

AFTER SEBALD

In Autumn 2008, I was in Berlin. The German critic I met there gave me a book as a present. The writer's name was one I'd never heard before, and the title was *Nach Der Natur* (*After Nature*).

Whoever closes the wings
of the altar in the Lindenhardt
parish church and locks up
the carved figures in their casing
on the lefthand panel
will be met by St. George.

린덴하르트 제단화
양쪽 날개문을 닫아
본체 나무조각상 인물들을
단 속에 가두면
왼쪽 날개문 위에 그려진
성 게오르그가 나타난다

I'd never seen an altar; I wasn't entirely sure what one was. From the very first sentence, then, I was confused. To understand that first sentence I would have had to know about the structure of the altarpiece, the way it had doors that opened on both sides like wings, and the pictures that were painted there. And besides, who was this St. George? I'm not a Christian. I loved German literature, loved it to the point of translating some of it, but still the episodes from the lives of the saints, the Biblical world which sometimes appeared in it, proved a stumbling block.

With that first page open in front of me, I sighed to the German critic "I can't understand it properly." I was grateful to him for having introduced me to top-quality German literature every time I went to Berlin, but it seemed obvious that this particular work wasn't right for me. But there and then, in the face of my complaints, he folded the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* he happened to be holding into three to demonstrate the winged structure of the altar. He also explained that the wings would have paintings on their front and back panels. As I stood there listening to his explanation, that first part of *After Nature* suddenly made sense.

"You'll come to like this writer," he said. "Perhaps you'll even introduce him to Koreans. By translating this book, that is."

"I can't see that happening," I replied, "even if the book does take my fancy. Right now I'm still a novice when it comes to translation. German literature's something I've only just started to tackle, and besides, the themes this writer deals with are far too European – I can tell that from the off. It wouldn't be easy to find a Korean publisher who'd bring out a book like this."

But now I know. He was right, and I was wrong.

It was *After Nature* that got me hooked on Sebald. I opened the wings of the altarpiece that was Sebald himself and entered the world I found there, that world that had initially seemed as inscrutable as the man. Even now, it seems as though I've forgotten to go back to the world I'd known before. I discovered that for certain people, time is divided into Before Sebald and After Sebald.

After I went to Germany for the first time in 2001 and started learning German, I spent a long time wandering in search of something. I can't say for sure quite what that thing was. I wanted to learn the language through its literature, and in order to do that I wanted to find suitable German writers. Of course, the likes of Kafka and Peter Handke were old favourites of mine, but they weren't enough. What I needed was a writer I hadn't encountered before, so that my first experience

of their writing would be in German, the language I'd only just begun to learn. I wanted to revel in the beauty of literature at the same time as enjoying a certain linguistic alienation, reading slowly and clumsily in an unfamiliar language estranged from my mother tongue. I was already yearning for the kind of writer I would come to love through such a process. But it wasn't easy. I'm a reader as much as a writer yet, unfortunately, there hadn't been that many cases where it was really the writer themselves, the particular style or worldview that persisted across their oeuvre, and not just the individual work, that captured my imagination. As a reader I was aware of what a great stroke of luck would be needed for this to happen.

The one who taught me as I was then to go 'wild' over their own particular way of perceiving and examining the world, their idiosyncratic language, was Sebald. Reading Sebald was different from reading other writers. Once I'd grasped that first sentence, he quickly sucked me in. How to describe the feeling I had after finishing *After Nature*? All I can say is that it was the moment that marked a transition in my life as a lover of literature, from Before Sebald to After Sebald.

On my return to Korea, I heard the news that translations of Sebald's *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants* were going to be published. A while later, a translation of *The Rings of Saturn* was also brought out. To tie in with that, the publisher hosted a reading attended by Korean Sebaldians, to which I was invited as a panellist. This was because, since coming back to Korea, I'd been taking every opportunity I could to introduce Sebald and his writing in various magazines, and through other media.

Of course, I wanted to be Sebald's translator. I wanted it with a passion. But, given that the books that were considered his representative works had almost all been translated already, and the fact that I was not the only Korean translator of German literature, I couldn't hold out any great hope for my dream to come true. Then one day I received a phone call from a publisher asking if I would be able to translate *Vertigo* and *After Nature*. Perhaps no one else can fully understand the access of joy that convulsed my heart just then. After all, Sebald hadn't left all that many books behind, and there was no longer the prospect of any new writing. To me, then, those two books, the only ones that hadn't yet been translated into Korean, were the greatest gift in the world. They were even ones which I felt especially attached to; *Vertigo* was my favourite of his non-fictional works, and *After Nature* was, of course, the very first of his I'd read.

You'll end up liking this writer. And perhaps you'll even end up translating him yourself. The German literary critic who'd said this to me departed this world a few months after making me a present of that first Sebald. He wasn't able to see how I became the most fanatical Sebaldian in Korea, and also, eventually, one of his translators. And of course, he also can't know that now, in 2014, I'm here in Sebald's city of Norwich. He will only remember me grumbling about the concept of the altar being tricky, insisting that the detailed descriptions of European art would make this writer feel too alien for Korean readers. In other words, he has no inkling that his gift, *After Nature*, opened such a large door for me. That fact still pains me, even today.

My friend Karin who lives in Munich told me that she met Sebald at a reading there in the late 90s. Not only did she get to listen to him read, she also tagged along when the event was over and Sebald and the other writers headed off to a cafe. As if that wasn't enough, it then transpired that the hotel he was staying at was in the same direction as her home, and the two of them ended the night walking side-by-side through Munich's silent streets. Side-by-side with Sebald!

Listening to that story filled me with envy, and jealousy, which was even worse. And so I pestered Karin with question after question: What sort of person was he? What sort of man? What did the two of you talk about? Had it been me instead of Karin walking by his side that night, what would I have said? Would my German have proved sufficient for me to be able to express my feelings properly? But no, of course, there would have been no need for such explicit communication, no need to put it into words. I'm happy just to have had the opportunity to write

this short piece, which is perhaps a kind of letter to him.

There's a dream I have. Once *Vertigo* and *After Nature* are published in Korea, I want to arrange a small event, a night of reading Sebald. Already, I've been getting together informally with various people who identify as Sebaldians, some I got to know in person and some through Facebook, and reading from his works as just that, readers, irrespective of whether we are also writers or literary critics. Rather than having an event affiliated with a publishing house or other organisation, I want 'After Sebald' to be an informal, independent night of readings run by readers and for readers. I will be there as a reader too, and have the opportunity to read some of my favourite passages from *Campo Santo* or *Vertigo*.

A while ago, reading a book by another writer I love, Fernando Pessoa, I came across the following passage: "One of my life's greatest tragedies is to have already read *The Pickwick Papers*. Because I can't go back and read them for the first time." I would like to appropriate Pessoa's formulation for myself, thus: "One of my life's greatest tragedies is to have already read Sebald. Because I can't go back and read him for the first time."