

## A FINAL POEM

—  
*W.G. Sebald*  
—

*The first translation of a last masterpiece.*

### MARIENBAD ELEGY

In my mind I can see  
how through the run  
of the three rooms facing  
south-west  
he paced in his cinnamon-  
coloured frock coat, pondering

diverse things, for instance  
his plan for a  
treatise on cloud formations  
long entertained, but a  
little distrait  
at the same time &

scatterbrained because  
of his passion for  
Ulrike that has brought him  
for the third time now  
to this newly  
aspiring resort. He looks

out of the window at  
the little globular trees  
set equidistant around  
the space in front of  
the Kebelsberg Palais,  
sees a gardener pushing

a wheelbarrow uphill, a  
 pair of blackbirds on the lawn.  
 Overnight he slept  
 badly in his narrow  
 bed, like a beetle  
 he felt or some other

weird creature, till,  
 outside, day stirred its  
 wings & he could rise  
 to continue his work.  
 But now, it's true,  
 he would much rather

lie down again, but  
 very soon now  
 there will be the call  
 to luncheon. A pike  
 perhaps could be served, then  
 veal scallops & last

a jelly of forest fruit.  
 Cooking is something the  
 Bohemians know about: the  
 yeast buns at morning coffee  
 were quite excellent &  
 the dearest of beings seemed

so gently & tenderly  
 textured, so well disposed  
 to him, that he almost  
 melted away in an upsurge of  
 hopeful desire, felt his heartbeat  
 throb in his throat.

In that manner, then,  
 things take their course. He  
 fixes a long gaze  
 into her eyes & turns

the finely embroidered  
napkin cover once

to the left, once to  
the right. When the mother  
hesitantly responds  
to his request  
for her daughter's hand,  
darkened he sets off

after the last cruelly  
sweet kiss through the  
mountains & in the very coach  
writes that famous three  
and twenty-stanza  
elegy of which,

drawing on his  
own words, they say  
that it sprang from  
a tempestuous emotion  
& was the most mature  
creation of his old age.

But to me it  
wasn't quite likeable,  
this masterly weft  
of interlaced loves  
which on his homecoming  
the poet proceeds

to copy in his  
most elegant  
script and with his own  
hand bound in a casing  
of red morocco &  
a silk ribbon

round it. Of that

this morning I saw  
 a facsimile in  
 the Marienbad Museum  
 beside a few  
 other objects which

meant much more to me  
 & among which  
 there was a wick trimmer  
 & a sealing-wax dish,  
 a little waste tray of  
 papier maché & a pen-

drawing of Ulrike's on  
 carton, the perspective  
 a little shaky, depicting  
 the North Bohemian place  
 Trebivlice, where she  
 lived unmarried up to

the time of her death. Also  
 the China-yellow leaf of  
 a tulip-tree from her herbarium  
 inscribed in dark ink across  
 the thin veins, as well as  
 a sad remnant

of black lace, called  
*krajky* in Czech,  
 a beautiful name,  
 a sort of neckband or  
 cravat & two cuffs  
 resembling wristlets &

so tight that the  
 wrist could not  
 have been much stronger  
 than that of a small  
 child. And then there

is a steel engraving

showing Fräulein von  
Lewetzow towards the  
end of her life.

The one who wooed her then  
has long been lying  
under the soil & she

stands in a heavy  
taffeta frock next to  
a book table with  
a horrible coiffure of  
cork-like curls & a  
ghostly-white face.

*Dated 14 viii 1999*

*Translated, from the German, by Michael Hamburger. The German original of this poem, "Marienbad Elegie," has not yet been published.*

*W.G. Sebald was the author of two volumes of poetry and five prose works. The last volume to appear in English was The Natural History of Destruction (Hamish Hamilton, 2003). He died in a car crash in East Anglia in December 2001.*