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## Exploring the Edge of Trauma in W.G. Sebald's Novel *Austerlitz*

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In an article he wrote for *The Guardian* titled “The Last Word,” Winfried Georg Sebald, known as W. G. Sebald, declared that “The moral backbone of literature is about the whole question of memory...Memory, even if you repress it, will come back at you and shape your life. Without memories there wouldn't be any writing.”<sup>1</sup> Loyal to this line of thought, Sebald steered his whole literary career towards negotiating a balance between literature and cultural memory, in particular traumatic recollections of genocide, war and destruction. In his last novel symbolically entitled *Austerlitz*, Sebald thematised world war two and the Holocaust, which he referred to elsewhere as “the head of the Medusa: you carry it with you in a sack, but if you looked at it you'd be petrified.”<sup>2</sup> In *Austerlitz*, he relates the story of a child survivor of the Holocaust who does exactly that: he shuns the stare of the Medusa until forced by circumstances to indirectly explore and accommodate a personal history he has enormous trouble to appropriate. It is the story of a deeply traumatised identity trapped between repressed personal memories and the immanent collective memory.

Sebald was inspired to write this novel after watching the documentary *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport* broadcast on Channel 4 in England in 2000, which focused on Susie Bechhofer's middle age recollections of her trip to Wales during WWII. Like many other Jewish children evacuated from Austria, Germany, and Czechoslovakia, she herself had boarded a train headed to Britain, leaving behind a family whom she would never be reunited with again. With the mutual agreement of the German and

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<sup>1</sup>Maya Jaggi, ‘The Last Word.’ Interview with W.G. Sebald, *The Guardian*, 21 December 2001.

<sup>2</sup>Maya Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’, *The Guardian*, 22 September 2001.

British governments, 10,000 children were thus saved between November 1938 and September 1939.<sup>1</sup>

Sebald approached Susie's real life story at an angle, though, creating Jacques Austerlitz as a character whose life story only tangentially reflects on the original. Back in 1939, at the age of 4, Austerlitz parted with his mother in Prague, boarding a train that would take him across Germany to Belgium and Holland, then by ship over the English channel to Wales in Britain. There he is adopted by a dour Welsh couple of fundamentalist Calvinist faith, leading a strict life dominated by silence and closure,<sup>2</sup> both literal and figurative, in a little country town in Bala. His past is completely erased when they take his backpack away—the only link to his previous life, then change his name to Dafydd Elias and raise him in complete oblivion of his roots and circumstances of his refuge to Britain. As Sebald declares later in a conversation with Christopher Bigsby, “there you have a situation of someone who has been deprived, by active intervention or default, of any knowledge of his own origins and who later resolves not to investigate his own case.”<sup>3</sup> As Austerlitz himself confessed to the imaginary narrator in the novel, his knowledge of European history ended with the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As for his self-knowledge, he explains:

Since my childhood and youth [...] I have never known who I really was. From where I stand now, of course, I can see that my name alone, and the fact that it was kept from me until my fifteenth year, ought to have put me on the track of my origins, but it has also become clear to me of late why an agency greater than or superior to my own capacity for thought, which circumspectly directs operations somewhere in my brain, has always preserved me from my own secret, systematically preventing me from drawing the obvious conclusions and embarking on the enquiries they would have suggested to me. It hasn't been easy to make my way out of my own inhibitions, and it will not be easy to put the story into anything like proper order. (AUS 60-1)

It is only late in life that Jacques Austerlitz, now an architectural historian at the end of his career, feels prompted to deal with the crisis of non-identity and to revisit a suppressed past that plagued him for many years. His travels take him around Europe for more or less purposeful observation of

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher Bigsby, *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust. The Chain of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 69.

<sup>2</sup>Austerlitz recalls the first few days after being shipped to Wales as being “in some kind of captivity. Only recently have I recalled how oppressed I felt, in all the time I spent with the Eliases, by the fact that they never opened a window [...] I remember how one of the two windows of my bedroom was walled up on the inside. And just as cold reigned in the house in Bala, so did silence.” (*Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell, London: Penguin Books, 2001, pp. 62-3). All quotations refer back to this edition.

<sup>3</sup>Christopher Bigsby, ed., *Writers in Conversation with Christopher Bigsby* (Norwich, 2001), vol. II, pp. 162-3.

archeological ruins and architectural wonders (like the train stations of Antwerpen and Luzern, the fortifications of Breendonk and Willebroek, the streets of London, the Palace of Justice in Brussels, etc.), and these peregrinations occasion the many chance encounters and conversations with “the narrator” who engages in telling the protagonist’s story. It is precisely the story of an archeological site—i.e., the fortress of Breendonk in Belgium—that triggers in Austerlitz the possibility of recollection, through its association with both world wars, and the torture of Jean Améry and Novelli by the Nazis. It is, as Sebald himself explains, a case of localised memory or of memory embedded, situated or invested in places: “Places seem to have some kind of memory, in that they activate memory in those who look at them.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the sight of the four hundred skeletons discovered after excavations during demolition work at the Broad Street Station in London in 1984 present Austerlitz with the possibility of recovering or “disinterring”<sup>2</sup> not only remnants reminiscent of collective memory, but his own past: “I felt at this time as if the dead were returning from exile and filling the twilight around me with their strangely slow but incessant to and fro-ing.” (AUS 188)

Simultaneously, though, Austerlitz constantly activates fierce mechanisms of denial and refines his defensive responses against remembering: “Inconceivable as it seems to me today, I knew nothing about the conquest of Europe by the Germans and the slave state they set up, and nothing about the persecution I had escaped [...] I did not read newspapers because I feared unwelcome revelations.” (AUS 197-8) To compensate, his formation as a scholar helps him accumulate professional knowledge towards building “a substitute or compensatory memory,” (AUS 198) a mere prosthesis to make up for the latent, crippled childhood memory. Yet, just like many of the ruins and disintegrated structures he observes around Europe (the fortifications of Willebroek in Lithuania, or Breendonk in Belgium, etc.), his own defensive walls are due to collapse:

this censorship of the mind, the constant suppression of the memories surfacing in me [...] demanded ever greater efforts and finally, and unavoidably, led to the almost paralysis of my linguistic faculties, the destruction of all my notes and sketches, my endless nocturnal peregrinations through London, and the hallucinations which plagued me with increasing frequency up to the point of my nervous breakdown in the summer of 1992. (AUS 198)

It is in an antiquarian bookseller’s place (a significant location) that he gets the first ever glimpse of the memories that he has been suppressing all these years. His memories spring a leak when he accidentally hears a radio programme in which two ladies recall the story of their arrival in England as children on a special transport in 1939:

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<sup>1</sup>Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’.

<sup>2</sup>Bigsby, *idem*, p. 73.

They mentioned a number of cities-Vienna, Munich, Danzig, Bratislava, Berlin—but only when one of the couple said that her own transport, after two days traveling through the German Reich and the Netherlands [...] had finally left the Hook of Holland on the ferry *Prague* to cross the North Sea to Harwich, only then did I know beyond any doubt that these fragments of history were part of my own life, as well. (AUS 200)

This transfer of group memory onto an individual has in Austerlitz's case a tremendous impact, since the momentous discovery prompts him to retrace the train trip back to his native Prague from London (via Germany) and thus attempt to undo the partially self-inflicted psychological damage. The idea of the train as symbol intrinsic to Holocaust memory is clearly pointed out by Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*: “at the beginning of the memory sequence, stands the train... There is not a diary or story, among our many such accounts, in which the train does not appear.”<sup>1</sup> The map of his estrangement as a child refugee on a Kindertransport during WWII is now reconstructed step by step, with a double anti-climax in Prague and Paris, two urban spaces still imbued with trauma, where he tracks down elements of his parents' incomplete story of deportation and death at the Nazis' hand.

In Prague, Austerlitz visits the archives and meets his long lost nanny Vera who recognises him after many years and helps him reconstruct his parents' undocumented stories: following the Jews' oppression and the passing on of the Jewish laws, his Dad Maximilian had left for Paris and waited for both Austerlitz and his mother Agáta to come and meet him there; yet Agáta had waited too long and never made it, ending up in the Jews' roundup and sent to Theresienstadt instead. Following in his mother's footsteps, Austerlitz sets foot in Terezín, the former Nazi concentration camp also known as “a limbo en route to annihilation where people had been held, living out a parody of normal life.”<sup>2</sup> In ghetto museum at Terezín he is faced with a solid proof of the Nazi corruption of memory while watching a fabricated documentary taken for the sake of a visiting Red Cross team. The video is meant to show the world a forcefully humanised image of Teresín, but the falsity of the attempt, along with the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, is revealed to Austerlitz when he rewinds the tape and plays it backwards: “Strangest of all, however, said Austerlitz, was the transformation of sounds in this slow-motion version,” (AUS 348) where the polka by some Austrian operetta and the can-can from *La Vie parisienne* and the scherzo from Medelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* “moved in a kind of subterranean world, through the most nightmarish depths [...] to which no human voice has ever descended.” (AUS 349) Rewinding the tape, he identifies Agáta, who seems to him “both strange and familiar” (AUS 351) and later recovers a photo of hers from the Prague theatrical archives in the Celetna, where she had professed as an opera singer. This is as close as Austerlitz comes to the memory of his dead mother.

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<sup>1</sup>Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London, 1988), p. 85.

<sup>2</sup>Biggsby, idem, p. 76.

From Prague, Austerlitz travels to Paris, aware of the fact that “he did not belong in this city, either, or indeed anywhere else in the world,” (AUS 354) but convinced that “we also have appointments in the past [...] and must go there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time.” (AUS 360) There is an inexorable connection between space and time, the living and the dead, history and memory in Sebald's prose: “The border between life and death is less impermeable than we commonly think.” (AUS 395) In fact, the boundaries of time are deleted. The real boundaries are those between comprehension and incomprehension, which Austerlitz tackles along the self-discovery track: “there was no transition, only this dividing line, with ordinary life on one side and its unimaginable opposite on the other.” (AUS 414)

After several fainting fits and “temporary, but complete loss of memory, a condition described in psychiatric books [...] as hysterical epilepsy,” (AUS 374) Austerlitz reaches Paris, Gare d'Austerlitz and the National Library, both places bringing him closer to awareness of his father's fate. As the narrator of the story remembers,

when I met Austerlitz [...] on the boulevard Auguste Blanqui, [...] he told me that the previous day he had heard, from one of the staff at the records centre in the rue Geoffroy-l'Asnier, that Maximilian Aychenwald [his father] had been interned during the latter part of 1942 in the camps at Gurs, a place in the Pyrenean foothills which he, Austerlitz, must now seek out. (AUS 404)

And so Gare d'Austerlitz in Paris is the uncanny place where memory and premonition, past and present, father and son, meet in an imaginary encounter. Captured by the Nazis in Paris, his father would have embarked here on his journey into the unknown:

I imagined, said Austerlitz, that I saw him leaning out the window of his compartment as the train left [...] That station [...] has always seemed to me the most mysterious of all the railway terminals in Paris. I spent many hours in it during my student days, and even wrote a memorandum on its layout and history [...] And I also remember that I felt an uneasiness induced by the hall behind this façade [...] where, on a platform roughly assembled out of beams and boards, there stood a scaffolding reminiscent of a gallows with all kinds of rusty iron hooks [...] perhaps because of the plucked pigeon feathers lying all over the floor boards, an impression forced itself upon me of being on the scene of an expiated crime. (AUS 405-7)

Yet Gare d'Austerlitz is not the only place where the layers of time and history are superimposed. The fortress of Breendonk's transformation from a colossal architectural structure of defense into a Nazi prison camp and later a museum of the Belgian resistance brings evidence to the multiple, and often

contradictory, histories embedded in ruins. Similarly, the dysfunctional Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris served once as massive warehouse for the expropriated possessions of Parisian Jews. These sites of memory show how “the past [particularly the traumatic past] intrudes upon the present” and can therefore never “be covered up indefinitely.”<sup>1</sup> Sebald suggests that the past is illusive and hides both histories and counter-histories, which archeology brings to the surface in the service of historical truth.

As Francois Mauriac remembers in the foreword to Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, the Gare d’Austerlitz was also a transition point for the Kindertransporte to Britain. The indelible memory of this sorrowful location marks for Mauriac a turning point: “nothing I had seen during those sombre years had left so deep a mark upon me as those trainloads of Jewish children standing at Austerlitz station... I believe that on that day I touched for the first time upon the mystery of iniquity whose revelation was to mark the end of an era and the beginning of another.”<sup>2</sup>

For Jacques Austerlitz, however, this spot in history and time is neither a terminus, nor a departure point, but a site of continuous, unresolved trauma. His story, steeped in the myriad layered stories of dislocation and disruption of wartime Europe, cannot reach definite closure and remains subject to incompleteness, premonition and supposition. Lacking concluding evidence and rational cohesiveness, the archeology of his personal story is “not a narrative, but an instantaneous accumulation of debris [...] building ever higher,”<sup>3</sup> a mere collection of fragmented data that undermine his project of reconciliation with the past. With both parents lost a second time and he himself wandering for further traces of their (in)existence, Austerlitz remains a nomadic hybrid of cultures and languages, a tragic figure whose failed attempts at breaking the boundaries of memory and trauma epitomise the struggle of man confronted with the barbaric violence of history.

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<sup>1</sup>Karin Bauer, ‘The Dystopian Entwinement of Histories and Identities in W.G Sebald’s *Austerlitz*’ in Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (eds), *W.G.Sebald. History-Memory-Trauma* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), p. 250.

<sup>2</sup>Elie Wiesel, *The Night Trilogy* (New York, 1990), p. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup>Bigsby, idem, p. 78.

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