

# W.G. Sebald's Engraftings of History and Memory in *Austerlitz*

Philip Beidler

The 2001 W.G. Sebald novel entitled *Austerlitz*, if one reads it in either the German- or English-language versions, displays on its cover a mysterious, visibly antique photograph of a chubby, flaxen-haired boy of somewhat indeterminate age. He is wearing a white, satin suit, complete with frilly coat and knee breeches, of the sort that might have been worn by an 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century courtier—or perhaps by a more recent merrymaker during traditional European Fasching or Carnival. (The same photo-image, in more coarse and grainy rendering, is re-reprinted at a crucial moment within the text.) Properly mystified, one opens the book, reads the title page, and enters into a narration that will trace out an ever-enlarging web of haunted connections.

Jacques Austerlitz, allegedly the boy in the picture, is a survivor of the 1938 Jewish *Kindertransport* from central Europe to England on the eve of Hitler's conquest of Czechoslovakia. Spending his life searching for an almost entirely forgotten past in both history and memory, he is the titular protagonist in the fourth, and final, fictional prose narrative by the emigrant German-English writer and translator named above, Winfried Georg Sebald, published nearly coincident with the author's untimely death of an aneurysm/vehicle collision at the age of 57 in 2001. In the novel, the emigrant boy Austerlitz has grown up thinking himself to be one Dafydd Elias, the adoptive son of Emrys Elias, a Welsh Calvinist evangelical preacher and his doomed, forlorn English wife, Gwendolyn. Austerlitz turns out to be the actual last name of the boy's mother, Agata Austerlitz, a Czech-German Jewish opera and operetta singer from Prague;

his first name, Jacques, he is eventually told by his old Czech nurse, is in commemoration of his family's fondness for all things French, and also specifically in honor of the French composer Jacques Offenbach, in whose *Tales of Hoffman* his mother has performed winningly, at the venerable Prague Estates Theater, in the part of Olympia—a singing mechanical doll. His father, actually named Maximilian Eychenwald—"Max" also being, one might add, the preferred first name of the boy's literary progenitor, W.G. Sebald—is an itinerant German-Russian Jewish revolutionary reformer from St. Petersburg who at the time of the boy's birth has been a prominent member of the Czech Social Democratic party. During their son's childhood in Wales and at various English schools, both have vanished as a result of the 1938-45 German occupation. Agata, after having to submit to an endless sequence of anti-Jewish ordinances and restrictions, has been eventually sent to Theresienstadt/Terezin, an alleged model camp established by the Nazis for its mainly Jewish inmates and actually featured as such in a wartime film, alternately entitled *Theresienstadt. Ein Dokumentarfilm aus dem jüdischen Siedlungsgebiet* (*Terezin: A Documentary Film from the Jewish Settlement Area*) or *Der Fuehrer Schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* (*The Fuehrer Gives the Jews a City*) coinciding with and highlighting the inspection visit of a Red Cross delegation. (This alone would surely belong in some insane metafiction, were the basic story not true.) Maximilian travels to France where he participates in underground activities until arrested and sent to the notorious transit camp at Drancy. (The Paris block serving as the site of his processing for transportation, we later learn, now forms the foundation of the sleek, towering *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*.) Both Agatha Austerlitz and Maximilian Aychenwald, the parents of Jacques Austerlitz, are eventually, in the bureaucratic

idiom of the conquerors, "sent east" to one of the extermination camps, most probably Auschwitz. They are assumed to have perished there.

Austerlitz is also the name of a great 1805 battle at the site so named in Moravia where Napoleon won a great victory over the combined forces of the Austrian and Russian empires. Many readers will recall its having been given its great literary representation in the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. In Sebald's novel, that epic clash of empires becomes the subject of an extended sequence of detailed and quite histrionic lectures given Austerlitz and his fellow students by a history master, Andre Hilary, whose interest in the battle, far beyond his name identification with the Tolstoy character serving gallantly in the event, has clearly tipped over the line into genuine obsession. The lectures happen to take place just at the point where the boy has found out his real name but is told by his headmaster to continue using Dafydd Elias for administrative reasons while he remains at the school. He reveals the true information only to Hilary, who in turn embraces and promotes Austerlitz as a protégé for whom he secures an admission to Cambridge and thus provides the beginning of a long, distinguished academic career as an art and architectural historian.

Later, Austerlitz makes certain of his own discoveries about the name. It turns out to be (a fact perhaps known to some readers but also told to us in the novel) the actual last name of the mid-20th century American dancer, singer, and movie celebrity Fred Astaire, born Friedrich Emanuel Austerlitz, of an immigrant family in Omaha, Nebraska. Simultaneously, much by coincidence, he finds out from a friend that it is the name of a person identified in Kafka's diaries who has apparently been called in to circumcise the author's nephew.

Finally, quite near the end, in a book filled with trains and railway stations everywhere from Antwerp to Auschwitz, we find that the Gare d'Austerlitz is one of the six major rail destination terminals of Paris, located on the Quai d'Austerlitz near the famed hospital Salpetriere hospital of the pioneering research, by Charcot and others, into hysteria. It is also, we find out very late in the novel, the nickname, by virtue of its proximity to the above locations, used by incarcerated French Jews during the Second World War to refer to the aforementioned storage depot for their looted possessions.

Characteristic of Sebald as a novelist, none of these notations is without its strange meaning in and of itself, even as it crosses what might be seen as sundry synaptical openings to connect just as strangely with all the others. His world is a world in which fragments, momentary apperceptions, unbidden mental flashes, strange divagations, pieces of characters' recollections, readings, jottings, quasi-scholarly scribbles—"studies," as the narrator is wont to call his own unidentified work, along with Austerlitz's ceaseless researches into architectural history—but also dreams, imaginings, philosophical musings, with the latter sometimes eventuating in extended meditations on works of literature, history, biography, autobiography, music, and the arts—continually proliferate outward to make connections, however uncanny, however indeterminate, however accidental. The connections build upon the connections. Those are the meeting places, for Sebald, where the work must be done. They are the myriad points, strange, shadowy, evanescent, yet often for a moment arrestingly, visibly, indelibly there, where are inscribed upon consciousness itself the engraftings of history and memory

All this comes to us in *Austerlitz* and the three other major fictions, *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, and *The Rings of Saturn*, by way of the now legendary Sebald narrator,

wandering, moody, invariably in transit, minutely observant, inwardly reflective, an emigrant—to use one of his own words—fully as life-burdened and story-haunted as nearly any of his multitudinous characters. In *Austerlitz*, he and the titular protagonist cross paths and commune on sundry topics in their various, largely unexplained mutual peregrinations in England and across Europe, meeting more than quite coincidentally it often seems, in visits at times quickly successive and at others nearly thirty years apart, in bars, cafes, hotels, and train station eating and drinking establishments, sometimes in Austerlitz's paper strewn rooms in Bloomsbury near the British Museum, finally moving their encounters, in the later part of the book, to the aging wanderer's dingy lodgings in the east end of London. Precisely to this degree, in the repeated meetings of the twinned emigrants, the narrator, as in the other fictional texts, repeatedly proves far more than the figure of the flaneur with which he is often in commentaries on Sebald's writings reductively associated. Like many of the author's solitary, learned, obsessively studious figures, he is a reader of texts both well-known and profoundly esoteric, and a compulsive writer, recording in his studies his responses to the vicissitudes of his own largely wandering existence, He is part of the whole world-fabric created by the narration. (On good authority, we are told by people who knew Sebald, he was a fair copy of the author himself, shy, mildly melancholy, yet affectionate and humorous, one of those people in the world who could actually be called droll. His connection with the German war was at once profound and strangely remote. His father, an early S.A. recruit, eventually served in the Wehrmacht as Captain, returning from Russian captivity only in 1947. The son, quartered in a remote alpine region, grew up largely untouched by the massive destruction visited upon the nation during the last phases of the war.) Sebald's phrasings and sentences are also frequently judged labyrinthine, involuted,

intentionally inconclusive, again much in the flaneur vein. Actually in German, the language in which all the novels are narrated, as to diction, word order, and grammatical construction, they are demanding but not insurmountable to read. There are others who disagree, notably James Wood, who has written with more perceptiveness and insight about Sebald than nearly anyone. To give the complexity of the argument on the matter, he is surely worth hearing. "Sebald's prose belongs, mysteriously, nowhere," he tells us. "The enigmatic patience of the sentences, the pedantic syntax, the peculiar antiquity of the diction, the strange recessed distance of the writing, in which everything seems milky and sub-aqueous, just beyond reach – all of this gives Sebald his particular flavour, so that sometimes it seems that we are reading not a particular writer but an emanation of literature." On syntactical construction in particular, we also have the authority of Sebald himself. "I usually start out with a short sentence," he told one interviewer. "Then I need to include factual information which doesn't fit into the next sentence, so I have to recast the sentence I've begun. The result is that by the time I've finished with it, my sentence is rather like a labyrinth. I do like some writers who work straightforwardly, main clause after main clause. But I tend to prefer those who engage in a degree of elaboration." Still, what labyrinthine phrasings, along with recondite terms and references do appear, in German and elsewhere, invariably seem somehow necessary, nay completely integral to the art. On the early pages of *Austerlitz* alone, the German for a feeling of illness, headache, and general malaise—"Gefühl des Unwohlseins and Kopfschmerzen mit unguuten Gedank repleght"—succeeds with unerring specificity, where English merely approximates. Accordingly, only in French could a railway terminal waiting room for continuing travelers be called a *salon de pas perdu*. From Sebald's

earliest sentences onward, we are constantly reminded that any language is a very complicated and perhaps finally indecipherable translation of itself.

In English, figures such as Michael Hamburger (also a character in *Rings of Saturn*) and Anthea Bell provided a fortunate gift of translators, presided over by Sebald himself, who after all was a polyglot German exile spending the better part of his exile running a center for translation at the University of East Anglia. Accordingly, the whole complex enterprise makes its way across a web of languages—with the author himself, as observed by specialist commentators, using the processes of multilingual operation to hone his signature style. This is also to say, in the English language version at least, that he could sometimes as well highlight the very concept of narrating in multiple languages with some strange transliterative jolts. At an early point in the narrator's acquaintanceship with Austerlitz, we are told that their early conversations have been conducted in French, a language in which Austerlitz, we are told, has been quite fluent by in which the narrator struggles. (31). For the remainder of their relationship, we are then further informed, all of their communications have been in English, a language in which both are fairly expert (32). In the German volume, of course, all are rendered in German. In the English volume, we must infer that these are accurate renditions of the putative French and English.

In all this, the stylistic unfolding of Sebald's equally complex, ever enlarging, patterns of self-referential semiotic invocation, often both verbal and visual, often come to present some strange literary cultural analogue of neuroscience—sensation, cognition, apprehension, voluntary and involuntary associations of things and ideas, interwoven patterns of experience, memory, imagination, dream, reverie, fantasy, hallucination; momentary losses of consciousness

and queer instants of recovery, from one moment to another incorporating any or all such neural functions. It is an enterprise largely centered on language-formation, the attempted generation of meaning at an extremely high order of sophistication, rendered in an imaginary synthesis of multiple languages—primarily German and English (along with frequent transliterations, as one might call them, of both), but also Welsh, French Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Flemish, Czech, Serbo-Croatian, Latin, and Greek, along with a recurrent commercial esperanto of transnational advertising and promotion. Yet all seem relatively available in elementary readability to the average reader. There is a fascination with anatomy, natural history, odd collections lovingly and exquisitely itemized. The famous sentences become the nervous system of the text, frequently opening like neural pathways, making new associations, summoning up and re-opening others, closing off and precluding still others leading to sites darkly unknown. Indeed, the closest analogy at times seem to be to recent medical literature, with its increasing speculations that certain kinds of psychological and psychiatric treatment, regimes of cognitive therapy, with or without drugs, can actually open or close, block or restore, neural pathways, clearing or regenerating some, while actually shutting down others. Literarily, with regard to storytelling, Sebald is frequently, and rightly, associated with Proust, Kafka, Thomas Bernhard, Jorge Luis Borges, and others. And along with these, of course, we must note throughout, as with the larger Sebald cycle of fictional narratives, his own stable of frequently invoked counterparts and fellow travelers, Rousseau, Stendhal, Chateaubriand, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Browne. Such invocations in turn are further interlarded with a myriad host of arcane references and sources—derived often of a magnetic attraction to offbeat museums and repositories, eccentrics with their fascinations and strange projects.

Or perhaps, as to the operations of such stylistic interconnectings and syntheses, in a variation on the neural metaphor one might invoke a more simple figure suited to the violence of the times, might visualize something like a skin graft of bone graft, the response to a wound sufficiently severe so as to require transplantation of matter from another site; with the injury perhaps covered or closed over but with the original deformation never completely rendered invisible or forgotten at the broken spot. To be sure, Sebald would never have used so sentimental, psychobabbleish a word as "healed." "Annealed" perhaps as in metalworking, but never "healing" or "healed."

Thus the central enterprise of Sebald, in an age of unspeakability and unwritability, becomes the linguistic and thereby both the epistemological and even, in the deepest and most desperate sense, ontological, work of trying to put together—or in many cases, put *back* together—some kind of provisional, if not fully load-bearing connections between words and things—in Foucault's famous phrasing, *les mots et le choses*—some momentarily sustaining vision at least of what it means to be a human person living in history. This is Sebald's quest exactly. So speaks the titular protagonist of *Austerlitz* in an early conversation with the narrator. "Since my childhood and youth, he says, ". . . I have never known who I 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 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." (44) And so is echoed rather precisely, from

the other side of history, so to speak, a thought that has occurred earlier in the text to the narrator, who confesses "I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on." (24) Such problems of knowledge, he thinks later, having heard it from Austerlitz on a visit to the observatory at Greenwich, may at least in the abstract be tied to the artificial and arbitrary nature of time itself. "Time," Austerlitz has ventured, "was by far the most artificial of all our inventions, and in being bound to the planet turning on its axis was no less arbitrary than would be, say, a calculation based on the growth of trees or the duration required for a piece of limestone to disintegrate, quite apart from the fact that the solar day which we take as our guideline does not provide any precise measurement, so that in order to reckon time we have to devise an imaginary perfect sun which has an invariable speed of movement and does not incline to the equator in its orbit." (100). But the subject here is History, and the insistence that it remain part and fiber of Memory. It is the absolute cruelty and murderousness of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that drives Sebald to be the laureate of vanished lives, the compiler of a sum total of suffering. It is that which connects Austerlitz with the four equally arresting figures depicted in *The Emigrants*, Dr. Henry Selwyn, Paul Bereyter, Ambros Adelwarth, Max Ferber, living, human persons of the twentieth century who have had in one way or another, by dint of History, their very grounds of being taken from them while being forced to live on. So it and must be with our own operations of historical consciousness says James Wood, citing a "stray passage" of Adorno, in an essay on Mahler written in 1936: 'So our memory is the only help that is left to them [the dead]. They pass away into it, and if every deceased person is

like someone who was murdered by the living, so he is also like someone whose life they must save, without knowing whether the effort will succeed.” Above all, the monstrosity of History remains the Nazis, with their fanatical hatreds, their soulless cruelties, even down to their crazed administrative zeal, their leaden language for nameless, faceless prisoners being “sent east” to death camps, issued designations “return not desired.” (241). Nor, however, as noted above, should it be lost on us that the newest great cathedral of texts, mentioned near the end of the novel, with what Austerlitz describes at length as its own totalitarian construction and administration, the French *Bibliothèque Nationale*, has created its own semiotic future by having been built upon the ruins of the main Jewish roundup and deportation centers and holding warehouses full of their looted belongings.

Past becomes present, and recapitulates itself as future. Austerlitz again. “It seems to me, he reflects toward the end “ . . . as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last, just as when we have accepted an invitation we duly arrive in a certain house at a given time. And might it not be, continued Austerlitz, that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak?” (258). Thus past, present, and future duly reconnect and newly recreate the essential circuitries of history and memory.

Something remains to be said about Sebald’s signature use of black and white photography at crucial points in the text. To be sure, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, over the vision of which he came to preside, was the great age of black and white photography in England, Europe, and the

United States—enshrined in official portraits, illustrations, newspapers, magazines, dedicated photo volumes. Meanwhile, it remained a ubiquitous amateur pursuit, comprising historical and family memorabilia, travel souvenirs, lovers' keepsakes, placid domestic scenes. Sebald's photo-illustrations come with a mixture of attributions and contextualizations. Sometimes they simply appear on a given page without comment. Often (especially if they are visibly old, grainy, distorted, with hard to distinguish original features, but as often from modern sources of illustration) they actually correspond to historical and/or fictional references included in text; frequently they are given their existence, such as it may be, by doing so. At some points there can be an occasional spirit of play. Early on where the narrator describes his attempt to dispel a bout of illness between trains in Antwerp by visiting a zoo attraction called the Nocturama, duly we are presented with parallel sets of night-creature eyes, those of lemurs, hedgehogs, opossums, and the like, along with one solitary raccoon endlessly washing a piece of apple. But then also come more parallel sets, those belonging to "certain painters or philosophers," the narrator tells, whom he imagines as attempting to "penetrate the darkness that surrounds us" (5). One pair of eyes, the reader can hardly avoid speculating, are those of Ludwig Wittgenstein. The other remains unidentified. A good guess might be Gertrude Stein. This notwithstanding, most of the photo-images strike us as nearly never of happy scenes. In a last, heartbreaking gesture, there appear two Austerlitz seems to have found in his journeys to the Czech republic—one in an actual frame from the Nazi Theresienstadt propaganda film, and the other from the Prague Estates Theater archives—possibly displaying the features of his mother (251, 253).

Throughout the novel, various significant photo-images may be traced to actual sites. In England, a masonic shrine allegedly contained within a secret chamber of the Great Eastern

Railway Hotel, one of the text's most important London loci, actually exists, even down to a cryptic ornamental three-story painting of Noah's Ark (43). In Prague's lesser town, on the left bank of the Vltava, the strange, labyrinthine, multileveled interior space at Number 2 Karmelitenstrasse pictured in the text and described as the city Records Office operates today as a museum of music history (144). High amidst the upward-winding byways of the same precincts of Mala Strana, in the shadow of Hradcany Castle, headquarters of the Nazi occupation, still stands the house of Agata, Max, and the boy Jacques as described, at the given address of Number 12 Sporkova, (It is tenanted by an order of Polish Catholic nursing sisters who were kind enough to show me inside, where I found the mosaic patterns of the entrance hall floor and the elaborate ironwork of the stairways to be those pictured in the novel [151, 153].) The address given for the Schonborn Palace, with its once-elaborate formal gardens, is that of the current U.S embassy (163). Of the same order of reality, revealed on a visit of my own, is Theresienstadt, now Terezin, exactly as photographed and described in the narrative. Strange, silent, haunted, it seems to exist unto itself as a place quite visibly occupied and populated, but with barely a single human being observable anywhere in the streets (188-97). In Paris, given multiple photo-illustrations from various angles, the four glass towers of the French national library, completed in 1997, roughly contemporary with the composition of the novel, do in fact rise in "Babylonian" imperiousness over a dismal, dilapidated cityscape, Austerlitz tells us, further "named in a manner reminiscent of a futuristic novel *La tour de lois, La tour de temps, La tour des nombres, and La tour des lettres*" (278). The names and places are real, but their identity is fictionalized, while, as with the photo of the young *kavali*er in the white satin suit (183), the myriad other scenes depicted are mainly fictional but now taken by us to be real. Real

places and persons serve imaginary purposes; unidentified places and persons are given newly reified identities; forgotten places are invested with new significance. Illustration, verbal and visual, becomes important for what we see, also for what we do not see. Terezin is there; Drancy is there. We never see Auschwitz, but we know it is there, in strange echolalic relation to the name of the titular character, the dark matter at the center of history. As to that young boy so named and photographed in carnival costume, if you do the math, he himself is quite possibly there, still alive, now in his late 70s or early 80s, perhaps somewhere in England or Europe—London, Paris, Prague. Thus the photo-images in and of themselves become part of a world, integral to the most profound operations of consciousness and narration in the text.

Amidst all this, curiously unmentioned, one must add in conclusion, seems perhaps one last possible detail of illustration, crucial to the story of Austerlitz, his escape, his youth, his eventual piecing together of his identity and his past, his claim on history and memory as a human person living in the last half of the twentieth century. And that is the site where his story may be said to have first become possible. On the main concourse of the central Prague railway station—in a fine Austerlitzian/Sebaldian touch, still named for the American President, Woodrow Wilson, who with his celebrated Fourteen Points doctrine briefly help bring the 1918-1939 country called Czechoslovakia into being, stands a statue. Life sized, it depicts a man and two children. The man is Sir Nicholas George Winton MBE, an English citizen and humanitarian, born of emigrant German Jewish parents, who, just before the German invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia, engineered the 1938 rescue of nearly 700 children, most of them of Jewish origins, in a relief effort that came to be known as the *Czech Kindertransport*. Winton is credited with finding homes for the children and arranging for their safe passage to Britain. With him are

a boy and a girl, the latter with his face buried in Winton's shoulder. There is another such memorial at the Liverpool street station in London, itself a recurrent destination in Sebald's novel. In either case, the boy could be Austerlitz. (The girl, it is suggested by commentators, is reminiscent of Suzi Becher, whose *kindertransport* memoir *Rosa's Child*, might have helped inspire Sebald's novel.) They remain among the most poignant, even heartbreaking memorials to the culture and population of the World War II murdered Jews of Europe. In all these connections, Geoff Dyer surely has it right. "The first thing to be said about W. G. Sebald's books is that they always had a posthumous quality to them. He wrote—as was often remarked—like a ghost. He was one of the most innovative writers of the late twentieth century, and yet part of this originality derived from the way his prose felt exhumed from the nineteenth." Or Richard Eder, more particularly addressing the realm of beings consigned to a late, catastrophic twentieth century: "Sebald evoked the personal nightmares that haunt those who, as survivors, descendants and even precursors, escaped the great nightmares of history—except they didn't. With a darkly incandescent diction, Sebald gives voice to the silence of history inside them." These seem to me variations on a last great point about Sebald's remarkable achievement. In the strange, dark beauty of the author's fictional engrafting of history and memory upon the embodied consciousness of those still living—even down to the very nerve endings—his story—and all the other stories for that matter—become part and fiber of our own being as well.

**Philip Beidler** is William and Margaret Going Endowed Professor of English at the University of Alabama, where he has taught American literature since receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in 1974. An armored cavalry veteran of the Vietnam War, his books include *ReWriting America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation* and *Late Thoughts on an Old War: the Legacy of Vietnam*. His most recent books are *The Victory Album: Reflections on the Good Life after the Good War*, *The Island Called Paradise: Cuba in History, Literature, and the Arts*, and *Beautiful War: Studies in a Dreadful Fascination*.