

Out of the past (Dr Henry Selwyn)

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Excerpt

Here is an attempt, away from the writings of others, to write in the sole company of the 1997 Harvill Press paperback edition of W.G Sebald's four illustrated stories *The Emigrants*. (Of course, to write 'alone' is inevitably to write in the wake of texts once read but out of mind). I found myself wanting to write about the story with which the book opens—a short narrative of an encounter with an old man who has taken root in his vast garden. Dr Henry Selwyn seems to be a man without lineage. In distinction from the other three stories, we are shown no family group photographs, no démodé portraits, all the photographs evoke the now of the narrator's present. What follows is an account of my close reading of text and image in Sebald's Dr Henry Selwyn as an effect of the interrelationship between narrative tense and photographic time.

At the end of September 1970, shortly before I took up my position in Norwich, I drove out to Hingham with Clara in search of somewhere to live. For some 25 kilometres the road runs amidst fields and hedgerows, beneath spreading oak trees, past a few scattered hamlets, till at length Hingham appears, its asymmetrical gables, church tower and treetops barely rising above the flatland. The market place, broad and lined with silent façades was deserted [...]

I read the first line of W.G Sebald's story, Dr Henry Selwyn: 'At the end of September 1970, shortly before I took up my position in Norwich, I drove out to Hingham with Clara in search of somewhere to live.' 'September 1970', from where I am in 2010, is a long time ago; and yet it is a time when this reader had already gathered memories (insignificant, undemanding) and photographs. 'At the end of September 1970' with which the story begins takes me back to the kitchen of blue Formica in the late light of an autumn afternoon and the darkening garden around it. While the protagonist drove in search of somewhere to live, I am at home, forty years ago. The 'asymmetrical gables, church tower and treetops' of Hingham recounted describe another place that I remember—no flatland, but mountains, at the foot of which houses gather. Sebald's words on the page conjure up thoughts and images of September 1970, any reader's September 1970, that linger as the flatland of Norfolk takes shape. The protagonist drove out to Hingham, at some point during an irretrievable few days at the end of September 1970: 'For some 25 kilometres the road runs amidst fields and hedgerows, beneath spreading oak trees, past a few scattered hamlets, till at length Hingham appears [...]' I am reminded of Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders driving through a level landscape punctuated by telegraph poles at the beginning of their Voyage to Italy. It is not just the reference to a man and a woman driving through flatlands that brings this sequence from Rossellini's film to mind. It is also and more mysteriously the sudden move from the past to the present tense. As my eyes run along the sentence, as the car slices through level fields, it is upon the ever present tense of the projected image—the past forever actualised in the flicker of 24 frames per second—that my imagination happens. As he narrates bygone events, W.G Sebald effects a classic shift from past to present tense. A moment in the past is thus made more vivid; a car travels, moved onward by the narrative thrust of the sentence. The effect is filmic, life at 24 frames per second. It is late September 1970 and the car brushes past hedgerows, its motor resounding against the old stones of hamlets. Of course this present cannot be sustained, even in this one sentence. We have travelled and the fields and hedgerows recede into the past as we, 'at length' come into Hingham. [...]