from 1922 to 1937) and saw firsthand the rise of the Nazi party and the increasingly perilous situation of the Jewish people. He was fortunate enough to escape Berlin in 1937 by way of Czechoslovakia, bringing his Jewish wife and their half-Jewish son to live in France before eventually emigrating to the United States in 1940. That said, he witnessed the Nuremberg laws as well as other anti-Jewish measures firsthand, and shared the plight of Jewish-Russian émigrés fleeing Europe. It was not only friends and contemporaries that Nabokov lost to the Nazi regime. His younger brother, Sergei Nabokov, was accused of being a British spy and was sent to a Hamburg concentration camp where he died of starvation in 1945.

Sebald, in comparison, was only born in 1944, and so is two generations removed from Nabokov, but still felt bound to the events of the Second World War that had such a ghastly coincidence with his early childhood in Bavaria: "a silent catastrophe that occurs almost unperceived" (*After Nature* 87). Sebald, whose father had been a soldier in Hitler's army, objected to what he regarded as the failure of post-war German citizens to acknowledge the events of the Third Reich.⁴ The question he was confronted with, both as a citizen and as an intellectual and writer, was one of moral responsibility, and the ethical and artistic difficulties that arise from same. Both Nabokov and Sebald faced the predicament of the post-war artist who wishes to address the Shoah: the imperative to remember and to try to make sense of unimaginable evil and the seeming impossibility of such a task, as well as the very real possibility of reducing or cheapening history by and through its fictionalization. Their situation was compounded by the fact that they were non-Jewish writers, which raised the possibility of trespass or

improper inquiry, yet they also bore the burden of the survivor—imaginatively, if not spiritually.

Nabokov is not an author that one would immediately associate with the literature surrounding the Shoah, although it does form a central fictional and moral thread in his novel *Pnin* (1957), which was one of the first American novels to approach this event.⁵ Although it would be an exaggeration to suggest that Nabokov's postwar work is about the Shoah, one could claim that it is sometimes *about* the Shoah, in that it circles it and is influenced by it. If the Nabokov of such a work as *Dar* (*The Gift*, published serially 1937–8, in book form 1952) could write of the transcendent power of art and of the artist-as-hero, his postwar counterpart was less assured in such a claim, content to offer instead, as Anna Brodsky notes, “a local palliative” (62). Nabokov may be seen to provide a model for the postwar artist, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, who wishes to confront personal and collective history in a way that has a moral and an aesthetic integrity. In doing so, he acts as an important literary predecessor for Sebald—the figure of the artist as exile who joins life and literature by the complex workings of memory and the weave of narrative craft.

We wish to pursue the idea that Nabokov may function as a moral and aesthetic standard for Sebald—a benchmark for what the creative artist may achieve—and that Sebald initiates an intertextual dialogue with Nabokov by referencing *Speak, Memory* (1967) in *The Emigrants* and including the butterfly man in his cast of characters. In the only published statement (to our knowledge) that Sebald has given regarding the function of Nabokov in *The Emigrants*, he is characteristically vague, but is suggestive nonetheless:

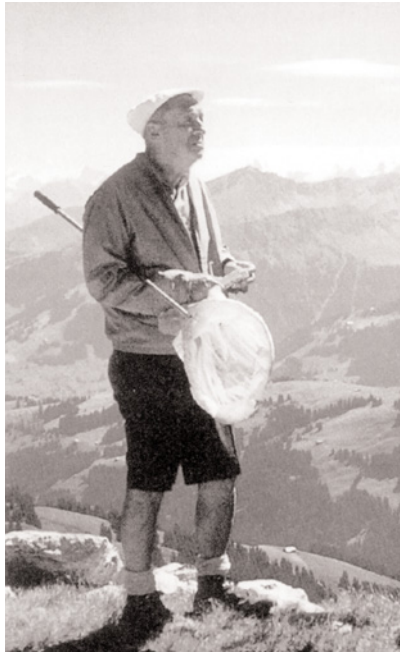
The appearances of Nabokov have something to do with my understanding of literature. [My] books are basically about reality. I firmly believe, though, that reality can only really work if it goes beyond itself in places, in other words if the text has mysterious facets that would normally have no place in a realistic text . . . Therefore these half concrete, half abstract figures (such as the butterfly man) must exist, which have a definite, yet not quite apparent, function. (our translation, qtd. in Sill 598–9)

Nabokov's appearances in *The Emigrants* thus speak to the collusion of realities that is inherent in Sebald's literary style, and his significance in the text is found in part in the very indeterminacy of meaning that Sebald courts. One of the distinctive features of Sebald's work is the way

in which it provides an abundance of details and stray suggestions without privileging one reading (or mode of reading) over another. The reader of a Sebald text is quite often disoriented but is also challenged by the increased importance that the act of interpretation holds. Sebald, like Nabokov, put stock in the notion of the ideal reader,⁶ and one of the possible implied functions of the butterfly man for the narrator in *The Emigrants* is of such a respondent: one who carefully considers each and every detail and enters wholeheartedly into the pursuit both imaginative and analytical. We would submit that the figure of Vladimir Nabokov in *The Emigrants* can be treated as an hermeneutic clue or compass with which to read Sebald's text: an eye or witness to the stories being told that is a counterpart to Sebald's own I/eye—his elusive narrator. The butterfly man draws attention to the fictional qualities of Sebald's text and this informs our approach herein, which is to re-interpret the narrative in the light of Nabokov's continued presence. In the space opened up by this reading, we hope to learn about how the artistic systems of these two authors meet and what this meeting might signify, both for their respective writing projects and for the historical events that they approach. In this article, we will track the appearances of Nabokov in *The Emigrants* chronologically, examining him as a subject character of Sebald's text and as an intertextual marker, so as to bring to light the different textual relations that are suggested by this oblique, yet considered, authorial gesture. Our method will be to follow the logic of the text, though Sebald's elliptical style of writing impels a digressive strain in our inquiry, as well as a qualified speculation.

Nabokov's first appearance in *The Emigrants* is not as a proper character in the text but as a photographic image, and as such, it raises many interesting questions. The photograph that Sebald reproduces in the first story of *The Emigrants* shows Nabokov on a mountaintop, butterfly-net crooked in his right arm, gazing into the middle distance.

One should note that photographs in Sebald's work do not work to support the text uncomplicatedly. Rather, the relationship between image and text is oftentimes dialectical, and the photograph may prick the reader into investigating alternative meanings.⁸ The context of the above photograph is as follows. Sebald's narrator is enjoying a social evening with Dr. Henry Selwyn, a shy, retiring man who putters about outdoors, and his friend, Edwin Elliot, who is a botanist and entomologist and a fellow lover of nature. When the projection slides of this pair's holiday in Crete are shown, the narrator is prompted to think of Nabokov: "one of the shots resembled, even in detail, a photo of Nabokov in the mountains above Gstaad that I had clipped from a Swiss magazine a few days before" (15). The narrator is telling us that



1. "Nabokov on La Videmanette," *The Emigrants*, p. 16.⁷

Nabokov is one of his fascinations, too. He is as drawn to him as he is to these other emigrant figures, and thus produces an image of the famous author and butterfly hunter where none is shown of Selwyn himself. Sebald's photographic sleight of hand allows him to map the character of Henry Selwyn onto that of Nabokov, offering a photographic image that works in the manner of a double exposure. Indeed, if one were not already familiar with this photograph or with Nabokov's appearance, one could be led into thinking that this was actually one of the slides from Selwyn's projector and that the image was of the host himself. The photograph thus works to cement a series of correspondences between Nabokov and Selwyn, if one investigates the matter. Both are avid lepidopterists and are drawn to nature. Both enjoy mountain climbing and attended Cambridge University in their youth. Selwyn, we learn, is Jewish and has a Christian wife, whereas in Nabokov's case, the situation was reversed (he was raised in the Russian Orthodox tradition and married a Jewish woman). These would be incidental relations, but Sebald's artistry is directed towards highlighting previously unrecognized associations and congruities, which suggest a further

significance. If one of the purposes of this photograph is to bring the hidden correspondences between Selwyn and Nabokov into view, what might Sebald be suggesting?

When the narrator meets Selwyn in the village of Hingham, in England, Selwyn has become a reclusive figure whose only comfort is in plants and animals. He has suppressed his Jewish-Lithuanian identity for most of his life, having changed his first name from Hersch to Henry and his surname from Seweryn to Selwyn, and has become assimilated into English culture. Consequently, he was forced into a dreadful double bind in the years of the Second World War as Germany and England came into conflict and the European Jewry was decimated. "The years of the second war, and the decades after, were a blinding, bad time for me" says Selwyn, "about which I could not say a thing, even if I wanted to" (21). In his old age, he severs his ties with society at large, drifts apart from his wife and spends his time in quiet commune with nature. His turning away from the social world and his mute sensibility resemble the depression of an exile or of a survivor of the Shoah, and it is curious that Sebald would impute (or at least highlight) these particular characteristics. For Selwyn is not a survivor of the concentration camps. On the contrary, he spent the interwar years motoring around Europe with his wife and was comfortably set up in his doctor's practice in England when the Second World War raged on. Nevertheless, Selwyn has lived much of his life in the shadow of the Shoah, and this has perhaps encroached more in his later years. One cannot know if Selwyn is wholly preoccupied with the Shoah, though his silence on the subject is certainly telling. The narrator relates that "[he] lived in his hermitage, giving his entire attention . . . to thoughts which on the one hand grew vaguer day by day, and, on the other, grew more precise and unambiguous" (11). As with Sebald and Nabokov, Selwyn has been placed in the precarious position of having to deal with a *vicariously* experienced catastrophe, with the concomitant feelings of displaced guilt and responsibility. How does one process a traumatic event of this kind with which one has a personal connection, but which one has not actually experienced? Instead, one learns about it belatedly—by report, word of mouth, or by documentary evidence (e.g. photographs of gas chambers, piled corpses). Sebald does not include such images in his text, but he is on record as having watched a documentary film of the opening of the Belsen camp in his late teens, and having been stunned by it.⁹ In traumatology theory, the sufferer of "vicarious traumatization" has his or her basic assumptions about themselves and the world around them radically unsettled by absorbing too much information about a catastrophe or by intuiting its sheer magnitude.¹⁰ How does one live? How does one cope with

borrowed memories and with imaginings that harrow and upend? These questions haunt the margins of the story of Henry Selwyn, as does the hall of mirrors that Sebald erects between his narrator, Selwyn and Nabokov—exiles all, and vicarious witnesses to catastrophe.

As the extent of the catastrophe committed in the past becomes clearer, the mind becomes less able to make sense of it; it is an unsolvable conundrum that makes the remembering subject singularly wretched. This is where the correspondence between Selwyn and Nabokov becomes less clear-cut, however, and we might again consider why Sebald appears to juxtapose the two men. Nabokov is famous for exploring the poetic faculty of memory in his work, which is buoyed by the imaginative possibilities that the act of remembering—of literally recreating—holds. He uses the poetic mode to restructure the details and events of his past, fictionalizing them to a certain degree (most notably in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*). While Sebald can also be accredited with doing this, memory, in his work, does not have the same dream-like properties that Nabokov often proclaims. In the eyes of Nabokov-as-poet, one's remembered life may enjoy a certain security; it is crystallized, made perfect and can be revisited at length. "That robust reality [of memory] makes a ghost of the present," he writes in *Speak, Memory*. "The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, *nobody will ever die*" (emphasis added, 77). If one registers a distinct sense of wish fulfillment in this statement, one is probably not mistaken, as the public Nabokov triumphantly heralds the healing power of memory through art.

In an article that looks at the psychoanalytical aspects of Nabokov's work, Phyllis A. Roth theorizes that the way that Nabokov deals with death and loss in his life and with the experience of mortality is "to work on the memories so as to make them permanent compensations for loss and inadequacy, and through the fictions to distance himself from painful experiences, denying the implications of death and of his complicity in it" (56). So, Roth suggests that on the one hand, Nabokov integrated memories of the past into his everyday life by transforming them into art, but at the same time, used his artistic work to control the darker aspects or to keep them at bay.¹¹ We will interrogate this idea further when considering Nabokov's treatment of the Shoah in *Invitation to a Beheading*, but for our present purpose of examining the crossover between Nabokov and Selwyn, it is sufficient to note that Nabokov found solace in nature and in his art, and was, at the time when the photograph was taken of him near Gstaad, quite peerless as an artist. If Sebald's narrator is sufficiently interested in Nabokov to cut out a photograph of him from a magazine, it is reason-

able to assume that he knows this, which gives the placing of the photograph in this story a special significance.

Selwyn may share the desire of Nabokov the poet to crack open a fissure in the surrounding world and to dwell in an idealized, timeless place, but he cannot. He is unable to (re)write or poeticize his memories (or imaginings) in the way that Nabokov does in *Speak, Memory*, freezing them in time and preserving them in picture-perfect condition. Instead, he dwindles away in solitude, eventually taking his own life. One might posit, then, that Nabokov (the butterfly man, but also the author) is established in this story as a beacon in Sebald's text but also as a possible source of tension—an ideal that the characters in his stories cannot realize. The image of the butterfly man is crossed with that of Henry Selwyn but the two do not match up, despite their common ground. This points to a potential schism between the ostensibly idealized world of the butterfly man and the poignant figure that Sebald follows. Might this also suggest a dialectic between the artistic (and ideological) systems of these two authors? In order to pursue this, and to consider the idea of Nabokov as an aesthetic standard for Sebald, we will examine the crossing of paths of Nabokov and the next two characters of Sebald's text: Paul Bereyter, followed by Ambros Adelwarth.

Nabokov's first appearance in *The Emigrants* is as a photographic image; his second, in the story of Paul Bereyter, is as an overt textual reference. Sebald's narrator has gathered much of the information about Bereyter's life from a certain Mme Lucy Landau, who became acquainted with Bereyter after he approached her on a park bench in the French Jura and commented on her choice of reading material—Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*. This is most likely a fabrication on Sebald's part (though one never knows), and it has the effect of making Nabokov the connecting link of the narrative chain. Following the logic of the text, Sebald's narrator would not have been able to recreate the life of Paul Bereyter to the same extent were it not for Nabokov's autobiography; without it, the connection with the informant would never have been made. It might be profitable, then, to read Nabokov in this story as an intertextual marker that illuminates the life of Paul Bereyter, locating echo points in Nabokov's work and comparing these with the approach that Sebald takes.

Like those of the other characters in *The Emigrants*, Paul Bereyter's life is something of a mystery, which, once elucidated, is infinitely more terrible. Having been fired from his post as a schoolteacher in the town of S (Sonthofen, in Bavaria) on account of his quarter-Jewish heritage, Bereyter was still required to serve in the German army during the Second World War and was stationed abroad. When the war finished,

he chose to go back to Germany, oddly enough, to teach at the same village that had previously rejected him. The guiding passion in Bereyter's life is the education of children, and he is absolute in his determination to encourage them beyond the narrow way of thinking that is prevalent in the town of S. The narrator tells us that Bereyter is repelled by "Catholic sanctimoniousness" and tries to rid the children of the habits and prejudices—"the stupidity, both inbred and willfully acquired"—that they would carry over into their adult lives, and that would give rise to, among other evils, anti-Semitism (35, 37). To this end, he introduces them to art and to music, and takes them outdoors so that they can learn about natural history. Bereyter has an inquisitive, creative mind and a sensitive temperament that is easily moved. The pain that he carries with him runs deep: from his soldier days in Hitler's army, to the memories of how Jewish families, his own relatives included, were persecuted and their livelihoods taken away, to the ultimate heartache of having to contemplate the deaths of murdered friends and loved ones. His own beloved, Helen Hollaender, was deported along with her mother in a train to Theresienstadt, and he never saw her again. Mme Landau explains: "Paul had preserved a resolute silence on the subject because he was plagued by a sense of having failed her or let her down" (49). In the last years of his life, Bereyter devotes his time to reconstituting the events of the past that led up to the *Kristallnacht* of 1938, pouring over archive materials and making endless notes and observations. In his commitment to understand calamitous events to which he was not party, but to which he is still painfully connected, Bereyter recalls the plight of Henry Selwyn, and also doubles the figure of the author and that of his ghostly companion, Nabokov.

One cannot but think of Nabokov's *Pnin* and the eponymous character of that book when considering the story of Paul Bereyter. This is not to suggest that *Pnin* is a direct intertext in the same way that *Speak, Memory* is, but rather that it is a companion piece that signals the influence (and importance) of Nabokov in Sebald's text. *Pnin* is a Russian émigré who is a professor at a provincial American college. He is an *intelligent* (a Russian term, which refers not so much to a person of an intellectual professional status but to one with an ethical commitment to culture and humanity), and is therefore of similar temperament to Paul Bereyter. *Pnin*, although not Jewish, is also confronted with the problem of incorporating painful memories of the past into his everyday life, trying to find a way of coming to terms with events that he would much rather forget. He, too, has lost the love of his youth, Mira Belochkin, in the Shoah: an occurrence that has singularly unsettled his ability to believe in an autocratic God, or indeed to make any sense of

his own continued existence in light of Mira's death in Buchenwald. In one of the most affecting, if not harrowing, passages of Nabokov's oeuvre, Pnin allows himself to dwell upon the variety of possible deaths that Mira Belochkin may have had:

[If] one were to be quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. One had to forget—because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past. And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one's mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood. (135)

With this passage, Nabokov's reader, accustomed to the stylistic brilliance of the author, finds this same faculty used to catalogue a creeping multitude of horrors. Mira Belochkin's death is rendered as dark poetry ("the dusk of the past"), not mere sober prose, and this is quite disconcerting. Nabokov faces the evils of the Shoah head-on in this section of *Pnin*, with a directness that Sebald, on aesthetic grounds alone, would not attempt.¹² Phyllis A. Roth's thesis that Nabokov used his fiction to distance himself from painful events, thereby allowing him to "[control] the uncontrollable" is less tenable in this light, though it is not entirely invalid (51). Still, Nabokov need not have written about the Shoah at all, and he certainly did not exorcise any demons by writing this book.¹³ The key factor for Nabokov was responsibility: the responsibility of the artist, and more fundamentally, that of the human being, and this is made into the guiding principle of *Pnin*. Nabokov arranges it so that Pnin's repeated efforts to erase his memories prove detrimental to his mental and physical health, manifesting themselves as mysterious heart palpitations that force him to engage with the figures of his past. It is only by acknowledging his memories that Pnin can reconcile himself, at least in part, with the post-Shoah world and with the possibility of a post-mortem survival

of consciousness (Shrayer, "Jewish Questions" 87). Following on from the passage quoted above, Pnin reflects to himself: "He did believe, dimly, in a democracy of ghosts. The souls of the dead, perhaps, formed committees, and these, in continuous session, attended to the destinies of the quick" (*Pnin* 136). Memory, for Nabokov, can still be a redemptive act, allowing the human subject to perpetuate the existence of those that have died by recreating them in thought and imaginatively restoring them to life. Memory is presented differently in *Pnin* than it is in *Speak, Memory*, however, where it was allied with a form of artistic perfection or brilliance. In *Pnin*, Nabokov is more hesitant to make this assertion (note the qualifiers *dimly* and *perhaps* in the quotation above); souls of the dead live on in memory, but will they not cease to exist with the death of the remembering subject? In the final instance, it is perhaps in art rather than in transient human memory that the dead can continue to live—one text but many readers—but it is still an art that is reliant on human boundaries, as well as a capacity for imagination and empathy.

Nabokov recognizes that the place of art is threatened in the post-Shoah world, but he still maintains that it has a potential to heal and to console. In the penultimate chapter of *Pnin*, he seems to stage an allegorical scene whereby the work of art is threatened and appears to be irreparably damaged but is ultimately found to be intact. Pnin is washing the dishes after a party he has given in his home. Among the dishes is a splendid glass bowl that Victor (the son of Pnin's ex-wife, and a filial presence) has given to him, and as he wipes it clean, it slips from his hand and falls back into the sink with a sound of breaking glass. Luckily for Pnin, it is only a goblet that has been broken—"The beautiful bowl was still intact" (172). Nabokov cannot quite make the assertion that the work of art can have cracks in it, or indeed must have in order to respond to certain events. In a Sebald text, it is likely that Pnin's bowl would be a single, beautiful shard that the narrator would somehow discover, ponder over and quietly document.

The issue that is broached here is that of representing the Shoah, and the suitability (or unsuitability) of art for this task. While we do not wish to re-tread old ground, it is important to understand how Nabokov and Sebald intersect with this debate, and what this might mean for our interpretation of the figure of the butterfly man in *The Emigrants*. The primary theorist to address is, of course, Theodor Adorno, whose 1949 proclamation that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" is sounded with unerring frequency in arguments involving art and the Shoah ("Cultural Criticism and Society" 34). Too often, however, this statement is misunderstood or is cited out of context, and without reference to Adorno's later revision of this statement. Adorno might have

objected to the aesthetic features of a work like *Phin*, for instance, as being wholly incompatible with the historical event that it addresses. How can there be the possibility of pleasure in a work that claims to speak to an event as catastrophic and as devastating as the Shoah, which worked to drain both life and death of meaning? “After Auschwitz,” Adorno writes, “our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate” (*Negative Dialectics* 361). His point is well taken, but there is an important distinction between employing the aesthetic to whitewash historical events and negotiating these same events in artistically responsible terms. There is nothing pretty about Nabokov’s depiction of the Nazi concentration camps in *Phin*, and the author patently foregrounds the impossibility of ever understanding what happened there. The comic surface of the novel may attract, but underneath lies a serious intent, a root of melancholy, and this tempers any aesthetic pleasure that the reader may derive from the text.

Sebald shares with Nabokov the understanding that the aesthetic component of a work of art can also have a moral dimension if executed with the proper consideration, but this is something that resists large-scale commodification.¹⁴ In the story of Paul Bereyter, the narrator states that he has written down what he knows about the subject in order to avoid the sort of “wrongful trespass” that would come out of a facile and unqualified emotional sympathy (29). That said, Sebald does not rule out the possibility that the artist can incorporate metaphysical concerns into the work in question, which Adorno would render *de facto* invalid, and he finds a sympathetic partner here in Nabokov. If Adorno was inhibiting in his first remarks regarding art after Auschwitz, his revision of this statement in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) is no less radical in its implications for the individual in the post-Shoah world. He writes:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. (362–3).

Adorno aptly characterizes the predicament of one who must live with the after-effects of devastation, one whose life has been spared but who is never free from the overarching shadow of annihilation. For Nabokov and for Sebald, the decimation of millions and of much of European Jewish culture in the Shoah was, as we have noted, a vicariously experienced catastrophe, but it was still very much a part of their living memories. The “drastic guilt” of the survivor about which Adorno writes is the telling feature in the lives of Sebald’s emigrants, and one suspects that Sebald understood it too. It is also true of Nabokov’s Pnin, who ventures yet fails to shut himself off from all conscience and consciousness, steeling himself against hearing the voices of the murdered victims. Paul Breyer does not share Pnin’s vague intuition of a postmortem survival of consciousness (the “democracy of ghosts”), and therefore cannot accept the continual haunting of past sorrows. Breyer eventually succumbs to an “insuperable sense of defeat” and lies down on the railway tracks one day, as though in symbolic protest to the transport that took Helen Hollaender and countless others away to the camps, quite literally paving their deaths with his own (49). The answer is not simple, and Adorno does not let the survivor off the hook, artist or non-artist alike. The post-Shoah subject will inevitably be distant or detached, he suggests, and this outlook is a cause of, as well as a response to, the originating trauma. He therefore charges the survivor, and, indeed, ostensibly disinterested citizens, with being complicit in the event—one is not able to extricate oneself from it with one’s innocence intact. This is why, as Naomi Mandel observes, Adorno originally stated that to write poetry after Auschwitz would be barbaric: immanent criticism means being implicated in, or complicit with, the object of inquiry, which in terms of the Shoah means designating this event, not as some siphoned off part of the distant past, but as an ongoing and uncomfortable presence in contemporary history (221). Knowledge of radical complicity in historical events dots the pages of Sebald’s narrative, with the narrator continually trying to seek out the presence of the past in the world around him: in buildings, landscapes, documents and in people’s stories. Entering into Sebald’s texts, the past seems hopelessly removed from the everyday world, but owing to the narrator’s quiet insistence and determination, we are led to feel its continuing traces. “How strange it is,” Sebald remarks in *Vertigo*, “to be standing leaning against the current of time” (46). So, too, for Sebald’s reader, who appreciates that what must first of all be countered is historical amnesia¹⁵—the desire to forget and to consign events to a shameful oblivion—but who also senses that the artwork that attempts to reach beyond this guilty silence will be, though perhaps beautiful, by necessity, tainted or flawed.

We enter back into our analysis of the appearances of the butterfly man in *The Emigrants* with the understanding that the artistic conceptions of Nabokov and Sebald do not always entirely match up; for the former, artistic perfection is paramount, while for the latter, imperfections can also be valid, and obliqueness is the artist's best tool, particularly in relation to the Shoah. We may do well to keep this in mind when reading the story of Ambros Adelwarth, in which the presence of Nabokov in the text is more pronounced than hitherto it has been (though he is not referred to by name; rather, it is left to the reader to deduce the identity of the butterfly man). Sebald may have been encouraged to increase the frequency of Nabokov's appearances in this story on account of the uncanny coincidence of geographical places that marks Adelwarth's history and that of Nabokov.

Ambros Adelwarth is the narrator's great-uncle. He worked in his youth in the Grand Hôtel Eden in Montreux, Switzerland—the city where Nabokov was to spend the last two decades of his life. Adelwarth, a German, becomes the personal valet (and implied partner) of the Jewish-American privateer, Cosmo Solomon, who is to end his days in a sanatorium in Ithaca, New York. Adelwarth then spends some years as a butler in the service of the Solomon family, but ultimately follows Solomon to the same sanatorium in Ithaca and to an equally unpleasant fate. Nabokov was teaching at Cornell University, Ithaca, at the same time that Ambros Adelwarth was staying at the sanatorium, so there is some documentary basis for his appearances in this story.¹⁶ Adelwarth willingly, even eagerly, undergoes repeated sessions of electric shock treatment, perhaps owing to the fact that he still has access to his long-term memory, and this, like his fellows in Sebald's text, is something he would rather blot out. Adelwarth is so removed from the world around him and from his own self, that he is inescapably drawn to the figure of Nabokov as the butterfly man, whom he often spies from his window at the sanatorium. Indeed, the only time he misses an appointment for the electroshock therapy is when he is waiting for the butterfly man to appear, and the appointment consequently slips his mind. The butterfly man seems to belong only partially to the everyday world: hence Adelwarth's attraction to him, perhaps. He brings a sense of unreality or the dream world into the narrative, and provides a welcome distraction for a man whose mind and body are in utter disrepair. Adelwarth may only half appreciate his fascination (or indeed, obsession) with the butterfly man, but for the reader of Sebald's text who identifies the figure as Nabokov, the situation is more pointed. One of the features that delighted Nabokov about butterflies was the pattern of mimicry that they displayed, the subtlety, sophistication and beauty of which were far in

excess of any utilitarian function, in his view. "Natural selection" in the Darwinian sense could not account for this aesthetic surplus, according to Nabokov, and this was wonderfully, endlessly tantalizing to him. "I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception" (*Speak, Memory* 125). The butterfly functions as a symbol of artistic perfection, a harbinger of joy and of the eternal that the human subject may strive for, and sometimes attain. Adelwarth, meanwhile, looks on from his window at the sanatorium.

Sebald draws on the connection between butterflies and the otherworld that Nabokov often makes and sets it alongside the less idealized world of his own text.¹⁷ Sebald's emigrants cannot escape into the otherworld, as for instance the protagonist of Nabokov's short story "The Aurelian" (1930) does;¹⁸ their only release is through death, and this is often self-imposed. Adelwarth is trying slowly but surely to become totally numb and to obliterate himself. The narrator reminds us that in the 1950s, shock treatment was essentially "torture or martyrdom" (111). Outside the torture chamber, Nabokov dances, making "curious jumps" with his butterfly net (104). In this light, Adelwarth's fixation with the butterfly man is rather poignant. It has, perhaps, an element of sadness and frustration attached to it, and this may account for the "undertone of mockery" that Aunt Fini, the narrator's informant, detects in Adelwarth's responses regarding this figure (104). Why might Sebald wish to reference Nabokov in this story, especially within the context of dementia? Nabokov's negative bias against psychiatry (and especially psychoanalysis) is well known, and the electric shock "treatment" of the patients at the sanatorium in Ithaca is certainly deplorable. There may be more to it than that, though, especially if one considers that Sebald has effected a textual or documentary encounter with Nabokov in the previous stories of *The Emigrants*, and he co-opts him as an actual character in the third. We would suggest that part of the significance of the butterfly man in this story is that he signals the careful exchange between Sebald and Nabokov in this text: the tribute of one author to another that is also something of a sidestepping of the earlier author's influence.

Even as Nabokov is celebrated in *The Emigrants*, he is quietly pushed against. There is something inhibiting, perhaps, in the artistic perfection to which Nabokov aspires (and often manages), which jars a little with Sebald's own conceptions. In Nabokov's art, the text is often constructed around a definitive controlling vision that the reader can decode, often not unsuccessfully, bestowing a higher unity upon the logic of the whole.¹⁹ The world of Sebald's texts, by contrast, is much more ambiguous and undecided. Details are scrupulously inserted but they do not

always cohere to make perfect sense. We can never quite understand, for instance, the motivating factors in the life of Ambros Adelwarth, which ends in his longing for final extinction. Sebald's texts are as open-ended as they are determinate, weaving details into patterns but also cherishing random elements. His work dismisses, indeed defers, finite insights or conclusions, as Amir Eshel observes: "Even if the catastrophic seems occasionally to be subsumed by all-encompassing conceptual frames, one is still confronted by moments in which this tendency is ironically inverted" (89). Judith Kitchen calls the space of this writing the Sebald Zone: "—a realm where truth is indeterminate, the narrator is indirect, the characters are enigmatic, the story is inconclusive, and history is uncertain" (309). Sebald gathers up the details of people's lives as best he can, but there is always a leftover—a gray area—that unsettles the neat design, and this stems from both the hidden complexities of the human and from a radical insecurity in relation to contemporary history. The rules are no longer clear, Sebald tells James Wood: "I think these certainties have been taken away from us by the course of history, and . . . we have to acknowledge our own sense of ignorance and of insufficiency in these matters and therefore to try and write accordingly" (89). The collision of the ordered world of Nabokov and the slightly less certain structure that Sebald follows results in a heartrending, if slightly absurdist, meeting: one that finds expression in the hovering of the butterfly man outside the sanatorium window of Ambros Adelwarth. It also opens up a positive space of interpretation for the reader of *The Emigrants*, however, in which possibilities even unknown to the author may emerge. It is to this inter-space that we will now turn, analyzing the crossovers and dovetailing of characters—spectral and otherwise—in the story of Max Ferber.

The last story in *The Emigrants* is the most ambitious in its scope and consequently the most complex. It is built on an interlocking series of narratives that tell the life story of Max Ferber: a Jewish painter originally from Germany but who has lived in Manchester for most of his life. In 1939, his parents were among a number of German and Austrian Jews who managed to send their children abroad (the *Kindertransport*²⁰); they were meant to follow him, but they did not get the chance. Ferber devotes himself to his art, locking himself away in a small studio in the Manchester docks, painting portraits of ashen, hollowed out faces. The intimation is that as a survivor, Ferber is bearing imaginary witness to the Shoah in his art, much as the narrator is doing.²¹ Ferber travels abroad once, in 1964, to visit an exhibition of the paintings of Matthias Grünewald, and stays at the Grand Palace Hôtel (where Nabokov lived) in Montreux. While he is there, he climbs Grammont and experiences a

fit of vertigo that he seems to half-welcome, but he is steadied by a familiar (yet unannounced) figure—Nabokov as the butterfly man. “He was carrying a large white gauze butterfly net and said, in an English voice that was refined but quite unplaceable, that it was time to be thinking of going down if one were to be in Montreux for dinner (174). This meeting sends Ferber into a sort of stupor, and initiates a yearlong quest to paint a portrait entitled “Man with a Butterfly Net.”²² The task proves almost impossible for him, however, and he is dissatisfied with the “faceless” painting that he ends up with, as it “conveyed not even the remotest impression of the strangeness of the apparition it referred to” (174).

As he did with Adelwarth, the butterfly man tantalizes Max Ferber with a sense of unreality or otherworldliness that is in sharp contrast to his everyday concerns. Nabokov makes something of a *deus ex machina* appearance in this story, stepping in to save the life of Max Ferber, and in orchestrating this, Sebald brings to the fore the artifice of his own text. Indeed, there are narrative designs at work in the story of Max Ferber that have not received comment, particularly in relation to the references to Nabokov, and perhaps this is because the fictional properties of the Sebald text—its artful nature—are not always fully recognized. By exploring the narrative design of *The Emigrants*, we may realize a dimension of it that has a significant bearing on the act of reading and remembering: vital components for a literature of memorialization.

The narrative of Max Ferber links back to that of Ambros Adelwarth and Cosmo Solomon in an intriguing manner. The narrator remarks that Ferber has a fresco in his studio by an unknown artist that shows a caravan moving from the depths of the picture straight towards the eye of the beholder. The scene, he tells us, looks like a “mirage” and it seems to him as though Ferber, in his dusty clothes, has just emerged from this scene or instead belongs to it (164). Sebald has not met Frank Auerbach (b. 1931), the German-born artist on which Ferber is partially modeled, nor has he visited his studio on the Manchester docks; his information about him, he states in an interview with Carole Angier, was gathered from published sources and largely from “a huge tome . . . by an American” (14). This tome is almost certainly *Frank Auerbach*, by Robert Hughes,²³ and this contains no reference to the fresco that Sebald describes. The fresco is one of Sebald’s inventions, then, and it has been planted there to recall an earlier scene in the text involving Adelwarth and Solomon. Solomon is attending a screening of a German film in New York about a gambler, and this ends up triggering his second nervous breakdown. Solomon describes the film as “a labyrinth devised to imprison him and drive him mad, with all its mirror reversals” (97). In

this film, a hypnotist manages to induce a collective hallucination in his audience:

From the depths of the stage . . . the mirage image of an oasis appeared. A caravan emerged onto the stage from a grove of palms, crossed the stage, went down into the auditorium, passed amongst the spectators . . . and vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared. The terrible thing was (Cosmo insisted) that he himself had somehow gone from the hall together with the caravan, and now could no longer tell where he was. (97)

Solomon's descent into madness is reminiscent of Luzhin, the protagonist of Nabokov's novel, *Žashchita Luzhina* (1930, Eng. tr., *The Defense* 1964) whose life is inextricably linked with the workings of chess,²⁴ or indeed with the young boy of Nabokov's short story "Signs and Symbols," who is the son of Jewish-Russian refugees living in the U.S.A. in the late 1940s, and who suffers from referential mania. But while in Nabokov's art, imaginative pursuits may allow the subject to enter the realm of the otherworld, with Sebald they merely reveal the characters to be trapped within themselves and within the nightmarish events that constitute their lives. This motif of the caravan that breaks the frame of representation and enters into an "other" space is a nod towards a Nabokovian aesthetic of transcendence, but in Sebald's text, this gesture is not enough. Art is not really a saving grace for these emigrants; even for Max Ferber, the fictionalized painter, it is something of an ordeal. Moreover, dementia only liberates one into interminable dissolution; it is not, in any positive sense, a release. The fact of the matter is that there is no release for the characters about which Sebald writes. How could there be? The lives that he is documenting are already set out before him; their ends have been prefigured ever before he put pen to paper.

There is one exception to this in the text, however, and it is something that Sebald has deliberately arranged. Significantly, it involves Nabokov. Max Ferber has given the narrator his mother's diary, written between the years of 1939 and 1941. In this diary, Luisa Ferber (née Lanzberg) makes no references to her then situation as a Jew in Nazi Germany or to the impending catastrophe, but focuses instead on the memories of her childhood and young adult life, which are generally happy, though tinged with sadness and nostalgia. Luisa Ferber gets to write about her memories, and in some sense to freeze them in time, as Nabokov has done in his autobiography. This is quite telling, because Sebald does

something very interesting here: he transplants an actual scene from *Speak, Memory* into her memoir. It is Nabokov's final appearance in the text, and possibly the most powerful. The scene that she remembers (or rather that Sebald has her remember) is one where a "Russian boy" is chasing butterflies in Bad Kissingen, accompanied by "two very refined Russian gentlemen" (214, 213). This corresponds precisely with Nabokov's account of the afternoon in Chapter Six of his autobiography (one of the gentlemen is his father; the other, A. S. Muromtsev, the president of the First Duma). For Luisa, the memory of the young Nabokov with his butterfly net is an image of pure happiness: a bona fide entry point into the otherworld:

though everything else around me blurred, I saw that long-forgotten Russian boy as clearly as anything, leaping about the meadows with his butterfly net; I saw him as a messenger of joy, returning from that distant summer day to open his specimen box and release the most beautiful red admirals, peacock butterflies, brimstones and tortoiseshells to signal my final liberation. (214)

This is a purely fantastical move on Sebald's part, and as such, it merits scrutiny. In an interview with Carole Angier, Sebald states that there was a Sunday afternoon excursion into the country in the original diary that he read, but Nabokov did not appear (14). We need to determine what this incident suggests, apart from compounding the already existing network of references to Nabokov in the book.

One must first address the narratological issues that it raises. Here we have a text within a text within a text: *Speak, Memory* within Luisa Ferber's diary within Sebald's *The Emigrants*. This Chinese-box like structure is an example of "worlds in infinite regression," which, as D. Barton Johnson has argued, is an ideal Nabokovian model and a staple of his metaliterary and metaphysical conceptions (2). Sebald's text becomes more unsettled than ever as it loses any sense of a stable center. Who is reading whom? Earlier, in the narrative concerning Paul Bereyter, Mme Landau was reading Nabokov's autobiography on a bench. Should not Luisa Ferber be contained within this world? The reason we are drawing attention to this textual conundrum is that Sebald is, in a sense, giving Luisa Ferber a way out: he knows (as she knows) that her fate is inevitable but he provides her with the possibility of transcending it. This is not something that the other characters in *The Emigrants* can apprehend because they exist in the same world as the narrator²⁵—the merciless world of Hitler's death camps. Luisa Ferber only exists as text,

however, and furthermore in an interconnection of same; she is freed into being by entering into Nabokov's imaginative world.²⁶ Chapter Fourteen of *Speak, Memory* begins thusly: "The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free" (275). By interweaving Nabokov's narrative with that of Luisa Ferber, Sebald gives precedence to the dimension of intertextuality: a dimension that is without boundaries and that is continually fashioned by the writing—and re-reading—subject. When Luisa Ferber writes of her childhood, it seems to her as if it had been "opened in time, in every direction—indeed, as if it were still going on, right into these lines I am now writing" (207). In an important sense, she is quite right; her memories are passed along to the narrator who in turn directs them to the reader of the text. This chain of contracts grants her a form of textual immortality that mimics the happiness of the young boy with the butterfly net: a transformation of life into literature and literature into life.

The meeting of W. G. Sebald and Vladimir Nabokov in *The Emigrants* signals an intricate play of ideas and forms. In this essay, we have offered on one level a Sebaldian reading of the text, in that we have forged new connections between the different narrative elements and have developed a particular interpretation of the text as a result. Sebald may not have formulated these connections himself, but the nature of his writing style—the way in which it is both determinate and open-ended—makes such a response quite valid. On another level, this is something of a Nabokovian reading of *The Emigrants*, and this, too, we think is a legitimate approach to take, given that these two authors share a conception of the literary text as an aesthetic totality, where attention to detail is paramount. As the butterfly man, Nabokov provides an entry-point into the mysterious dimensions of Sebald's text: the zone of the unreal, the allusion, the possibility that forever remains suggested but unrealized. He heralds the imaginative, *fictional* aspects of Sebald's writing: the inspired ability to draw connections between details and events that would otherwise remain unrecognized. As an authorial presence, Nabokov provides an exemplary model of the artist-as-exile, whose work has both an intellectual, aesthetic and metaphysical significance and who both complements and contrasts Sebald's own designs (particularly with regard to the idea of artistic perfection). Nabokov can also be thought of as an artist-in-residence in *The Emigrants*, who, in concert with Sebald, demonstrates the continued importance of the artist in the post-Shoah world, heralding the qualities of diligence, responsibility and exactitude. For Sebald and Nabokov—non-Jewish writers who, nevertheless, are inescapably connected to Jewish concerns—the task of responding to the Shoah is

perhaps more delicate, but the burden of responsibility and the charge of remembering, of bearing witness in one's art, is the same. The terrible history of the Shoah cannot remain unspoken; it must be broached, but in a way that does justice to the enormity of this occurrence, and to its implications for our everyday lives, for contemporary history. What is required is an *individual* labor of remembering and not a collective displacement (or even absolution) of guilt, and in this, the distinction between the artist and the non-artist collapses under a greater responsibility: to the memories of the dead, to the propagation of their stories and to the resurrection of their spirit in word and thought. The remarks that Max Ferber makes about his mother's memoirs are also true of Sebald's text as a whole. He likens her diary to "one of those evil German fairy tales in which, once you are under the spell, you have to carry on to the finish, till your heart breaks, with whatever work you have begun—in this case the remembering, writing and reading" (193). These are the acts that constitute the post-Shoah consciousness as they bridge the gulf between past and present, between the difficulty in ever properly expressing or understanding and the greater danger of not even countenancing the attempt. In *The Emigrants*, the criss-crossing of Vladimir Nabokov and W. G. Sebald generates an artistic web that consoles even as it saddens and mystifies, as the flight of a net that moves subtly and silently through space and time.

NOTES

- 1 W. G. Sebald. *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse. Originally published as *Die Ausgewanderten: Vier Lange Erzählungen* (Eichborn Verlag, Frankfurt, 1992). Subsequent references are to the English translation.
- 2 For an illuminating discussion of the real-life people on whom the four characters in *The Emigrants* are based, see Carole Angier's interview with Sebald, "Who is W. G. Sebald?"
- 3 In order to avoid any ambiguity, the word *Shoah*, which is a derivative from the Hebrew, meaning "catastrophe," will be used in this article in the place of the word *holocaust* to refer to the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War.
- 4 "There is something about the Germans, which for lack of a better word we'll call cowardice," Sebald told James Atlas in a 1999 profile. "They have a habit of avoidance. People don't want to know. It's as if it never happened . . . In Germany, partly because of the destruction of the cities and partly because of the way in which Germany deals with its own past, their history is much less present. It has been, as it were, neutralized" (284–5).
- 5 Nabokov's short story "Conversation Piece, 1945" (first published as "Double Talk" in the *New Yorker* in June 23, 1945) may have been *the* first piece of

- American fiction about the Shoah and revisionism. See Shrayer “Jewish Questions” 87–9.
- 6 Sebald: “I always try to write *pour ceux qui savent lire* [for those who know how to read]” (qtd. in “W. G. Sebald” by Arthur Williams. In his essay “Good Readers and Good Writers” from *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov defines good readers as having imagination, memory, a dictionary and some artistic sense. Furthermore, he states that “one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader” (3).
 - 7 Fig. 1, “Nabokov on La Videmanette,” 1971, photographed by Dmitri Nabokov. (Reproduced by permission of Dmitri Nabokov, Montreux, to whom the authors acknowledge a debt of gratitude.)
 - 8 As Stefanie Harris observes: “Sebald both exploits and denies the documentary status of the photograph, prompting us to look beyond the simple reading of these photographs as merely enhancing the non-fictional elements of the text and to ask how they might function with and against the language of the text itself in order to communicate a particular relationship to the past” (380). In his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov employs a more traditional usage of photographs. The largely portrait photographs are demarcated from the text and are captioned, serving to illustrate, not to provoke.
 - 9 Sebald, from an interview with Maya Jaggi, entitled “The Last Word”: “Until I was 16 or 17, I had heard practically nothing about the history that preceded 1945. Only when we were 17 were we confronted with a documentary film of the opening of the Belsen camp. There it was, and we somehow had to get our minds around it—which of course we didn’t. It was in the afternoon, with a football match afterwards.”
 - 10 “Vicarious traumatization” or “secondary traumatic stress” is a condition that may be acquired by therapists or others who work with victims of trauma. Jennie Goldenberg has examined the possibility that those who interview survivors of the Shoah are also privy to this condition. See “The Impact on the Interviewer of Holocaust Survivor Narratives.” For a discussion of how post-Shoah artists have responded to events that they have not themselves experienced, but have instead encountered in a hyper-mediated or received fashion, see James E. Young, “The Holocaust as Vicarious Past.”
 - 11 Similarly, Anna Brodsky characterizes Nabokov’s writing on the Shoah as being haunted by the paradox of not being able to forget—but not being able to do anything with the memory. “He finds ways of distancing it,” she says, “and his approach is usually marked by obliqueness,” noting that when he writes in *Speak, Memory* of his brother’s death by “inanition” in a Nazi concentration camp, the use of this erudite word seems designed to dull the blunt fact of his brother’s death by starvation (52).
 - 12 Sebald: “It was . . . clear to me fairly soon that you could not write about the horrors of persecution in its ultimate forms directly, because no one could bear to look at these things without losing their sanity. So, therefore, you would have to approach it, as it were, tangentially, from an angle, by intimating to the reader that these subjects are subjects which are constant company. . . . [Their] presence, as it were, shades every inflection of every sentence one writes . . .”

- (“St. Jerome Lecture 2001” 8). Only with his description of Theresienstadt in his novel *Austerlitz* (2001) does Sebald come this close to a direct description of Nazi brutality.
- 13 In the 1970s, Nabokov told his first biographer, Andrew Field, that he wanted to make a further “statement” about the Nazi camps: a subject, he said, that he had somehow or other only touched upon in *Pnin*. Field writes: “[Nabokov] spoke with great feeling: ‘Oooloo, ooo!!! There is a sense of responsibility about this theme which I think I will tackle one day. I will go to those German camps and look at those places and write a terrible indictment . . .’” (*The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* 104).
- 14 Sebald: “If a story is aesthetically right, then it is probably also morally right. You cannot really translate one to one from reality. If you try to do that, in order to get at a truth value through writing, you have to falsify and lie. And this is one of the moral quandaries of the whole business” (“The Questionable Business of Writing”). In an profile by Maya Jaggi for *The Guardian* in 2001, Sebald stated that he loathed the term “Holocaust Literature”: “It’s a dreadful idea that you can have a sub-genre and make a speciality of it; it’s grotesque” (“Recovered Memories”).
- 15 We borrow this phrase from Tess Lewis, who uses it in her article on Sebald (“W. G. Sebald: The Past is Another Country”) for *The New Criterion* 89.
- 16 The name “Ambros Adelwarth” is an invention on Sebald’s part, though his story is true. Sebald states in an interview with Carole Angier: “I don’t know that Ambros saw Nabokov in Ithaca, but it’s entirely plausible. He lived there for ten or fifteen years. Everyone in Ithaca saw [Nabokov] at one time or other, with his butterfly net” (“Who is W. G. Sebald?” 13). Sebald may have erred on this point; Nabokov rarely hunted butterflies in Ithaca, taking summer collecting trips to the West.
- 17 One also notes the presence of moths and butterflies in *Austerlitz*, in which Sebald inserts photographs of these creatures in display cases. Indeed, Sebald’s *Austerlitz* offers a Nabokovian a whole series of recognizable details and clues, among which are the following: waiting on a Pninian bench for the pain to subside (3; also 142); Oostende (7; cf. Nabokov’s story “Revenge”); Ithaca, New York (41); a Pninian resistance to remembering the past (139); a moth emerging from an opened container (164–65; cf. Nabokov’s story “Christmas”); echoes of Nabokov’s story “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (1937) in connection with Marienbad in Sebald’s novel; Nabokov’s own stay in Western Bohemia after he left Germany in 1937 (206–17), etc.
- 18 Or the character of Vasily Ivanovich, who tries to enter the otherworld in Nabokov’s “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (1938), but fails, on account of the German fascist regime. See Shroyer, *The World of Nabokov’s Stories* 134–61.
- 19 An arguable exception to this is *Pale Fire* (1962). This text—one of Nabokov’s most complicated—actually foregrounds the difficulty, or perhaps even impossibility, of definitive interpretation.
- 20 About ten thousand Jewish children were sent to England from Germany on the *Kindertransport*; Sebald returns to this subject in his novel, *Austerlitz*.

- 21 The narrator makes a particular point of highlighting Ferber's preoccupation with dust, for instance, which has about it a grim reminder of the concentration camps. "He felt closer to dust, he said, than to light, air or water . . . [He] never felt more at home than in places where things remained undisturbed, muted under the grey, velvety sinter left when matter dissolved, little by little, into nothingness . . . I often thought that his prime concern was to increase the dust" (161).
- 22 While Frank Auerbach (the painter on whom Ferber is partially modeled) did go on an excursion to see the paintings of Matthias Grünewald, there is no evidence to suggest that he ever knew or met Nabokov in Montreux. This is almost certainly an invention on Sebald's part. Likewise, there is no reference to the painting "Man with a Butterfly Net" in Auerbach's catalogue, or anything resembling its description. In the German edition of this text (*Die Ausgewanderten*), Auerbach's charcoal drawing "Head of Catherine Lampert VI" (1980) is reproduced on page 240. This was removed from the English edition when Auerbach voiced his disapproval.
- 23 Hughes, *Frank Auerbach*. In a coincidence of which Sebald would have approved (and perhaps even knew about), the art critic Robert Hughes also produced, wrote and co-directed a documentary on Nabokov in Montreux (where Hughes also lived) in 1966.
- 24 There is also a scene in Nabokov's *The Defense* (191–2) in which Grandmaster Luzhin, recovering from a nervous breakdown, goes to see a film in which two of the characters play a game of chess; the sight of the chessboard stokes his private obsessions.
- 25 The narrator also comes to know Ambros Adelwarth through the diaries that his great-uncle wrote, but he first met him (in the "real" world) as a child, and learns more about him from his surviving family relatives. The life of Luisa Ferber, however, is preserved solely from the diary that she passes on to her son, who in turn gives it to the narrator.
- 26 Luisa Ferber's childhood memories have further resonance with Nabokov and his fiction. Her weeks-long illness with its hallucinatory wallpaper patterns (205–06) recollects the illnesses and consequent delirium of the young Nabokov in *Speak, Memory* (36–7). Further, her distress upon waking up, in this period, and seeing ostensibly innocuous jars of preserves—"I try in vain to work out what they mean. They don't mean anything, says Mama, they're just cherries, plums and pears" (206)—recalls the prized jars of fruit jellies in Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols," which is a story about referential mania (and the legacy of the Shoah). Finally, when the young Luisa's condition improves, her father brings her a "wooden box of sweets with a peacock butterfly painted on it" (206).

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