

A Place in the Country

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A Place in the Country is W. G. Sebald's meditation on the six artists and writers who shaped his creative mind-and the last of this great writer's major works to be translated into English.

This beautiful hardcover edition, with a full-cloth case, includes more than 40 pieces of art and 6 full-color gatefolds, all originally selected and laid out by W. G. Sebald.

This extraordinary collection of interlinked essays about place, memory, and creativity captures the inner worlds of five authors and one painter. In his masterly and mysterious style-part critical essay, part memoir-Sebald weaves their lives and art with his own migrations and rise in the literary world.

Here are people gifted with talent and courage yet in some cases cursed by fragile and unstable natures, working in countries inhospitable or even hostile to them. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is conjured on the verge of physical and mental exhaustion, hiding from his detractors on the island of St. Pierre, where two centuries later Sebald took rooms adjacent to his. Eighteenth-century author Johann Peter Hebel is remembered for his exquisite and delicate nature writing, expressing the eternal balance of both the outside world and human emotions. Writer Gottfried Keller, best known for his 1850 novel Green Henry, is praised for his prescient insights into a Germany where "the gap between self-interest and the common good was growing ever wider."

Sebald compassionately re-creates the ordeals of Eduard Mörike, the nineteenth-century German poet beset by mood swings, depression, and fainting spells in an increasingly shallow society, and Robert Walser, the institutionalized author whose nearly indecipherable scrawls seemed an attempt to "duck down below the level of language and obliterate himself" (and whose physical appearance and year of death mirrored those of Sebald's grandfather). Finally, Sebald spies a cognizance of death's inevitability in painter Jan Peter Tripp's lovingly exact reproductions of life.

Featuring the same kinds of suggestive and unexplained illustrations that appear in his masterworks Austerlitz and The Rings of Saturn, and translated by Sebald's colleague Jo Catling, A Place in the Country is Sebald's unforgettable self-portrait as seen through the experiences of others, a glimpse of his own ghosts alongside those of the men who influenced him. It is an essential addition to his stunning body of work.

Praise for A Place in the Country

"Measured, solemn, sardonic . . . hypnotic . . . [W. G. Sebald's] books, which he made out of classics, remain classics for now."-Joshua Cohen, The New York Times Book Review

"In Sebald's writing, everything is connected, everything webbed together by the unseen threads of history, or chance, or fate, or death. The scholarly craft of gathering scattered sources and weaving them into a coherent whole is transformed here into something beautiful and unsettling, elevated into an art of the uncanny-an art that was, in the end, Sebald's strange and inscrutable gift."-Slate

"Magnificent . . . The multiple layers surrounding each essay are seamless to the point of imperceptibility."-New York Daily News

"Sebald's most tender and jovial book."-The Nation

"Reading [A Place in the Country is] like going for a walk with a beautifully talented, deeply passionate novelist from Mars."-New York

W. G. Sebald was born in Wertach im Allgäu, Germany, in 1944. He studied German language and literature in Freiburg, Switzerland, and Manchester. He taught at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, for thirty years, becoming professor of European literature in 1987, and from 1989 to 1994 was the first director of the British Centre for Literary Translation. His books *The Rings of Saturn*, *The Emigrants*, *Vertigo*, and *Austerlitz* have won a number of international awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Award, the Berlin Literature Prize, and the LiteraTour Nord Prize. He died in December 2001.

Translator Jo Catling joined the University of East Anglia as Lecturer in German Literature and Language in 1993, teaching German and European literature alongside W. G. Sebald. She has published widely on both Sebald and Rainer Maria Rilke. *A Comet in the Heavens*

A piece for an almanac, in honor of Johann Peter Hebel

In the feuilleton which Walter Benjamin wrote for the *Magdeburger Zeitung* on the centenary of the death of Johann Peter Hebel, he suggests near the beginning that the nineteenth century cheated itself of the realization that the *Schatzkästlein des Rheinischen Hausfreunds* [Treasure Chest of the Rhineland Family Friend] is one of the purest examples of prose writing in all of German literature. Out of a misplaced sense of cultural superiority, the key to this casket was thrown among peasants and children, heedless of the treasures concealed within. Indeed, between Goethe's and Jean Paul's praise of the almanac author from Baden and the later appreciation of his work by Kafka, Bloch, and Benjamin, we find scarcely anyone who might have introduced Hebel to a bourgeois readership and thus shown them what they were missing in terms of a vision of a better world designed with the ideals of justice and tolerance in mind. It says something, too, about German intellectual history if we consider what little impact the intercession of these Jewish authors of the 1910s and 1920s had on Hebel's posthumous reputation, by comparison with the effect the National Socialists had when they later laid claim to the *Heimatschriftsteller* [local or provincial writer] from Wiesenthal for their own purposes. With what false neo-Germanic accents this expropriation took place, and how long it was to prevail, is clearly set out by Robert Minder in his essay on Heidegger's 1957 lecture on Hebel, the whole tenor and expression of which differed not in the slightest from that employed during the Nazi era by Josef Weinheber, Guido Kolbenheyer, Hermann Burte, Wilhelm Schfer, and other would-be guardians of the German heritage, who fondly imagined that their jargon was rooted directly in the language of the Volk. When I commenced my studies in Freiburg in 1963, all that had only just been swept under the carpet, and since then I have often wondered how dismal and distorted our appreciation of literature might have remained had not the

gradually appearing writings of Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School—which was, in effect, a Jewish school for the investigation of bourgeois social and intellectual history—provided an alternative perspective. In my own case, at any rate, without the assistance of Bloch and Benjamin I should scarcely have found my way to Hebel at all through the Heideggerian fog. Now, though, I return time and time again to the *Kalendergeschichten* [Calendar or Almanac Stories], possibly because, as Benjamin also noted, a seal of their perfection is that they are so easy to forget. But it is not just the ethereal and ephemeral nature of Hebel's prose which every few weeks makes me want to check whether the Barber of Segringen and the Tailor of Penza are still there; what always draws me back to Hebel is the completely coincidental fact that my grandfather, whose use of language was in many ways reminiscent of that of the Hausfreund, would every year buy a Kempter Calender [Kempten Almanac], in which he would note, in his indelible pencil, the name days of his relatives and friends, the first frost, the first snowfall, the onset of the Föhn, thunderstorms, hailstorms, and suchlike, and also, on the pages left blank for notes, the occasional recipe for Wermuth or for gentian schnapps. Naturally, by the 1950s the stories in the Kempter Calender—which first appeared in 1773—by authors such as Franz Schrammer-Heimdahl and Else Eberhard-Schobacher, telling of a shepherd lad from the Lechtal or a skeleton discovered in the Bergwald, did not quite live up to the quality of Hebel's own *Kalendergeschichten*, but the basic format of the Almanac had by and large remained the same, and the multiplication tables, the tables for calculating rates of interest, the saints' names beside every date, the Sundays and holy days marked in red, the phases of the moon, the symbols of the planets and signs of the Zodiac, and the Jewish calendar, which strangely enough was still retained even after 1945—all this even today constitutes for me a system in which, as once in my childhood, I would still like to imagine that everything is arranged for the best. For this reason, nowhere do I find the idea of a world in perfect equilibrium more vividly expressed than in what Hebel writes about the cultivation of fruit trees, of the flowering of the wheat, of a bird's nest, or of the different kinds of rain; nowhere more readily grasped than when I observe the way in which, with his unerring moral compass, he differentiates between gratitude and ingratitude, avarice and extravagance, and all the various other vices and frailties mankind is heir to. Against the blind and headlong onrush of history he sets occasions when misfortune endured is recompensed; where every military campaign is followed by a peace treaty, and every puzzle has a solution; and in the book of Nature which Hebel spreads open before us we may observe how even the most curious of creatures, such as the processionary caterpillars and the flying fish, each has its place in the most carefully balanced order. Hebel's wonderful inner certainty is derived, though, less from what he knows about the nature of things than from the contemplation of that which surpasses rational thought. Doubtless his continued observations about the cosmos were intended to give his readers a gentle introduction to the universe, to make it familiar so that they may imagine that on the most distant stars, as they glisten in the night like the lights of a strange town, people like us are sitting in their living rooms at home "and reading the newspaper, or saying their evening prayers, or else are spinning and knitting, or playing a game of trumps, while the young lad is working out a mathematical problem using the rule of three"; and certainly Hebel describes for us the orbits of the planets, noting for our edification how long a cannonball fired in Breisach would take to reach Mars, and speaks of the moon as our most trusted guardian, true household friend, and the first maker of calendars of this

earth; yet his true art lies in the inversion of this perspective encompassing even the furthest stars, when from the point of view of an extraterrestrial being he looks out into the glittering heavens, and from there sees our sun as a tiny star, and the earth not at all, and suddenly no longer knows "that there was a war on in Austria and that the Turks won the siege of Silistria." Ultimately it is this cosmic perspective, and the insights derived from it into our own insignificance, which is the source of the sovereign serenity with which Hebel presides in his stories over the vagaries of human destiny. Such moments of stopping to stare, in pure contemplation, give rise to his most profound inspiration. "Have we not all," he writes, "seen the Milky Way, which encircles the heavens like a broad, floating girdle? It resembles an eternal wreath of mist, shot through by a palely gleaming light. But viewed through an astronomer's lens, this whole cloud of light resolves itself into innumerable tiny stars, as when one gazes out of the window at a mountain and sees nothing but green, yet looking even through an ordinary field-glass one can make out tree upon tree, and leaf upon leaf, and gives up counting altogether." Rational thought is stilled, and the bourgeois instinct—otherwise so favored by Hebel—with its passion for cataloging everything no longer stirs. By often thus abandoning himself to pure contemplation and wonderment, with subtle irony our Hausfreund undermines his own proclaimed omniscience at every turn. Indeed, despite his professional didactic inclinations, he never takes up a central role as preceptor, but always positions himself slightly to one side, in the same manner as ghosts, a number of whom inhabit his stories, who are known for their habit of observing life from their marginal position in silent puzzlement and resignation. Once one has become aware of the way Hebel accompanies his characters as a faithful companion, it is almost possible to read his remarks on the comet which appeared in 1811 as a self-portrait. "Did it not every night," writes Hebel, "appear like a blessing in the evening sky, or like a priest when he walks around the church sprinkling holy water, or, so to speak, like a good and noble friend of the earth who looks back at her wistfully, as if it had wanted to say: I was once an earth like you, full of snow flurries and thunderclouds, hospitals and Rumford's soup kitchens and cemeteries. But my Day of Judgment has passed and has transfigured me in heavenly light, and I would fain come down to you, but I may not, lest I become sullied again by the blood of your battlefields. It did not say that, but it seemed so, for it became ever brighter and more lovely, the nearer it came, more generous and more joyful, and as it moved away it grew pale and melancholy, as if it too took this to heart." Both, the comet and the narrator, draw their train of light across our lives disfigured by violence, observing everything going on below, but from the greatest distance imaginable. The strange constellation, in which sympathy and indifference are elided, is as it were the professional secret of the chronicler, who sometimes covers a whole century on a single page, and yet keeps a watchful eye on even the most insignificant circumstances, who does not speak of poverty in general but describes how back at home the children's nails are blue with hunger, and who senses that there is some unfathomable connection between, for example, the domestic squabbles of a married couple in Swabia and the loss of an entire army in the floodwaters of the Berezina. If the essence of Hebel's epic worldview is the result of a particular disposition and receptiveness of the soul, then the way it is conveyed to the reader, too, has a flavor all its own. "When the French army was encamped across the Rhine after the retreat from Germany": "after she had left Basel by postchaise via the St. Johannistor and had passed the vineyards on the way into the Sundgau": "just as the sun was setting over the mountains in Alsace": in such manner the stories progress. As one

thing follows another, so, very gradually, the narrative unfolds. Nevertheless, the language constantly checks itself, holding itself up in small loops and digressions and molding itself to that which it describes, along the way recuperating as many earthly goods as it possibly can. Hebel's narrative style is characterized further by his intermittent borrowings from dialect, of both vocabulary and word order. "For to count the stars there's not fingers enough in the whole world," it says in the syntax of Baden or Alsace at the beginning of a piece in the "Betrachtungen des Weltgeb[au]des" [Observations concerning the Cosmos], and in the piece about the Great Sanhedrin in Paris we read: "The great Emperor Napoleon accepted this, and in the year 1806, before he began the great journey to Jena, Berlin and Warsaw, and Eylau, he had letters be sent to all the Jews in France that they should from among their midst send him men of sense and learning from all the departments of the Empire." The words are, in this sentence, not set down in accordance with Alemannic usage, but rather follow exactly the word order of Yiddish, which refuses to subordinate itself to the rules of German syntax. This fact alone ought to be enough to refute the primitive Heideggerian thesis of Hebel's rootedness in the native soil of the Heimat. The highly wrought language which Hebel devised especially for his stories in the Almanac makes use of dialect and old-fashioned forms and turns of phrase precisely at those points where the rhythm of the prose demands it, and probably functioned even in his own day more as a distancing effect than as a badge of tribal affiliation. Nor is Hebel's particular fondness for the paratactic conjunctions "and," "or," and "but" necessarily indicative of a homespun na[iv]e[ti]vet[us]: rather, it is precisely the way he deploys these particles which gives rise to some of his most sophisticated effects. Opposed to any hierarchy or subordination, they suggest to the reader in the most unobtrusive way that in the world created and administered by this narrator, everything has an equal right to coexist alongside everything else. The pilgrim promises to bring the landlady of the Baselstab a shell "from the seashore of Ascalon" on his return, or a rose of Jericho. And the journeyman's apprentice from Duttlingen says at the graveside of the merchant from Amsterdam, more to himself than to the latter, "Poor Kannitverstan, what use are all your riches to you now? No more than my poverty will bring me one day: a shroud and a winding-sheet; and of all your lovely flowers a bunch of rosemary perhaps upon your cold breast or a sprig of rue." In these cadences and inflections at the end of a sentence, which mark the profoundest emotional moments in Hebel's prose, it is as if the language turns in upon itself, and we can almost feel the narrator's hand upon our arm. This sense of fraternit[ät] can be realized—far from any thought of actual social equality—only against the horizon of eternity, whose other side is the gold background against which, as Walter Benjamin noted, the chroniclers love to paint their characters. In these seemingly inconclusive final clauses, ending as it were on a half note and trailing away into nothingness, Hebel rises above the concerns and considerations of the world and assumes a vantage point from where, as it says in a note in Jean Paul's Nachla[ss], one can look down on mankind's distant promised land—that home, in fact, where, according to another saying, no one has ever been.

Hebel's cosmographical observations are an attempt, in the clear light of reason, to lift the veil which separates us from the world beyond. Weltfr[ö]mmigkeit [secular piety] and the study of nature take the place of faith and metaphysics. The perfect mechanism of the spheres is, for the Almanac author, proof of the existence of a realm of light which we may

at the last enter upon. Hebel permitted himself no doubts on this matter; indeed, his office clearly precluded such a possibility. But in his dreams-beyond the reach of the controlling authority of consciousness-which for a while he was in the habit of writing down, we find not a few indications that he, too, was prey to troubling fears and insecurities. "I was lying," he notes on the fifth of November 1805, "in my old bedroom in my mother's house. There was an oak tree growing in the middle of the room. The room had no ceiling, and the tree reached up into the rafters. In places the tree was aflame, which was most lovely to look at. Finally the flames reached the uppermost branches and the roof beams began to catch fire. After the fire had been extinguished, a greenish resinlike substance, which later became gelatinous, was found at the seat of the fire, as well as a great number of ugly dirty-green beetles gnawing greedily at it."

Other Books

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Ⓢ Ⓢ Ⓢ Ⓢ Ⓢ . If it is with respect to health care funding we are told there is a formula based on per capita. If a province's population is dropping we are told it is its own tough luck. If it is with respect to equalization we are told there is a ..."