

TRAUMA OBSCURA REVEALED:
REVISITING LOSS IN W. G. SEBALD'S
AUSTERLITZ

CATALINA BOTEZ

This summit of the abyss, memory.
—Blanchot 1993, 317

W. G. Sebald's "transfictional"¹ work *Austerlitz*² digs deeply at the roots of traumatic memory, which it explores in all its complex guises: from individual and cultural to architectural, archival, and technological³ memories. Also remarkable is the nuanced engagement with counter-memories of various European people and the complex treatment of

¹The term "transfiction" was coined by S. Clingman in *The Grammar of Identity* and it mainly refers to the overlapping of genres in Sebald's *Austerlitz*, to the "mixed modes" of "image and text, but even within the text the combination of history, memoir, fiction, journal, travelogues, catalogue, research - every available form... It is itself a migrant form... a syntactic form, a metonymic form, a navigational form" (Clingman 2009, 187-8).

²The protagonist's name, along with the title of the novel, alludes to one of Napoleon's resounding victories. As Sebald declares in an interview, "*Napoleon und alles Napoleonische taucht in fast allen meinen Büchern auf, als historisches Paradigma, das etwas mit der Europa-Idee zu tun hat, die damals erstmals auf branchiale Weise durchexerziert wurde*". The interesting fact is that 130 years later Germany tried to establish their own hegemonic empire using the same methods, beginning with Wilhelm II up until 1939/40/41 when the map of Europe consisted mainly of Germany and its satellites. (Doerry and Hage 2001, 230) This comparative historical approach makes sense particularly in view of the more recent studies on the Holocaust and multidirectional memory, as explained by M. Rothberg in the introductory chapter to his book of the same title (Rothberg 2009, 1-33). B. A. Kaplan's *Landscapes of Holocaust Postmemory* also clarifies how "expanded 'postmemory' articulates the reach of the Holocaust across diverse eras, genres and geographies", thus paying tribute to M. Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory (Kaplan 2011, 5).

³i.e. photographs and video-recordings.

historic events. Essentially, its narrative texture is built upon repressed and occasionally resurfacing memories. In its beauty that is monolithic and fluid at the same time, this work is a narrative testimony to the post-mnemonic⁴ and post-traumatic⁵ effort of recuperating and comprehending identity in the face of the destructive force of war and genocide.

In this essay I enquire into the ways in which (post-)memory and history feature as traumatic loci in Sebald's text and how they help trace the cause of lost identity. I also investigate the role of traumatic photography and film in the event of failed memory retrieval. I will also show how the photographic medium itself is affected by trauma in the form of repetition compulsion and a constant return to the sites of incomplete memory. Finally, I shall examine the ways in which the limits of the remembrance and representation of Holocaust trauma are probed in a challenging text that resists classification precisely through its structural and stylistic resemblance to the very mechanisms of trauma.⁶

⁴The postmnemonic effort I refer to is the manifestation of what Marianne Hirsch dubs "postmemory", with reference to second-generation Holocaust survivors; it's a mediated form of intergenerational trauma and knowledge "not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation". It is, Hirsch adds, a mass of "overwhelming inherited memories [...] that defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" and thus extend into the present (Hirsch 2008, 107). Postmemory, she avers, "reactivate[s] and reembody[ies] more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression" (Hirsch 2008, 111).

⁵Trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, is "a wound inflicted not upon the body, but upon the mind [...] experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. [...] so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature [...] returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 1996, 3-4).

⁶Susannah Radstone addresses this issue by reinforcing Shoshana Felman's interpretation of Adorno's famous dictum regarding the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz, which she calls "the founding equivocation of post-holocaust memory": "The near annihilation of the entire European Jewry certainly constituted the near-annihilation of Jewish memory. The traumatic impact of the Holocaust has also been linked to the impossibility of both representation and remembrance. Yet [...] it [poetry] must write 'through' its own impossibility" (Felman 1992, 34). If the entire field of representation was contaminated by this event whose incommensurability precluded adequate representation, then art was the only—albeit *apparently* impossible—hope (Radstone 2000, 5-6).

In an article he wrote for *The Guardian* entitled “The Last Word”, 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. (Jaggi 2001)

But what is it about writing traumatic memory that makes it a fictional theme? As Sebald seems to suggest, it is precisely this mixture of lived reality, psychological makeup, affect and imagination that stands at the roots of literature, the mission of which is to process and reduce a friction, as he describes below:

It is a characteristic of our species, in evolutionary terms, that we are a species in despair, for a number of reasons. Because we have created an environment for us which isn't what it should be. And we're out of our depth all the time. We're living exactly on the borderline between the natural world from which we are being driven out...and that other world which is generated by our brain cells. And so clearly that fault line runs right through our physical and emotional makeup. And probably where these tectonic plates rub against each other is where the sources of pain are. Memory is one of those phenomena. It's what qualifies us as emotional creatures, psychozoologica or whatever one might describe them. And I think there is no way we can escape it. The only thing that you can do, and that most people seem to be able to do very successfully, is to subdue it. (Schwartz 2010, 56)

Loyal to this line of thought, Sebald steers his whole literary career towards negotiating a balance between literature and memory, and in particular the traumatic recollections and re-articulations of genocide, war and destruction. In his last novel symbolically entitled *Austerlitz* (2001), Sebald focuses on the catastrophic effects of World War Two and the Holocaust on individual and collective memory, which he refers 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” (Jaggi 2001). *Austerlitz* 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 explore and accommodate an unlined experience he has enormous trouble to appropriate. It is the story of a deeply traumatised self trapped between repressed or absent personal memories, on the one hand, and an immanent collective memory, on the other.⁷

⁷ Geoffrey H. Hartman warns against the perils of mistaking fiction for history and underscores the role of the historian and literary critic in the learning process: “The

Sebald found inspiration to write this novel in a documentary called *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport*, broadcast on Channel 4 in Britain in 2000, which focuses on Susie Bechhofer's middle-age recollections of her trip to Wales during WWII. Like many other Jewish children evacuated from Austria, Germany, and the former Czechoslovakia, she herself had boarded a train heading for Britain, leaving behind a family, whom she would never be reunited with. With the mutual agreement of the German and British governments, 10,000 children were thus saved between November 1938 and September 1939 (Biggsby 2006, 69).

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 across the English Channel to Wales in Britain. There, he was adopted by a dour Welsh couple of fundamentalist Calvinist faith, leading a strict life dominated by silence and closure,⁸ both literal and figurative, in a little country town in Bala. His past got completely erased when they took his backpack away—the only link to his previous life—, then changed his name to Dafydd Elias and raised him in complete oblivion of his roots and the historical circumstances of his flight to Britain. As Sebald later declared in a conversation with Christopher Biggsby, “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” (Biggsby 2001, 162-3). As Austerlitz himself confesses to the narrator in the novel, his knowledge of European history ends with the 19th century. As for his self-knowledge, he adds:

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

collective memory uses and produces fictions, yet it must learn from art not to confuse fiction and history, and from history not to succumb to sentimental or mystical ideas about a community's ‘world-historical’ destiny” (Hartman 1994, 16). For a theoretical background on collective memory, see M. Halbwachs 1980. *Collective Memory*. Translated by M. Douglas. New York: Harper & Row, 22-44.

⁸ Austerlitz recalls the first few days after being shipped to Wales as an experience of 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” (Sebald 2002, 62-3).

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. (Sebald 2002, 60-1)

It is only late in his life that Jacques Austerlitz, now an architectural historian at the end of his career, feels prompted to deal with the crisis of lost identity and to revisit a suppressed past that has plagued him for many years. His travels take him around Europe for a more or less purposeful observation of archeological ruins and architectural wonders (like the railway stations of Antwerp 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 tells 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 with the torture of Jean Améry and Novelli by the Nazis. It is, as Sebald himself elucidates, a case of localised memory or of memory embedded, situated or invested in places.⁹ “Places seem to have some kind of memory, in that they activate memory in those who look at them” (Jaggi 2001). Similarly, the sight of the four hundred skeletons discovered after excavations during demolition work at Broad Street Station in London in 1984 presents Austerlitz with the possibility of recovering or “disinterring” (Bigsby 2001, 73) the actual remnants of his very 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” (Sebald 2002, 188). Thus, Austerlitz’s premonition correlates the missing memory to the absence or death of his family.

⁹ B. Prager stresses the importance of locatedness for traumatic memory and warns against a transhistoric outlook: “not everyone, including Jews, Germans, children and survivors, and Hollywood directors, is likely to commemorate and remember the Holocaust with one international and transhistoric voice. Rather than pretend that such differences do not exist, the standards used to evaluate the efficacy of these responsesstandards that facilitate dialogue and critical analysis—benefit from attending to national and historical contexts” (Prager 2005, 102).

Austerlitz also observes how the collective memory of trauma is embedded in physical space, evident in the connection between grand architectural structures and colonialism, and later fascism, as manifestations of power versus powerlessness and slavery across history. This is particularly obvious in the construction of the Antwerp train station in Belgium, where Austerlitz meets the narrator, but also in the Nazi conception of architecture. The Nazi megalomaniac fantasies were put into practice by Speer, the court architect, at Sonthofen Ordensburg, a former college for the Nazi elite. It is, Sebald says,

the architecture of power-crazed minds. It was prefigured by the bombast of the 19th-century bourgeois style [...] These vast edifices depended on slave labour. The SS ran quarries next to concentration camps. It’s not an accidental link. (Jaggi 2001)

In spite of his peripatetic meditations on history and cultural memory, Jacques Austerlitz activates fierce mechanisms of denial and refines his defensive responses to remembrance, in order to preserve what J. J. Long calls “an internal mnemonic void” (Long 2007, 152):

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. (Sebald 2002, 197-8)

This mnemonic void functions both as a mechanism of self-protection and an incentive to action towards memory-recovery.

In order to achieve this abstraction from reality, Jacques deploys his scholarly skills to accumulate knowledge and build “a substitute or compensatory memory” (Sebald 2002, 198), which is a mere prosthesis¹⁰ or complementary memory to make up for the latent, crippled childhood recollections. In fact, the archives in Britain, Paris or Prague, which he visits with the intention to fill in the gaps of his existence, are nothing but another form of “substitute memory”, because they make up, I argue, a

¹⁰ Postmemory is essentially a form of intergenerational prosthetic subjectivity: “Prosthetic memories thus become part of one’s personal archive of experience, informing one’s subjectivity as well as one’s relationship to the present and future tenses. [...] these memories are not ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’ and yet they organize and energize the bodies and subjectivities that take them on” (Landsberg 2004, 26). In Austerlitz’s case, however, this substitute memory doesn’t have exclusively beneficent effects. See also C. Lury’s chapter on “Identity and Prosthetic Culture” (Lury 1998, 1-7).

substitute for his present, as well. Thus, the archive as a form of infinite regression “becomes a self-generating, self-referential system that entails a perpetual deferral of the moment of completion” (Long 2007, 154). That is to say, the archival data Austerlitz consults are often incomplete and cannot, therefore, clarify the instances of his personal life. Yet,

the temporal structure of the archive facilitates the elision of all that intervenes between the recorded past and the projected future towards which the archivist is perpetually impelled. In Austerlitz’s case, the elision includes the recent past and present of his life. (Lury 1998, 1-7)

Moreover, as R. Crownshaw contends on the margins of Derrida’s meditation on *le mal d’archive* (archive fever), its internal condition is built on a contradiction: it amasses information while at the same time consuming and therefore destroying memory (Crownshaw 2004, 219-220). All the above shows the controversial nature of the archive, which functions both as a container and preserver of memory and as an agent of forgetting.

In this vein, Aleida Assmann suggests, and I concur, that

memory, including cultural memory [the archive], is always permeated and shot through with forgetting. [...] The canon stands for the active working memory of a society that defines and supports the cultural identity of a group. [...] The function of the archive, the reference memory of a society [...] creates a meta-memory, a second-order memory that preserves what has been forgotten. (A. Assmann 2008, 105-6)

This explains why Jacques feels baffled ~~by~~ with regard to his identity: unable to retrace his own memories, he is also incapable of relating to the archival data by feiling to establish a meaningful, enduring connection with them. Theory, on the one hand, shows that trauma severely impairs both “embodied communicative memory and institutionalized cultural/archival memory”¹¹ (A. and J. Assmann 2008, 97-109; 109-118). *Austerlitz*, on the other hand, reveals that trauma equally impairs the functionality of both personal and collective memory, since the Nazis’

¹¹ In a book called *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1997), Jan Assmann discriminated between “communicative”, biographical or factual memory on the one hand, and cultural, institutional or archival memory on the other. In 2006, Aleida Assmann elaborates on this twofold distinction by distinguishing four memory compartments: on the one hand, individual and family/group memory correspond to Jan Assmann’s “communicative” memory; on the other hand, national/political memory and cultural/archival memory are classified under J. Assmann’s second category of “cultural” memory (as explained in Hirsch 2008, 110).

erasure of records upsets archival memory, as well: “Under the Nazis, cultural archives were destroyed, records burned, possessions lost, histories suppressed and eradicated” (Hirsch 2008, 111). Consequently, the reliability of archival information is questionable, because it might, in some cases, be undermined by censorship and an abusive process of selection.

Still, just like the ruins and disintegrated structures Austerlitz observes and photographs all around Europe (like the fortifications of Willebroek in Lithuania or Breendonk in Belgium), his own defensive walls eventually collapse, because ruins are inherently *lieux de mémoire*. The effects of this “surrender” are no less catastrophic at the human level:

this censorship of the mind [...] 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. (Sebald 2002, 198)

Such self-defensive mechanisms against memory, strangely similar to the Nazi attempts to eradicate memory, are synonymous with a state of aggression against language as substitute of memory itself, which results in a situation Gabrielle Schwab compares to “a form of death in life”:

Thus quarantined from the world, he remains immune to traumatic impingements and mnemonic intrusions, a state that ultimately translates into immunity to being. (Schwab, 2010, 50)

However, I would add, the paradox of living death is all the more traumatic, as it triggers a deeper tension in Austerlitz, i.e. the anxiety of non-identity, and prompts him to take self-restorative action.

It is at an antiquarian bookseller’s (not an insignificant location) that he gets the first ever glimpse of the memories that he has been suppressing for years. His memories begin to resurface when he overhears a radio programme in which two ladies recall the story of their arrival in England as children on a special transport in 1939:

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 travelling 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. (Sebald 2002, 200)

This first impulse of adherence to a group memory has a tremendous impact on Austerlitz, as the momentous discovery motivates him to retrace the train journey back to his native Prague from London (via Germany), and thus attempt to undo the partly self-inflicted psychological damage. The idea of the train as a symbol intrinsic to Holocaust memory is 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. (Levi 1988, 85)

The map of his estrangement as a child refugee on a Kindertransport during WWII is now reconstructed step by step, with a double anticlimax in Prague and Paris, two cityscapes still imbued with trauma, where he tracks down elements of his parents' incomplete stories of deportation and death at the Nazis' hands.

In his attempt to reconstruct personal memory in Prague, Austerlitz comes across a photo of himself dressed as a Rose Queen page at the age of four. While photography is usually regarded as a technical aid for memory, in Jacques's case it signals the limitations of traumatic memory, as he is unable to identify with the boy in the image and decipher its encrypted meaning.¹² Thus, the photo remains, "despite detailed scrutiny and extensive textual commentary, fragmentary, decontextualised and opaque" (Duttlinger 2006, 157). The act of analysing the photo and retrieving a latent memory is a psychological process which Freud dubbed *Durcharbeiten* or "working through" of trauma through the recuperation of repressed memory. Yet, like memory, photographs themselves are unreliable, precarious media:

In my photographic work I was always especially entranced, said Austerlitz, by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long. (Sebald 2002, 109)

As Duttlinger suggests,

¹² D. Blackler shows how photography in Sebald's fiction has an alienating effect not only on the protagonist faced with an irretrievable past, but also on the reader, "because the photographs reflect our otherness as readers in a darkly unrevealing way, as the verbal text does not to the same degree" (Blackler 2007, 176-7).

photography is thus figured as a model not for the permanence of memory but for the phenomenon of forgetting. Interestingly, all three processes—photography, recollection and forgetting—take place in the dark [...] and therefore in the liminal sphere between dreaming and waking, consciousness and the unconscious. (Duttlinger, 2006, 158)

Freud, in fact, had already signalled the similarity between photographic development and the mechanism of memory and trauma, particularly with regard to disturbing childhood events that block out memories due to the insufficient receptivity of the psychic apparatus.¹³ This Freudian explanation fits Austerlitz' case, since Prague—the place where this photo was taken—functions as a locus of trauma for Jacques.

According to S. Pane, Austerlitz's purpose, when faced with the four-year-old page boy in the photograph, is "Barthesian", that is, he wants to ratify the past, not to restore it. Once unable to attest to the existence of that past, Jacques experiences what Barthes calls *punctum* in *Camera Lucida*, i.e. the wounding or piercing effect of a photo, translated as the inability to name the source of grief.¹⁴ Which goes to show that the photographic medium is traumatic in itself, i.e. that trauma can and does reside in photographs. The repetition compulsion inherent in trauma is evidenced in the fact that Austerlitz keeps taking photos throughout his life, animated by the hope to order the narrative of his existence through the photographed material. Yet, his efforts are constantly frustrated, an indication of the fact that the photographic medium can furnish no evidence and bridge no gaps. At best, it can function as replacement memory for Jacques, one that hardly alludes to the atrocities of the past.

I propose, however, an understanding of this instance of dissimulation (young Jacquot in the photo versus the mature Austerlitz returned to Prague) through the term "heteropathic recollection". In a chapter called "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs and Public Fantasy", Marianne Hirsch alludes to the term when discussing the case of contemporary second-generation survivors glimpsing photos of child victims of the Holocaust, and thereby experiencing identification with them through what she calls a "triangular visual encounter":

The adult [...] encounters the child (the other child and his/her own child self) both as a child, through identification, and from the protective vantage point of the adult-looking subject. (Hirsch 1999, 15)

¹³ In *Introductory Lectures, Moses and Monotheism*, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

¹⁴ As discussed in Pane 2005, 47-8.

Hirsch goes on to explain that

in the particular case of postmemory and “heteropathic recollection” where the subject is split not just between past and present, adult and child, but also between self and other, the layers of recollection and the subjective topography are even more complicated [because] the adult subject of postmemory encounters the image of the child victim *as* child witness, and thus the split subjectivity characterizing the structure of memory is triangulated. (Pane 2005, 47-8)

This triangle is inherent to postmnemonic alterity and it is defined as cultural and intergenerational. The fact that the adult Austerlitz does not recognise himself in the pre-war photo of the costumed boy steers the interpretation towards a case of “heteropathic recollection”, because identification between Austerlitz’s own child self and the child in the photo does not occur at any stage.

The dramatic quality of this photo featuring Austerlitz dressed in a role-performing ball costume is cancelled by the sheer frozenness and lack of dynamism of the photographic medium, which in this case translates as the paralysing force of life-long trauma. The lifeless image and its inability to trigger memory, however, induce a sense of performative trauma by “staging” and encapsulating the uncanny nature of deep, irretrievable memories.¹⁵

Following in his mother’s footsteps, Austerlitz sets foot in Terezín, the former Nazi concentration camp known as “a limbo en route to annihilation where people had been held, living out a parody of normal life” (Bigsby 2001, 76). In the ghetto museum in Terezín, he is faced with solid proof of the Nazi corruption of memory while watching a propaganda documentary commissioned by the Nazis staging a *Verschönerungsaktion*, meant to deceive a visiting Red Cross team.¹⁶ The video is meant to show the presumably humane side of Teresienstadt, yet the falsity of the attempt, along with the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, are 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” (Sebald 2002, 348), where the polka from some Austrian operetta and the can-can from *La Vie parisienne* and the scherzo from Mendelssohn’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* “moved in a kind of subterranean world, through the most

¹⁵ See Maya Barzilai’s discussion of Langer’s concept of “deep memory” as interlinked with common memory in individual testimonies (Barzilai 2006, 215-216).

¹⁶ The film is called *Der Führer schenkt die Juden eine Stadt*.

nightmarish depths [...] to which no human voice has ever descended” (Sebald 2002, 349). Rewinding the tape, Austerlitz identifies his mother Agáta, who seems to him “both strange and familiar” (Sebald 2002, 351), and later on recovers a photo of hers from the Prague theatrical archives in the Celetna. This is as close as Austerlitz comes to official information on his dead mother, which by no means makes up for his absent memory of her.

Paradoxically, “the film made by the Nazis uses the same strategies of staging, masquerade and theatricality that underpin the protagonist’s attempts to reactivate his memory of the past” (Duttlinger 2006, 166), which reinforces the point I made earlier about the uncanny similarities between Jacques’s internal psychic strategies of blocking memory and the political mnemonic strategies of the Nazis.

Critic Russell J.A. Kilbourn compares Jacques’s uncanny journey of self-discovery to an intentionally ironic and recontextualised modern Odyssey, a kind of underworld excursion:

The self’s recuperation of lost memory-content allegorises his re-emergence into the land of the living; the state of “un-remembering” or mnemonic divestment is shown to be emblematic of the self’s sojourn through a living death. (Kilbourn 2006, 152)

Inflected by trauma, though, this journey into the underworld of memory is similar to a further deconstruction of it, which defeats the purpose of memory recuperation.

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”, (Sebald 2002, 354) and 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” (Sebald, 2002, 360). Like all trauma fiction, Sebald’s also dwells on the dissolution of time, and the proximity of or indistinguishable limit between the living and the dead, past and present: “The border between life and death is less impermeable than we commonly think” (Sebald 2002, 395). In fact, the very boundaries of time are deleted and replaced with those between comprehension and incomprehension: “there was no transition, only this dividing line, with ordinary life on one side and its unimaginable opposite on the other” (Sebald 2002, 414).

Jacques’s physical and imaginary peregrinations in search of personal memory exude a sense of psychological restlessness, while at the same time set the narrative in motion. Sebald’s stream-of-consciousness prose is itself a journey at the textual level: long sentences and paragraphs with a

melancholy rhythm reminiscent of late 19th-century German literature set the pace for the winding, yet inconclusive, path to self-discovery. His narrative style is best described by Peter Brooks's concept of "narrative desire": "narrative both tells of a desire—typically present in some story of desire—and makes use of desire as a dynamic of signification" (Brooks 2002, 37). That is to say, through the narrative and photographic media employed in his prose, Sebald constantly frustrates and stimulates the desire for knowledge and order. Unsatisfied desire becomes the stimulus to narrate, to travel, to photograph and look for hints related to his past experience.

After several fainting fits and a "temporary, but complete loss of memory, a condition described in psychiatric books [...] as hysterical epilepsy" (Sebald 2002, 374), Austerlitz reaches Paris, Gare d'Austerlitz and the National Library, both settings bringing him closer to an awareness of his father's fate. As the narrator of the story recalls,

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. (Sebald 2002, 404)

But Gare d'Austerlitz in Paris is the uncanny place where memory and premonition, past and present, father and son, meet in an imaginary encounter of sorts. 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. (Sebald 2002, 405-7)

However, 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 defence into a Nazi prison camp and later a museum of the Belgian resistance provides

evidence of the multiple, and often contradictory, counter-memories embedded in ruins. Similarly, the now dysfunctional Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris served once as a massive warehouse for the expropriated possessions of Parisian Jews. These sites of memory show how "the [traumatic] past intrudes upon the present" and can therefore never "be covered up indefinitely" (Bauer 2006, 250).

As Francois Mauriac recalls in the "Foreword" to Elie Wiesel's *Night*, 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. (Wiesel 1990, 7-8)

For Jacques Austerlitz, however, the Parisian train-station as a spot in history and time is neither a terminus, nor a departure point, but a transitional site of continuous, unresolved trauma. His story, steeped in the myriad layers of other stories of dislocation and disruption in wartime Europe, cannot reach definite closure and remains subject to incompleteness, premonition and supposition. Lacking conclusive evidence and rational cohesiveness, the archeology of his personal story is "not a narrative, but an instantaneous accumulation of debris...building ever higher" (Bigsby 2006, 78), a mere collection of fragmented data that undermine his project of reconciliation with his past. With both parents lost a second time and he himself wandering in search of further traces of their (non)existence, Austerlitz remains a nomadic hybrid of cultures and languages, a tragically liminal figure or postmnemonic alterity, whose failed attempts to break the boundaries of memory and trauma epitomise the struggle of man confronted with the barbaric violence of history.

As for the way Sebald negotiates the tensions between fiction writing and remembrance, between trauma and post-memory, it is no doubt a question of artistic mediation and reconciliation of the forces of remembering and forgetting in the presence of severe post-traumatic stress disorder and memory repression. Art in both its performative and postmnemonic aspects (like writing, photographic and cinematic representation) functions as preserver and modifier of (post-)memory, but is essentially a problematic medium as far as representing trauma goes: fiction does not help retrieve suppressed memories, replace lived experience or heal memories of the offence. What it can do, however, is

render the depth and complexity of this experience, of the attempt to bring back memories and recreate a sense of identity. Sebald's fiction is thus a profound, alluring performance of post-memory and all its wrenching force.

Works Cited

- Assmann, A. 2008. "Canon and Archive." In *Cultural Memories Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by A. Erll and A. Nünning, 97-107. Berlin, New York: Water de Gruyter.
- Assmann, J. 2008. "Communicative and Cultural Memory." In *Cultural Memories Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by A. Erll and A. Nünning, 109-118. Berlin, New York: Water de Gruyter.
- Barzilai, A. 2006. "On Exposure: Photography and Uncanny Memory in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*." In *W. G. Sebald. History—Memory—Trauma*, edited by S. Denham and M. McCulloh, 205-219. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Bauer, K. 2006. "The Dystopian Entwinement of Histories and Identities in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*." In *W. G. Sebald. History—Memory—Trauma*, edited by S. Denham and M. McCulloh, 233-250. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Bigsby, C. 2006. "W. G. Sebald: An Act of Restitution." In *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust. The Chain of Memory*. 25-115. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge UP.
- . 2001. *Writers in Conversation with Christopher Bigsby. Vol. II*. Norwich: Pen & Inc. Press.
- Blackler, D. 2007. *Reading W. G. Sebald. Adventure and Disobedience*. Rochester. New York: Camden House.
- Blanchot, M. 1995. *The Writing of the Disaster/L'écriture du désastre*. Translated by A. Smock. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P.
- Brooks, P. 2002. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Caruth, C. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP.
- Clingman, S. 2009. "Transfiction: W. G. Sebald." In *The Grammar of Identity*. 167-205. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Creet, J. 2003. "Hypermnnesia and the Genealogical Archive." In *Travelling Concepts III. Memory. Narrative. Image*, edited by N. Pedri, 59-73. Amsterdam: ASCA Press.

- Crownshaw, R. 2004. "Reconsidering Post-Memory: Photography, the Archive, and Post-Holocaust Memory in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature and Ideas* 37: 215-236.
- Doerry, M. and V. Hage, 2001. "Ich fürchte das Melodramatische." *Der Spiegel*, November: 228-234.
- Duttlinger, C. 2006. "Traumatic Photographs. Remembrance and the Technical Media in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*." In *W.G. Sebald—A Critical Companion*, edited by J.J. Long and A. Whitehead, 155-175. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Felman, S. and Laub, D. 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge.
- Halbwachs, M. 1980. *The Collective Memory*. Translated by M. Douglas. New York, Canada: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.
- Hartman, G. H. 1994. "Introduction: Darkness Visible." In *Holocaust Remembrance. The Shapes of Memory*, edited by G. H. Hartman, 1-22. Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell.
- Hirsch, M. 1999. "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy." In *Acts of Memory. Cultural Recall in the Present*, edited by M. Bal, J. Crewe, and L. Spitzer, 3-24. Hanover and London: University Press of New England (Dartmouth College).
- . 2008. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today: International Journal for Theory and Analysis of Literature and Communication* 29 (1): 103-128.
- Jaggi, M. 2001. "Recovered Memories." *The Guardian*, September 22. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/sep/22/artsandhumanities.ighereducation?INTCMP=SRCH>.
- . 2001. "The Last Word." *The Guardian*, December 21. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2001/dec/21/artsandhumanities.ighereducation?INTCMP=SRCH>.
- Kaplan, B. A. 2011. *Landscapes of Holocaust Postmemory*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Kilbourn, R. J. 2006. "Architecture and Cinema: The Representation of Memory in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*." In *W.G. Sebald—A Critical Companion*, edited by J. J. Long and A. Whitehead, 140-155. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Landsberg, A. 2004. *Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Levi, P. 1988. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. London: Penguin.

- Long, J. J. 2007. "The Archival Subject." In *W. G. Sebald*. 149-168. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Lury, C. 1998. *Prosthetic Culture. Photography, Memory and Identity*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Pane, S. 2005. "Trauma Obscura: Photographic Media in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature and Ideas* 38: 37-54.
- Prager, B. 2005. "The Good German as Narrator: On W. G. Sebald and the Risks of Holocaust Writing." *New German Critique*, Volume on "Memory and the Holocaust" 96: 75-102.
- Radstone, S. 2000. "Working with Memory: An Introduction." In *Memory and Methodology*, edited by S. Radstone, 1-25. Oxford, New York: Berg.
- Rothberg, M. 2009. "Introduction: Theorizing Multidirectional Memory in a Transnational Age." In: *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, edited by M. Rothberg, 1-33. Stanford, California: Stanford UP.
- Sebald, W. G. 2002. *Austerlitz*. Translated by Anthea Bell. London, New York: Penguin.
- Schwab, G. 2010. *Haunting Legacies. Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Schwartz, L. S., ed. 2010. *The Emergence of Memory. Conversations with W. G. Sebald*. New York, London, Melbourne, Toronto: Seven Stories Press.
- Wiesel, E. 1990. *The Night Trilogy. Vol. 1. Night*. New York: Hill and Wang.