

juggling with “richly brocaded” words’ (17); Maugham is not mentioned again in the *Selected Letters* until 1973.)

It is easy to see the attractions *All the Conspirators* held for Larkin. The novel relates the story of a young man named Philip with ambitions to write and paint, who struggles to escape the stifling atmosphere of his bourgeois home and the demands of his day job in the City. Philip’s desire to pursue his vocation as an artist and writer puts him at odds with his manipulative mother and his sister, who attempts her own form of escape through an ill-advised engagement. While Philip’s Kensington home was a long way from Larkin’s upbringing in Coventry, Larkin likely saw aspects of himself in Philip’s difficult family situation, his acute consciousness of his family’s (relative) lack of money, his difficulty combining a writing life with the need to make a living, and his desire to escape a deadening, claustrophobic sense of conformity. At the same time, he might have responded to Isherwood’s scepticism about Philip’s grand gesture, which, at the end of the novel, produces only a hollow victory and no significant work of art.

Many of these concerns are present in ‘Poetry of Departures’, which takes the plot of *All the Conspirators* as its starting point, and sets out the speaker’s reaction to it. Like Isherwood, Larkin is wary of the possible pretentiousness of a dramatic break with everyday life, even as he is obviously attracted to the possibility of leaving behind the world of work and responsibility (a possibility he also explores in ‘Toads’, which appeared immediately before ‘Poetry of Departures’ in *The Less Deceived*). Larkin’s repeated rereadings of *All the Conspirators* must have made even small verbal details of the novel lodge in his memory, to be recalled—probably unconsciously—some time later. There are other echoes of Isherwood’s novel in ‘Poetry of Departures’. ‘We all hate home’ (l. 10) recalls Philip’s mother’s remark that ‘you don’t like your home’ (51). The ‘nut-strewn roads’ (l. 25) recall the ‘lanes scattered with fir-cones and pine-needles’ around a minor country house in the novel (112). The ‘specially-chosen junk’ (l. 13) in the speaker’s room

perhaps recalls Isherwood’s several evocative descriptions of the furniture and objects in Philip’s house (e.g. 42). The poem thus recalls the novel both at the level of its subject matter and at the level of verbal echoes.

Over Christmas 1940, Larkin was pondering a short story. He promised J. B. Sutton that it would be ‘Aldous Huxley of “Two or Three Graces” and “Those Barren Leaves” crossed with the Christopher Isherwood of “All the Conspirators” and “The Memorial”’. Larkin will officiate at the marriage’ (9). He planned to call one of the characters Christopher, as though repaying Isherwood for his novel about a character called Philip. The story came to nothing, but Isherwood’s first novel, which Larkin admired so much, did reappear thirteen years later in ‘Poetry of Departures’.

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W. G. SEBALD AND JOSEPH CONRAD’S ‘SWISS GOVERNESS’

The fifth section of W. G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* opens with the author’s description of having fallen asleep while watching a documentary about Roger Casement on BBC television. On waking, all that Sebald can recall, he reports, is the programme’s opening account of Casement’s meeting with Joseph Conrad in the Congo. Sebald then turns his attention to Conrad, starting with a description of the departure of the young Konrad Korzeniowski, as Conrad was then called, from a stay with his mother on her brother’s estate in 1863. She had been allowed to remain there for three months to recover her health (her tuberculosis was to kill her in 1865) before taking her son to rejoin her husband Apollo in exile. Sebald’s description of the scene includes a reference to ‘ungainly Mlle Durand from Switzerland, the governess who has devoted herself to Konrad’s education all summer with the utmost energy’ and who implores him as he departs with his mother:

'N'oubliez pas ton français, mon chéri!'¹ In Sebald's original German text *Mlle Durand* is described as 'das häßliche Schweizerfräulein Durand'.²

The description is clearly based on Conrad's own recollection of the event in *A Personal Record*, first published as a sequence of essays in *The English Review* in 1908–9 under the title of *Some Reminiscences*, and then in book form as *A Personal Record* in America in 1912 and in Britain in 1916. In this account Conrad recalls:

... the good, ugly Mlle. Durand, the governess, with her black eyebrows meeting over a short thick nose and a complexion like pale brown paper. Of all the eyes turned towards the carriage, her good-natured eyes only were dropping tears, and it was her sobbing voice alone that broke the silence with an appeal to me: '*N'oubliez pas ton français, mon chéri.*' In three months, simply by playing with us, she had taught me not only to speak French but to read it as well. She was indeed an excellent playmate.³

Sebald refers again more indirectly to, we must presume, Mlle Durand, in another collection of essays, *A Place in the Country* (in German *Logis in einem Landhaus*). In the essay 'Death Draws Nigh Time Marches On', subtitled 'Some remarks on Gottfried Keller', Sebald writes: 'Or we need only think of the young unmarried Swiss women, many of whom, as we know from the autobiographical writings of Conrad or Nabokov, could only find positions as governesses or tutors in lands far distant from their home cantons.'⁴

Sebald's claim is justified in the case of Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov's story 'Mademoiselle O' was one of the only two texts Nabokov wrote in French, and according to Jacqueline Hamrit, Mademoiselle O is based on his Swiss-French governess Cécile Miatob, who lived with the Nabokovs in Russia from

1906 to 1913, and who was visited in Lausanne by Nabokov in the early 1920s. Hamrit notes that Nabokov used her as a model in a number of his fictional works in addition to 'Mademoiselle O'.⁵ However, so far as I can ascertain, there is no Swiss governess or tutor either in Conrad's fiction or in his non-fictional writing. Indeed, there is evidence that Mlle Durand was not Swiss, but French. In a letter to Kazimierz Kaszewski of 10 November (OS) / 22 November (NS) 1866, Conrad's father Apollo Korzeniowski, while claiming that he, rather than the governess, taught Conrad French, writes: 'Konradek is another case in point: I taught him French by the same method and every day has brought new progress. The French governess is amazed by his knowledge of French after only one year of lessons.'⁶

Michael Hulse, who has translated three of Sebald's works—*Die Ausgewanderten* (*The Emigrants*), *Die Ringe des Saturn* (*The Rings of Saturn*) and *Schwindel. Gefühle* (*Vertigo*)—has written an informative and extremely thought-provoking account of his discussions with Sebald about translating his work into English, drawing particular attention to the ethical responsibilities of both writer and translator. At the start of his essay Hulse reproduces the report he wrote for the publisher Harvill, recommending that *Die Ausgewanderten* should be translated and published. It includes this telling sentence: 'Behind this stance and style is always the ethical awareness that the act of remembering, of naming and detailing, is the one sure way to show respect to the past'.⁷ Hulse's essay reveals that translating Sebald involved a number of ethical challenges of its own, especially those relating to the inclusion of fictional elements in what are presented as fundamentally factual accounts. A written reply from Sebald to a query from Hulse concedes: 'About the

¹ W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans Michael Hulse (New York, 1999), 106–7.

² W. G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt* (Frankfurt am Main, 2001), 135.

³ Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*, ed. Zdzisław Najder and J. H. Stape (Cambridge, 2008), 66.

⁴ W. G. Sebald, *A Place in the Country*, trans Jo Catling (New York, 2013), 107.

⁵ Jacqueline Hamrit, 'French Echoes in "Mademoiselle O"', *Zembla, The Nabokov Online Journal*, <<https://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/hamrit.htm>>, accessed 10 November 2016. Article published 2006.

⁶ Zdzisław Najder (ed.), Halina Carroll-Najder (trans), *Conrad Under Familial Eyes* (Cambridge, 1983), 107.

⁷ Michael Hulse, 'Englishing Max', in Jo Catling and Richard Hibbit (eds), *Saturn's Moons: W. G. Sebald—a Handbook* (London, 2011), 196.

degree of fictionality in *Die Ausgewanderten*: I quite understand your concern', and he tells his translator that the four stories in the collection 'are, almost entirely, grounded in fact, except that, in the Bereyter story I have added (a very few) touches of Wittgenstein's life as a primary teacher & that the fourth story is a sort of collation of two lives.'⁸

Such ethical challenges accompanied Hulse's translation of *Die Ringe des Saturn* in a somewhat stronger form. Again replying to a query from Hulse, Sebald wrote: 'Over the troublesome business of the quotations (Browne, Conrad etc.) you must have cursed me more than once because of the "unreliable" way in which I deploy them. I often change them quite deliberately. The long quote, for instance, in which Apollo describes Vologda was substantially rewritten by me. I did not have another source'.⁹ Hulse discovered that a passage in the work that the reader was led to assume came from Conrad's 'Congo Diary' was actually taken from a letter written by Conrad to his friend Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham. Hulse makes the following comment on the challenges such mixing of fact and fiction pose:

Two sets of ethics meet at a moment like this. One is the author's: the author makes a decision which balances concerns about aesthetic impact and concerns about answerability to the verifiable facts of historical record. The other is the translator's: the translator makes a decision which balances concerns about fidelity to what his author has written and concerns about answerability to the verifiable facts of historical record. My own instinct is always that whatever exists as a historical document should not be falsified; at the same time, as a translator I believe that in cases of doubt the author has the final say...¹⁰

Hulse provides another example of the clash between these two ethical principles: he had discovered a source for a letter Conrad's father had written to his cousins about his place of exile, Vologda, and altered Sebald's

text so as more accurately to represent what Apollo had actually written. However, 'This return to the authentic utterance of his sources was not, of course, what Max wanted', and the published English version accordingly 'restored the contours of his German rewriting of Apollo's letter'.¹¹ The issue of Mlle Durand's nationality was not discussed by author and translator.¹²

Was Sebald's description of Mlle Durand as a 'Schweizerfräulein' another deliberate fictionalizing of the historical record—or was it merely a mistake on Sebald's part? If it was a deliberate addition to what Conrad wrote in *A Personal Record*, what aesthetic purpose could such a change achieve? In *A Place in the Country* the fiction perhaps allows Sebald to yoke together the accounts of Nabokov and Conrad in order to give greater force to the claim that so many young unmarried Swiss women were forced to seek employment abroad. But this can hardly explain the fiction that is also a falsehood in *The Rings of Saturn*.

In 1924 Conrad's erstwhile friend Ford Madox Ford rushed out a memoir of Conrad. Such was Ford's speed of composition that the book was completed on 5 October 1924, only two months after Conrad's death on 3 August of the same year, and it was published in early November. Among the anecdotes concerning Ford's interaction with Conrad is an account of Ford (then Ford Madox Hueffer) waiting in Bruges to be joined by the Conrads at the end of July 1900. In a humorous account of the complex negotiations between the two writers about the impending visit of the Conrads, given in the form of half-sentences separated by ellipses, Ford writes: 'The French-Swiss governess, indispensable, declared she would not stop another day in Bruges. . . . Little boys calling her *Sale Anglaise* had thrown ink over her pink striped, best dimity dress. . . .'¹³ Ford's memoir is not included in the catalogue of books contained in Sebald's library compiled

¹¹ Hulse, 'Englishing Max', 201. Max is the name by which Sebald was known to friends and acquaintances.

¹² Personal communication from Michael Hulse.

¹³ Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (London, 1924), 224 (ellipses in original).

⁸ Hulse, 'Englishing Max', 198.

⁹ Hulse, 'Englishing Max', 199–200.

¹⁰ Hulse, 'Englishing Max', 204.

by Jo Catling.¹⁴ But it is not impossible that Sebald nevertheless read or dipped into the account and conflated Ford's reference to the Ford family's French-Swiss governess with Conrad's account of Mlle Durand.

Sebald is a writer with limited respect for rigid generic boundaries and conventions. The publisher of the paperback edition of *Vertigo* felt the need to open the back-cover description of the book with the words 'Part fiction, part travelogue'.¹⁵ The avowedly fictional *Austerlitz* includes reproductions of historical photographs and documents, including stills from a Nazi-produced film of the Theresienstadt extermination camp that show actual inmates of the camp, identified in Sebald's text as characters in the novel.¹⁶ Disturbing though this use of photographs of the victims of the Nazis in a work of fiction may be, it is not likely to confuse the reader. But in a book that appears to conform to the genre of 'non-fiction essay collection' such as *The Rings of Saturn*, the inclusion of fictional—or at least in some sense untrue—information may very well mislead the reader.

Had Sebald been a writer with the reputation of never knowingly altering the historical record, then we would be looking to find out how he had mistakenly got the idea that Mlle Durand was Swiss, and considering the possibility that—for example—a reading of Ford's account might lie behind the misconception. But the problem with crying wolf too often is that eventually no one can be quite sure whether you have actually seen a wolf, whether you mistakenly believe that you have seen one, or whether you are pretending to have seen one. Likewise, if an author gets the reputation of having a cavalier attitude towards what Hulse calls the 'historical record', then this will weaken the sense readers have that real-world facts and issues are being dealt with in a given text. And this in turn may undermine the aesthetic effect that

the author aimed at in tweaking the historical record in the first place.

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AL PURDY'S LIBRARY: A BIOGRAPHICAL RESOURCE

Although his works remain comparatively unknown outside Canada, the poet Al Purdy (1918–2000) was an exceptionally prominent, and even notorious, figure in Canadian letters from the 1960s until his death. Beyond his country's borders he is perhaps best known for his epistolary friendship with the American writer Charles Bukowski.¹ Purdy's final gathering of poems, *Beyond Remembering*, was published shortly after he died; it is a landmark in Canadian poetry.² He addressed a great range of topics in his works, but despite their variety his poems are typically (and not always unjustly) understood to explore aspects of Canadian identity and experience: he was acutely concerned with history, politics, cultural affairs, and the myths of nationhood, which he was as likely to deflate as to uphold. The witty assessment of his fellow-poet George Bowering—'Al Purdy is the world's most Canadian poet'³—carries an essential truth, and studies of Purdy's career have made a recurring subject of the poetry's national (and nationalist) dimensions in their celebratory and condemnatory manifestations alike.⁴

¹ See Charles Bukowski and Al Purdy, *The Bukowski/Purdy Letters: A Decade of Dialogue 1964–1974*, edited by Seamus Cooney (Sutton West, ON, 1983). Bukowski is cast as 'the American Céline' and Purdy as a 'lustful, tough guised bard' (115, 117).

² Al Purdy, *Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*, edited by Purdy and Sam Solecki (Madeira Park, BC, 2000).

³ George Bowering, *Al Purdy* (Toronto, 1970), 1.

⁴ The most comprehensive account to date of Purdy's works is Sam Solecki, *The Last Canadian Poet: An Essay on Al Purdy* (Toronto, 1999).

¹⁴ Jo Catling, 'A Catalogue of W. G. Sebald's Library', in Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (eds), *Saturn's Moons: W. G. Sebald—A Handbook* (London, 2011), 377–441.

¹⁵ W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans Michael Hulse (London, 2002).

¹⁶ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans Anthea Bell (London, 2002), 351.