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Sebald in Starbucks

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Sebald in Starbucks

Marfa, Texas. Dry grasslands, desert and mountains. The western corner of Texas wedged between Mexico and New Mexico, where the hot emptiness of the Chihuahuan Desert obliterates the border, keeping the Border Patrol wired and alert. The railroad runs through it; the railroad put it on the map; the railroad is still loading freight from the California coast to the Gulf of Mexico, almost 800 miles across Texas. The trains run through all day and all night, hooting, calling, sometimes a hundred cars long, moving across the high desert. At night the great eyes of the engine lights move east, move west, through the darkness. Under black skies, or moonlit ones.

Marfa is a funny sounding name. Like a child's lisp, or a foreigner who can't get that troublesome English *th* sound. Or like a brand name cobbled together out of two people's names—Marfa Delivery, or Marfa Soap, or Marfa Manufacturing from Marv and Fanny, or Martinez and Farrell. As it happens, this little whistle stop, founded to accommodate the railroad in 1881, was named by a Russian, a woman, a frontier wife brought to the wide views of the Chihuahuan Desert and the long view of the iron rails cutting through it because her husband was a railroad overseer. So, one important thing to know is that in Russian that Cyrillic *f*-sound is perfectly acceptable. A literate woman, reading *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, provided a name for the place from her reading, from the Karamazov family servant, whom nobody remembers, but to whom Dostoevsky gave the name Marfa. And if you think about it, Fyodor has the same problem of the funny lisp.

What seizes the imagination here is the woman reading a recently published novel, something just out from a contemporary writer from home. She was on the other side of the world from Fyodor and his Karamazovs, the dysfunctional relationships, unholy and holy desires, the exploding sentences. Possibly for her it was a link to home, possibly it was a way to while away the long hot days in the desert, a way to defeat the interminable space and the bright eye and lonely hooting of the trains. Did she know that she was reading Russian Literature? Dostoevsky: Isaiah Berlin's great example

of the literary hedgehog; outsider, epileptic, prophet; in 1881, just dead in St. Petersburg; alive in Texas today. She was reading a novel published the previous year and brought along to Marfa, where she, nameless footnote to Manifest Destiny, dropped the simple and rather foolish name of one of its minor characters.

In Marfa for a quiet month of work, I began reading *Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald. I have read other books by this same author, and of course many other books by authors both dead and alive. So many authors are alive in my time with their names before the public but some of them you can read very quickly. Now I am reading this book, also a recently published work of fiction, and I find I am reading very slowly, almost word by word, following its winding sentences and paragraphs, and looking at its strange photographs (all Sebald's books are scattered with photographs, black-and-white snapshots without captions that illustrate not so much the story he is telling as the difference between his precise text and the camera's casual glance), and sometimes going back and rereading pages or looking at how many pages are necessary for one paragraph (25 is not unusual).

I am thinking of Proust, his three-volume monument, that fat French legacy of time and place and simultaneity, while Sebald, this author here, is pulling me through cities and vistas and time, down through layers of narrators (but always reminding me, in the gentlest, most rhythmical way, who is speaking) into his story and around it and behind it. I am moving into the past with him, but like the railway overseer's wife I am also moving into the future, because with this book in my hands I am connected to those who will read this book in the future and know this author's name as part of Literature. My immersion in the mental world of *Austerlitz*, my meaningful now, does not undo the strangeness of this object, bought in a bookstore in Ohio and carried to Texas and then to Massachusetts, where I am now reading it, reading just as I read the other books I have on my desk or by my bed or waiting for me elsewhere in my daily life. Only unlike most of those, I am pretty sure, this book in my mortal hands has the uncanniness of its life in a future when I am long dead.

Sebald himself has recently died, like Proust before him, and Dostoevsky. By doing so he has turned himself into an untimely loss, dead in his fifties, a traffic fatality, an example of the senseless-

ness of things. Sebald writes very quietly of horror and loss, of the sudden incursion of unreality into the real world, of the possible co-existence of all moments of time in the same space. Loss of family, of country, of mind share in his sentences unsensational space with sunlight coming through the feathers of a bird's wings, or a perfectly appointed billiards room left shuttered and untouched for a hundred and fifty years.

In this quiet way, on an unperturbed Monday morning, he is describing for me a Nazi prison in Belgium called Breendonck, and a particularly horrible Nazi torture. I am sitting in Starbucks and the woman at the next table has a drink topped with a mound of whipped cream under a plastic bubble. And music is quietly bubbling, not too loudly to disturb the readers and writers and thinkers at the other little tables. Everything is easy and safe: the friendly guys at the counter, the sweet and pungent coffee smell, the busy brains of Cambridge in here and walking by outside. Across the street the little green box of the ATM kiosk, a corner in a familiar world, unruffled sunlight of late winter. Into all this Sebald, known as Max to his friends when he was alive and writing the words I am reading, brings that other world so gently, in one long sentence, a sentence like a distant line of freight cars across the high grasslands, with the irony only of its unexpected appearance in a passage about a seemingly random memory of the laundry room in the narrator's childhood home, an image connected to the Holocaust only by the fact of its invoking a German word his father liked and he didn't—*Wurzelbürste*, the word for scrubbing brush—but slipping on the soft soap smell of its umlaut into a story of a prisoner at Dachau who, upon his release, left for the jungles of South America, a self-exile that leads the section of the book I am holding to end with three lines of capital A's, *like a long drawn out scream*, says Sebald.

So it becomes afternoon in Cambridge, the sun slipping farther across the street. The outsized Flemish fortress of Breendonck proved a useless defense in the first world war, and again in the second one. Its history and the cruelty practiced therein are an hour further away, as Sebald tells it first in English, and then repeating the original French of another writer's memories, and then giving more details about the intention to put distance between horror and oneself: the green jungle, the painting that repeats and repeats the letter A, the telling over in unwinding sentences of a past now

part of the daily peace of my small city on a Monday. A city full of my own past and my own busy and mysterious brain, so many Mondays thinking and beginning again and drifting in long winding sentences to maybe just the repetition of the capital letter A.

I think his endless unruffled paragraphs show how reading works, how the mind moves from observing swallows in Wales to a cleverly contrived suicide in Halifax to the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, the Border Patrol of time, where they calibrate with instruments as beautiful and mysterious as these sentences. Here in my time (which until recently was also Sebald's) it is my good fortune to be reading this and going into it and being part of it, an early reader, a contemporary reader, a person in its world—as the woman who named Marfa was in the servant Marfa's, and also in Dostoevsky's. That world does not seem to be part of this transient sublunary Starbucks at all, but mine are the nameless hands and eyes and brain it is passing through while all the moments of our lives, Sebald says, are occupying the same space. Time is going through me and all around me and I am sitting in a chair with a book in my hands. Entirely lost but still there, like the wife of the railway overseer, like the Russians in Texas, like the tumbleweed along the tracks and the long hooting of the train in the dark Texas night.