

The Aesthetics and Ethics of Refraction: Narrative Structure, Imagery, and Temporality
in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

by

Jason Michaud
BA, University of Victoria, 2012

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies

© Jason Michaud, 2014
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy
or other means, without the permission of the author.

Supervisory Committee

The Aesthetics and Ethics of Refraction: Narrative Structure, Imagery, and Temporality
in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

by

Jason Michaud
BA, University of Victoria, 2012

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Helga Thorson, (Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies)
Supervisor

Dr. Charlotte Schallié, (Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies)
Departmental Member

Abstract

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Helga Thorson, Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies
Supervisor

Dr. Charlotte Schallié, Department of Germanic Studies
Departmental Member

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the aesthetic structure and components of W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* and to show their reciprocal relationship to ethical forms of remembrance for the present and the future. The goal of this project is to explain how fiction may be utilized as a means of meaningful engagement with points of traumatic memory for the purpose of maintaining viable connections to the past across time.

The first chapter deals explicitly with the novel's overall structure and its relation to philosophical forms of thought that facilitate a practical connection to the past through fiction. The next chapter examines the use of refracted or indirect narration as an aesthetic component of this process. The final chapter constitutes an investigation of photography as a structure in this aesthetic that lends itself to the overall obliqueness I see as necessary to the ethics of representation embodied in *Austerlitz*.

Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
INTRODUCTION	1
A Note on Language and Images.....	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
Transcending Temporality: The Narrative Futures and Productive Pasts of W.G. Sebald's <i>Austerlitz</i>	9
Reflexivity, “Self-Reflection” and “Action”: On Traumatic Figuration and the Future ..	12
Today's Problems/Tomorrow's Possibilities	18
<i>Austerlitz</i> : Moving Beyond the Weight of the Past	22
CHAPTER TWO	30
Seeking the Past: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Refracted Narration	30
Grasping at Traces: The Process of Refracted Narrative in <i>Austerlitz</i>	34
Criticism and Continuation	44
CHAPTER THREE	47
Photography and the Palimpsest of Meaning.....	47
Indexes: Photographic Representation in Time and Text.....	50
Remnants and References: Sebald, <i>Austerlitz</i> , and the Image	59
CONCLUSION.....	68
WORKS CITED	73

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Helga Thorson, for her constant encouragement, guidance, and sound advice over the course of my time as a student. I have been most fortunate to have had a mentor that so patiently supported my work and who has provided me with the most amazing, extraordinary, and life changing opportunities. I would also like to thank my second reader, Professor Charlotte Schallié, who managed to convince me that graduate studies was a viable option and whose constant enthusiasm has helped me immensely throughout this process. I cannot forget the rest of the faculty and staff in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies. Thank you for teaching me most of what I know today and for helping me keep things in perspective.

I must also thank all my fellow students in the department. In particular I would like to thank my departmental neighbour, Zola Kell, who always kept things positive and light while being both constructive and critical.

Finally, my sincerest thank you to both the Departments of Germanic Studies and Slavic Studies and Graduate Studies, whose financial support, in reality, made my studies possible.

INTRODUCTION

On December 14th 2001, just weeks after the publication of *Austerlitz*, Winfried Georg Sebald lost his life in a tragic traffic accident. As the outpouring of shock and grief expressed by family, friends, and colleagues began to subside, the massive tide of critical praise that had been building in strength in literary circles well before his death, began to spread within the popular press, many suggesting the author was to be a Nobel Prize candidate (see Gussow; Homberger; Reynolds, for example). The life and death of Sebald was, fittingly, described by one writer in astrological terms, as resembling a “supernova” (Ulin)—an astronomical event whereby a star is extinguished in dramatic fashion.

Notably, supernovas cannot be observed from our vantage point in the universe. Rather, the results of supernovas, however massive wherever they occur in space, can only be detected as remnants, as brief flashes, or as consequential structures. The vast distances that these signals travel means that what is detected are only traces of what occurred or what was.

In many ways, Ulin’s observation rang true. Sebald’s meteoric rise from relative obscurity to potential noble laureate over the short course of four published prose works was certainly dramatic, at least in terms of the literary world. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, with the writer’s time here on Earth ending, he had certainly left behind such consequential structures, found in the form of his scholarly and fictional creations, each constituting their own brief flashes of brilliance and of an often confounding insight, hard to follow but present. More than this, Sebald provided an opportunity. This opportunity, I argue, is related to the function of memory and, in the

case of *Austerlitz*, his last work of fiction, the staging of a provisional platform for making productive use of memory in the present and future.

As abstract as the possibility of an author influencing the way in which a reader or public remembers or forgets sounds, I intend to show that *Austerlitz* constitutes a special engagement with points of memory and the traumas found within those memories. This engagement is made possible through the use of a specific aesthetic, a mode of structural, narrative, and photographic construction. Sebald's portrayed interactions with time and space through his unnamed narrator and protagonist, Jacques Austerlitz, are filtered multiple times through levels of oscillating narrative temporality. The various archives of memory found within the novel's characters, as well as through the images that inexplicably come with these interactions, operate to obscure conceptions of memorial linearity. In doing so, I argue that the aesthetic existing in *Austerlitz* provides an ethical way of representing the past and its traumas.

The connection I observe between this aesthetic and an ethical representation of the past and its traumas requires further explanation. For the purposes of this thesis, I view the particular relationship between aesthetics and ethics found in *Austerlitz* as reciprocal; the aesthetic constructed by Sebald to convey his narrative is that which allows and propels a specific ethics of representation, which itself is defined in relation to the time-bending action found in the journey of the characters. The other side of this process involves the ethical consciousness of the work—the consciousness of its status as fiction, the consciousness of the personal geographies intertwined within and without the novel, and the awareness of its distance and proximity to history—which permits the specific functionality of the aesthetic framework. This framework, overall, is what I call

the aesthetics and ethics of refraction. The aesthetics and ethics of refraction does not suggest a purposeful avoidance of the past and its traumas, but rather a measured, intentional narrative engagement with the past in relation to other planes of temporality. It signals a recognition of the practical influence (or lack thereof) that a work of art may impart on the understanding of the past and therefore the necessity to engage with our own time while looking forward into the future.¹ Though I do not view *Austerlitz* as a template for engaging the past, its contribution as a representation of such an engagement is vital for the very continuation of the process of remembrance, forgetting, and understanding our own time.

As a work of fiction dealing with themes of memory and trauma (particularly those of the Holocaust), written by a man who did not experience them directly, I argue that Sebald provides an actionable framework for present and future engagement with such historical traumas. To clarify further, the circuitousness of the aesthetic is an oblique and evasive approach that allows and promotes interaction not with the past itself, but with the present, while providing opportunities for future interaction. The spaces the characters interact with are fleeting traces of what was and could have been. The very unobtainable traces whose origins are in the past are present now, represented as reverberations of events across time. While impossible, the process of trying to understand or grasp these fragments of time is the very action that will perpetuate their existence.

I describe and analyze the processes of this action in several different ways over the course of this thesis. In the chapter following this introduction I analyze the structural

¹ The various components making up the ethics I describe will be broken down on a chapter-by-chapter basis. As each chapter deals with a particular facet of the aesthetic structure, the nature of the ethics shifts to complement each portion of the structural elements.

function of *Austerlitz* through the lens of Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt. In particular, I have extricated elements of Adorno's thinking that reflect the potentialities of self-reflexivity as related to practicality. To elaborate, I maintain, through a rereading of Adorno, that often negative interpretations of his position on culture, certainly after the Holocaust, but also stemming from and related to his later various socio-political concerns, are misplaced in that they relegate the practicality of his approach to a purely philosophical realm. My rereading describes the potential usefulness of an application of the positive, humanistic elements of Adorno's thinking as a call for and a means of present and future engagement with the ruptures of history. Similarly, though needing less positive rehabilitation, I read Arendt's humanism as offering a unique approach to the act of interpretation. Arendt observes the potential to affect cultural and social change through various modes of interpretation, these modes carrying validity and significance across communities. I apply her concept of human and communal action to the realm of the temporal processes reflected in *Austerlitz*—of memory and history—to illustrate the unbounded potentiality and transformative power they suggest. In conjunction, and as applied to the novel, I show the potentiality of Sebald's aesthetic as a transfigurative form for the present and future of representing and interpreting the past.

The second chapter signals the transition into the interior functions of the narrative, particularly the specific mode of character narration found in the work. I highlight particular passages where the narrative is most refracted and oblique, where what is told and received happens at a remove. As a support structure of the overall aesthetic I describe in the preceding chapter, chapter two focuses on the use of indirect character narration and how it is employed to further illustrate the difficulties of

remembering and forgetting, while maintaining and propelling the catalytic power of interaction with the temporal points that accompany both. Focusing on several sections of the novel, I contend that the author employs such a mode of narration as a means to demonstrate the fallibility of the reliance on information that the past suggests. In this chapter I utilize Derrida's theory of the trace as a lens through which to read the passages. While Sebald applies his own contextual lenses in each passage, the concept of the trace—that fragment of time or space that exists yet does not exist—is the binding thread, each memory representing a fragment of what was and of what can never be fully understood. In many ways, the value of the trace as I have applied it is found in the ethical action it promotes; the impossible endeavor to capture and gain epistemological understanding of the trace drives the seeker toward a continual process of inquiry and new ways of interpreting the present and future.

The third chapter examines the second interior aesthetic function: the use of photography within *Austerlitz*. Here I argue that the images found in the text provide a palimpsest of possible meaning. Despite the ambiguous nature of their relationship to the text itself, academic analysis has to a large degree sought to illustrate the power of the images as indexes of the past, their power being located in providing knowledge related to the past they represent. In contrast, while maintaining the value to some degree of this mode of thinking, I argue that the images are themselves projections that further support the aesthetic distancing approach employed by the narrative. The photographs provided are both about the interior of the text—the engagement with memory and trauma therein—and projecting outward to the exterior. In this way, the projections become less about what photographs typically depict—the past—and more about their interaction in the

present and future. This stacking of temporality suggests the palimpsest I noted; the images endowed with an interpretive capability that exposes the continuum of time and, in turn, possibilities of interaction.

In order to explain this functionality, I employ an intertextual approach to explicate the potential of these exterior projections. To begin, the chapter reconciles several theories of the image while providing important theoretical context, including Proust's concept of *mémoire involuntaire*, Walter Benjamin's notion of the aura, the thought of both Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, and finally the more recent theory of postmemory, coined by Marianne Hirsch. While spanning several minds and decades, the striking commonalities to be found in the interpretations and analyses of these thinkers provide a workable framework for my own approach to the image. I follow this analysis with a reading of *Austerlitz*'s images vis-à-vis the image of Ludwig Wittgenstein to show that what is contained and illustrated within the novel suggests a dialogue that is not completely related to the memories being relayed by the characters within the text, but rather outside of it, the dialogue concerning itself with what is possible in terms of representation. The relationship of ethics and aesthetics espoused by Wittgenstein himself is one of the issues at hand. In order to support this, I have incorporated photographs not always contained within *Austerlitz*. These photos are either of Wittgenstein or have been taken by Wittgenstein. I have done so to argue something of the power of the projective image, to show the authors' aesthetic lineage, and to highlight the congruity of thinking—via imagery—of both Sebald and Wittgenstein. These separate images are included, furthermore, to serve as aesthetic bridges between Sebald and Wittgenstein that may be

crossed by readers, and for the purpose of illustrating that these connections can lead to new pathways of inquiry beyond the text.

A Note on Language and Images

The majority of the passages from *Austerlitz* I have chosen to analyze appear in the original German. Rare exceptions where the English is used are for the flow of particular portions of analysis only. I have provided footnotes containing English translations for all German passages. Regarding in-text citations, I differentiate between the English and German versions of the novel with a simple abbreviation—*Ae* for the English and *Ad* for the German.

All images appear with footnotes denoting their source of origin. This decision has been made in consultation with the copyright librarian at the McPherson Library located at the University of Victoria.

CHAPTER ONE

Transcending Temporality: The Narrative Futures and Productive Pasts of W.G. Sebald's Austerlitz

In terms of the representation of past traumas in narrative there exists a particular interdependency between the dominant though sometimes oppositional modes of interpreting the past—history and memory—and the narrative work itself. In many ways, the work of historians, authors, and critics, while engaging in the very crucial task of questioning, deciphering, and representing the past, have come to rely on the past itself as an end point, the answers found informing our understanding of that past. While vital to our understanding of history and its traumas, many current modes of engagement with these temporal spaces neglect presenting the possibilities to be found for influencing and forming the future and its own modes of thinking or understanding. I view this as an issue related to the work of representation as a process of doing justice to events or as cultural coping mechanisms, a way to publically recognize the work of remembrance—both justifiable and important gestures, but which place their emphasis, particularly in physical memorials but also in other works of art, on the creation of the particular piece as being singularly representative of a specific time or event.² There is a rigidity in this thinking that reduces the value of the generated piece, one that limits the potentiality for the work of art to function beyond the temporal planes upheld by memory and history.

This section of my paper attempts to show through an analysis of the narrative structure of W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* that representations of pasts connected to trauma

² On this note, I am speaking of institutional or politically instrumentalized forms of memorialization, which, as James E. Young points out, are often created as a means to provide markers for historical memory on national landscapes and are not often created with the expectation of flux regarding the understanding of what the memorials represent. For more please see James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993).

can, beyond providing significant connections to these pasts, allow for the formation of important ways for addressing the present and future. By approaching narrative, which, notably, in its novelistic form has been referred to as a, “genre-in-the making,” a transient process capable of creating a “new creative and cultural consciousness” (Bakhtin 11-12), and, moreover, as a means to articulate “new ways of conceiving [...] time and space, history, memory and the present” (Swanson 112), we may undertake the representation of the past events in a way that can productively inform our own time and also the future. The flexibility endowed in narrative provides an openness “to all kinds of subject matter and [can] bend its usual forms to meet the special demands of extraordinary experiences” (Lothe, Suleiman, and Phelan 9), while maintaining the distance, in this case provided by fiction, required in the representation of trauma.

In the example of Sebald’s novel, a significant portion of contemporary criticism and literature has focused on the possible mnemonic function presented by the narrative, emphasizing the importance of traumatic memories, images, and spaces as both an obstacle and pathway to the protagonist’s recollection and construction of identity. Similarly, the novel’s connection to the historical functions of modernity has also been emphasized widely (on both these memorial and historical analyses see, for example, Darby; Hirsch; McCulluh; Fuchs and Long; Pane; Szentivanyi). These analyses have centred on narrative structure as well as photographic imagery and its role in relation to memory, recall, and history. In contrast, the intention of this chapter of my thesis is to argue that the process of identity discovery undertaken by both Austerlitz and the narrator (of which we know little, but of whom we will learn more) is not wholly dependent on the past. Rather, I contend that there is a recurrent process of individual identity

construction that occurs as a result of the complex relationship formed by the narrator and Austerlitz. This process is stimulated in their present and is depicted over the course of several random encounters within the narrative that take place in a non-linear, disorienting fashion. Within this aesthetic, both characters contribute to the configuration of new identities as they interact at and with these points of narrative reference, this being most apparent throughout their respective journeys as they converge, diverge and experience, reinterpret and reflect on various centres and figures. While the past remains vital to the conception of the work itself, the possible success of the journey undertaken by Austerlitz (as well as the narrator) is reliant on present interactions: how each character, how each figure, how each space, how each description of time touches the characters. This necessarily affects and drives the narrative forward in such a manner that it becomes less about remembering and more about the present and the formation of a future. I argue that the manner in which this process unfolds signals new ways of constructing the future in relation to the past, therefore contributing to possible ways of approaching the problems of representation that may come with time. The process of figuring the future, it will be shown, will be vital if we are to have any success in moving forward toward the period “after testimony,” when survivors, particularly those of the genocides of the twentieth century, are no longer with us (see Lothe, Suleiman, and Phelan).

In order to continue, the theoretical basis or lineage for the process described above needs elucidation. The first section of this chapter, itself a rereading of influential actors in the debates of memory and history, will discuss the context and theoretical processes that I believe provide the oft-overlooked linkages that inform a proactive

relationship with the future. The second section will provide my own interpretation of these catalyst moments in Sebald's final and perhaps most temporally dynamic prose work, which, I argue, signals the possibilities I have described and hope for.

Reflexivity, "Self-Reflection" and "Action": On Traumatic Figuration and the Future

In a few short years the world will be without living memory of the Holocaust. As scholars, along with community-oriented groups and individuals, various artists, and authors scramble to gather and represent the last of the primary testimony and memory available, the river of time flows forward, carrying us toward this inevitability.³ As this reality looms ominously for all touched by the lives of the survivor generation, another somewhat difficult inevitability awaits those who will remain: the future figuration of the Holocaust and the trauma it wrought.

In many ways, the inheritors, guardians, and creators of narratives related to the Holocaust and its memory will be (and are currently) faced with a similar set of complexities as those who were initially compelled to explore this limit event. Theodor Adorno's early and now famously quoted and yet often misquoted dictum that, "nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch," (Adorno, *Prismen* 26)⁴ is an early indication and articulation of problems that accompany the aesthetic representation of the Holocaust. It must be noted that Adorno did not spend time in concentration camps and is not a survivor of the concentration camp system. How then is it that he could justify and

³ Examples of such contemporary work to gather fragments of living memory before they are gone include, but are not limited to: the Vienna Project, an Austrian based community driven and collaborative memorial project to commemorate the *Anschluss* as well as Nazi atrocities in Austria. Please see <http://theviennaproject.org> for more information; extensive work by German and Austrian public servants sometimes called the *Gedenkdienst* (memory service) to gather, archive and disseminate information on the Holocaust; "The Local Experiences and Stories of the Holocaust" Archival Project, a Victoria based, community driven archival and memorial project.

⁴ Translated as "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." My translation.

qualify such a claim, at least in terms of his own proximity? In reality Adorno did not call for an end to poetry and taken in context we find that there was much more to the passage:

Je totaler die Gesellschaft, um so verdinglichter auch der Geist und um so paradoxer sein Beginnen, der Verdinglichung aus eigenem sich zu entwinden. Noch das äußerste Bewußtsein vom Verhängnis droht zum Geschwätz zu entarten. Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben. Der absoluten Verdinglichung, die den Fortschritt des Geistes als eines ihrer Elemente voraussetzte und die ihn heute gänzlich aufzusaugen sich anschickt, ist der kritische Geist nicht gewachsen, solange er bei sich bleibt in selbstgenügsamer Kontemplation. (26)⁵

While surely a grim analysis of post-Holocaust intellectual and cultural domains, and most certainly of notions of modernity, we must not mistake his pessimism for an acute cynicism. On the contrary, Adorno's ideas within the passage represent a latent but present hope for the future that culturally there could be a break from a purely (ir)rationalistic approach akin to that which fed and grew Nazi ideology. In plain terms, a reconceptualization of rationality, and within this an aesthetic shift, was necessary if,

⁵ Translated as, "The more total society becomes, the greater reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation" (Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," 162).

culturally, there would be a way forward out of the abyss created by the Holocaust. The latent hope I read in Adorno's famous passage was also one directed beyond his present toward a future of continued artistic and intellectual engagement. This becomes historically evident in his own retraction of some of the more negative aspects of the "Auschwitz" statement, where in *Negative Dialektik* and regarding poetics Adorno wrote,

Das perennierende Leiden hat soviel Recht auf Ausdruck wie der Gemarterte zu brüllen; darum mag falsch gewesen sein, nach Auschwitz ließe kein Gedicht mehr sich schreiben. Nicht falsch aber ist die minder kulturelle Frage, ob nach Auschwitz noch leben lasse, ob vollends es dürfe, wer zufällig entrann und rechtes hätte umgebracht werden müssen. (353)⁶

Within the cultural domain of his time, Adorno, while maintaining a stance often regarded as pessimistic or nihilistic by the European left (Rensmann and Gandesha 2), allows explicitly for the expressive power of poetics, the negative dialectic driven by the power of guilt, itself, "calls for self-reflection of thinking" as a way forward (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 365). For Fabian Freyenhagen, the negativity often found in Adorno's criticism of culture goes hand in hand with optimism, one that is found in Adorno's observations on human potentiality. Freyenhagen relates this to a "practical philosophy" espoused by Adorno, which suggests an ethical obligation to contribute to changing the social world (1-3). This way forward through self-reflection and practicality is also supported by his metaphysical writings. While Adorno and metaphysics are not

⁶ Translated as, "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 362).

usually considered in the same breath, it has been noted that he viewed metaphysics, “as a haven for truth” (Hammer 63). Differentiating his conception of the term from traditional metaphysics, Espen Hammer notes, that for Adorno the metaphysical was where, “experience leaps beyond the false totality of modern life and connects with the redemptive potentiality of real material being” (Hammer 63). Adorno stripped the traditional views of metaphysics of its formal rationalistic idealism, which he believed could not contribute to the social theory he hoped to outline, a theory where traditional society and its ideals could be transcended in favour of something less fundamentally evil (Hammer 65, 73). The evil he fought against was best represented by the horror of the Holocaust and was best fought, he believed, through self-reflection and transcendence. Self-reflection, as I read it, may be likened to a forward-looking optimism, where cultural reevaluation is a distinct possibility. In the arena of poetics and art more generally, Adorno observes the potential for this type of work in its possible ability to express the change he most definitely viewed the world as needing.

Though rarely compared beyond their shared exilic experience in the wake of the Nazi rise of 1933, the thought of Hannah Arendt mirrors in many ways my reading of the tone of Adorno’s thinking. The lineage of thought may be traced to the immediate post-war period, where Adorno and Arendt became visible public intellectuals—Arendt for her involvement in the Eichmann trial and Adorno in the early public debates regarding *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [often translated as “coming to terms with the past”] (Auer 231). Their shared concern for their homeland and for the modern world continued, it is observed in one of the few comparative works available on Adorno and Arendt, where both are seen to, “share motives, theoretical undercurrents [...] which are grounded in

common concerns for politically transformative human solidarity, difference, spontaneity, and plurality” (Rensmann and Gandesha 9). The commonalities regarding their view of humanity in the modern world can be found in their respective claims or calls for the active, free human agent. Expressed in the above passage quoted from the *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno’s position, though obscured by the language he chose, is one of humanism, the cynicism betrayed by the forcefulness of his future-looking perspective. In very similar terms, Arendt expresses a hope for communal freedom in the influential *Human Condition* (1958), where on human action she wrote in this long but extremely valuable passage,

To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. Thus action and reaction among men never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners. This boundlessness is characteristic not of political action alone, in the narrower sense of the word, as though the boundlessness of human interrelatedness were only the result of the boundless multitude of people involved, which could be escaped by resigning oneself to action within a limited, graspable framework of circumstances; the smallest act in the most limited

circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation. (190)

Beyond the freedom of action, what is perhaps most important within Arendt's passage is the possibility for an unbounded process where acts themselves become transformative by virtue of their ability to be interpreted and affective within a community. This process provides, though not discussed in temporal terms by Arendt, for an expansion of the interpreted across time, as the community itself is fluid and dynamic, constituted of a plural identity. The transformative power of the interpretive action is also related to Arendt's conception of understanding historical and memorial processes. In *Between Past and Future* (1961) she channeled Hegel writing, that the "task of the mind is to understand what happened, and this understanding, according to Hegel, is man's way of reconciling himself with reality; its actual end is to be at peace with the world" (8). For her, the appearance of history in the consciousness was not merely to inform the present. Rather, historical processes may create an understanding of lived time as related to the past, but are made independent by the ability of man to be an agent of affective change across time.

Read in this way, the prospective value allowed by the perspectives of Adorno and Arendt—where the conceptions of "self-reflection" and "action" meet—is one of great worth today. Perhaps intended for their own time, at this intersection we find something toward an ethics of potentiality in regards to the representation of trauma. Engaging with the great ruptures of National Socialism and the Holocaust, Arendt and Adorno, while often focused on reconceiving political modernity, provide an actionable framework for the analysis of artistic and productive mechanisms of our own time. We

may ask the question: How may the work of literature, of self-reflection, of action, expand our understanding of tomorrow? In applying these concepts I have extricated from Arendt and Adorno to the literature of today, to those works that attempt to trace the images of trauma, we may undertake the massive responsibility of addressing the issues that these works of art, themselves, present. In this way, the process of interpreting, critiquing, and examining narratives becomes unbounded, the process lending itself to an open-ended engagement.

Today's Problems/Tomorrow's Possibilities

It is clear that the commentators, intellectuals, and artists of today have never stopped digging and are yet entrenched in the mire left by the Holocaust. While the reasons for its investigation often remain similar to those of the past, of Adorno and Arendt's time, distinct contemporary problems are now the focus. For example, rather than the perceived "if" of representation articulated by Adorno, it is today the definite "how" of representation. That is to say, how do we go about this process today? I would like to add, again, the question: what can these representations mean for the future? The future of traumatic representation will be intimately linked to the methodologies employed by those who imagine it. Importantly, these methodologies will have to be employed with an understanding of our current and future proximity to the traumas. As the distance grows and the spaces between the past, present, and future become greater, our position in relation to trauma and our awareness of this position become vital. The way in which the Holocaust is engaged with will, necessarily, be informed by these spaces. Put another way it may be asked, how will we go on presenting and representing the Holocaust in and for the future, not simply for posterity, but usefully and in a manner conscious of the

problems brought on by a distinct lack of knowledge concerning events of a horror beyond comprehension? This incomprehension is compounded by our proximity to the events of the Holocaust, the temporal space creating many difficulties for those who take on the subject. On the one hand, historical theorist Frank Ankersmit has argued, “writing about the Holocaust requires [...] tact and a talent for knowing when and how to avoid the pitfalls of the inappropriate. Every discussion of the Holocaust runs the risk of getting involved in a vicious circle, where misunderstanding and immorality mutually suggest and reinforce each other” (176). But, on the other hand, within these extreme difficulties of representation, our current and future relation to the Holocaust presents a unique opportunity to propagate its memory for the future. As Andreas Huyssen has put it, we must figure “how to represent that which one knows only through representations and from an ever growing historical distance,” a distance that he contends will “require new narrative and figurative strategies” (136). As noted, since 1945 these strategies have come to take many forms. In the literary realm, diaries, memoir, historical works, docu-fiction, and fictional works have presented the lived and imagined Holocaust experience. For some, imagining the Holocaust and its trauma through these narratives is done to “arouse ourselves, to awaken our conscience, to keep our obligations to those who were lost, those who survive, and to those of future generations (Schwarz 3). Similarly, in the physical or monumental realm, works of art representing the dead as well as survivors have come to dominate interior and exterior landscapes, spurring on the ever-evolving debate on the appropriateness of approaches.⁷ An outgrowth of this monumental and

⁷ While these landscapes have certainly come to include the now famous memorial centres of Berlin and Washington D.C., other cities and countries have come to rely on the use of monuments to deal with the past and its traumas. Various European memorials and monuments provide perhaps more obvious evidence of this practice, but in the Canadian context it is also accelerating as we finally begin to work through our

testimonial turn has led to these sites and works becoming wells of memory to draw upon for the public and policy makers alike.

Currently there is no consensus on how to continue the project of remembering the Holocaust, with great divisions existing in perspectives on how to go about the process within an ever “expanding space of retrospection” (Lang 3). Evidence of this tension can be found in the widespread contemporary debates regarding the theoretical value of memory versus history, aptly noted by historian Berel Lang as both an obstacle and an opportunity (Lang 12). With this in mind it may be possible that the very lack of this consensus will be that which enables a continued engagement with the traumatic memory of the events. If we allow Huyssen to finish his thought cited above on the future of representation, we find a valuable perspective for a productive engagement with narratives of trauma. In his own important dialogue with Adorno’s famous quote he wrote,

There is another sentence of Adorno’s, less frequently quoted, but perhaps more pertinent today than the famous statement, ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.’ This sentence continues to haunt all contemporary attempts to write the Holocaust: ‘Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter.’ Only works that avoid that danger will stand. But the strategies of how to avoid such degeneration into idle chatter in artistic representations cannot be written in stone. (Huyssen 137)

own past. In particular, I would like to note the 139 planned memorials to the victims of the Residential School system employed by the Canadian government. There will be one memorial at each of these 139 sites, located at former schools. The monuments will not individually dominate landscapes, but will collectively represent the larger memory of the associated traumas, spanning generations and decades, each a point or marker connecting this memory and the project of reconciliation. For more information please visit the Commemorative Marker Project page located on the Canadian Assembly of First Nations website.

Huyssen calls for a freedom of form, not to be without criticism, but for a proliferation of strategies and for continued and productive dialogue with the various spaces around trauma. Notably, this negotiation of space will necessarily be comprised of a traversal of our own time and the spaces that come with it. In many ways, Huyssen's rereading of Adorno confirms the possibilities or potentiality of self-reflection and action that I am attempting to highlight, his call for methodological proliferation a mirror of various narrative strategies.

Another contemporary thinker has, in very similar terms to those of Huyssen, applied a rereading of past thinkers toward a formulation of a practical theory of figuring trauma. Amir Eshel's concept of "futurity" relies on the work of Richard Rorty and Hannah Arendt, the former a neopragmatist concerned with language's ability to reshape lives through the progressive expansion and interpretation of metaphor, and the latter's attempts at articulating a humanism after the traumas of war. Combined, Eshel attempts to explain a theory for the practical past, where trauma is not to be viewed as a stopping point for human agency. Rather, borrowing from Arendt, Eshel suggests that the past is not a burden, but a resource where we may discover potentialities (7-10). Literature and the experience contained therein is a prism by which we may read this potential, the potential itself also contained, in this conception, in man's capacity to detect it, as being "capable of acting in our given realities and capable of shaping our future" in relation to the work of literature (15).

Though I offer a brief sampling from the great myriad of thinkers concerned with representing trauma, we see there exists a latent and sometimes explicit trend toward the need to forge pathways toward the future of traumatic representation. That is not to say

that analyses and works of art signaling such concepts as Eshel's "futuraity" are not without their own issues related to describing the indescribable but that, if we are to continue attempting to remember, such work must be done. Important to this process is necessarily a recognition that we soon will be, in fact, in a space "after testimony," where the work will no longer be that of bearing witness. Rather, we will become reliant on self-reflexivity and action as a means to ethically represent these traumas, the actions of reading and of criticism, themselves, enforcing the normative aspects of the process as it moves forward through time.

Austerlitz: Moving Beyond the Weight of the Past

W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, not created in the space after testimony, consciously engages with the past, the author himself commenting that, "Memory, even if you repress it, will come back at you and it will shape your life. Without memories there wouldn't be any writing: the specific weight an image or phrase needs to get across to the reader can only come from things remembered - not from yesterday but from a long time ago" (Sebald, "Last Word" n.p.). The implications of this perspective are that Sebald regarded the past as vital to our understanding, but that, perhaps, he put little faith in the prospective power of literature, the weight and force of the past creating pools that could not be traversed; the past generative and totalitarian in its ability to shape identity. Indeed the subject matter, as will be shown, is not undemanding, the emphasis of this bygone weight showing through his text at every turn. With this in mind, the very obliqueness, non-linearity, and often difficult feel of the text, reflecting the wading conducted when we approach bodies of memory, is the very action and manifestation of self-reflexivity I view as vital to *Austerlitz*'s ability to signal a productive future. This capacity is contained both

within the text and without, both a feature of its narrative structure, but also as a conceptual facet that is cast outward, beyond the work itself, contributing to a space where we are not drowned in the depths of history and memory, but buoyed and given the opportunity to shape the interaction.

The narrative presented in *Austerlitz* takes place over several decades but is not structured in a linear fashion. Rather, the text begins with a retelling of an experience once had by the narrator, who is anonymous, and who, “teilweise zu Studienzwecken, teilweise aus anderen, mir selber nicht recht erfindlichen Gründen, von England aus wiederholt nach Belgien gefahren [bin]” (Ad 5).⁸ Seemingly drawn to this place, the city of Antwerp becomes an unknown and unsettling starting place for our narrator, a place where he noted: “ich bin von einem Gefühl des Unwohlseins [ergriffen worden]” (Ad 5).⁹ It is during this time that our narrator, after visiting the Antwerp Nocturama, which reminded him of the *Salle des pas perdus*, another of Antwerp’s great buildings, comes across the protagonist Jacques Austerlitz, who is sketching and photographing the surrounding architecture (Ae 7; Ad 11). At this early juncture, the theme of architecture becomes the first of a number of lenses through which the couple come to give and receive the story of Austerlitz’s life, the lens highlighting the characters’ perceived understanding of time and history. During their introductory conversation, the narrator noted the ease at which they both spoke, remarking in particular that, “Während der beim Reden eintretenden Pausen merkten wir beide, wie unendlich lang es dauerte, bis wieder

⁸ Translated as, “I travelled repeatedly from England to Belgium, partly for study purposes, partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me [...]” (Ae 3).

⁹ Translated as, “I had begun to feel unwell [...]” (Ae 3). This is perhaps far less impactful sentiment than the German, “ergriffen werden” denoting a sort of all encompassing seizure of feeling.

eine Minute verstrichen war [...]” (Ad 13).¹⁰ It is here at this first meeting that the narrator and Austerlitz are affected by time, where they both note the way it shows upon their interaction, slowing it to a standstill. In contrast to their experience of time on what would have been a regular day in 1967, the narrative continues, Austerlitz expounding on the architectural history of the city, of such characters as King Leopold, and of the golden history of the capital, Brussels and its fortifications, his tale covering some 234 years, from the completion of Saarlouis in 1680 to the continuation of the line of fortifications at Breendonk, finally completed just before the First World War (Ae 9-18; Ad 13-27).

This portion of the narrative is often interrupted by the thoughts of the narrator, his own thinking constituting projections of time that transcend both his lived experience and that of Austerlitz’s stories. In particular, a seemingly random footnote explains that while being reminded of this conversation by rummaging through old notes, that Austerlitz’s tale, itself, stirs up the memories of an event which took place in 1971, four years after their first meeting, where the narrator witnessed the burning of Lucerne Station, a similar structure in grandeur and style to the *Salle des la perdus* (Ae 10-11; Ad 14-15). Similarly, the narrator goes on to remember, in a strange instance of coincidence after listening to Austerlitz reference the fort at Breendonk as, “completely useless” or “vollkommen nutzlos” (Ae 18; Ad 27), that it had in fact been employed by the Germans as an internment camp during the Second World War and had subsequently been converted into a memorial site of the Belgian Resistance. Importantly, the narrator notes that he would have never heard of the site if he had not heard it from Austerlitz the day

¹⁰ Translated as, “During the pauses in our conversation we both noticed what an endless amount of time went by before another minute had passed [...]” (Ae 8).

before and would not have paid much attention to the short news article on the history of Breendonk he was reading while taking his coffee the next morning (*Ae* 19; *Ad* 28).

The result of this seemingly anecdotal first encounter, rife with strange details that span a considerable and varied history, as well as a pastiche of memories from both characters, is that it serves as a catalyst in their present and as the generative stimulus for their respective journeys yet to be had. While Austerlitz falls out of view briefly, the narrator is motivated to investigate the site of Breendonk, and in fact travels to the site the following day. Located just outside of the town of Mechelen, the narrator proceeds to relay his memory of his exploration of the area, noting, “daß mit jedem Schritt, den ich mache, die Atemluft weniger und das Gewicht über mir größer wird” (*Ad* 35-36).¹¹ The weight of the history of the area pressed down on him upon this visit, and, as he transfers this to the reader, he makes clear that the memory of this journey led him to further explore the event through further research, this work bringing him to the experiences of Jean Améry, who had written of his own torture while a prisoner at Breendonk.¹² In these instances, memory and history lead to experience and interaction with the sites referred to in the narrative presented by Austerlitz, which was then passed outward to the reader, revealing the power of action and reflexivity contained in narrative.

The next interaction between the two characters takes place a few days later in the city of Liège, neither of them noting the strange fact that they happened upon one another. Of this meeting we know little other than that it led to a brief conversation on architecture (*Ae* 28; *Ad* 41). What we do find at this point in our narrator’s tale is that they again meet by chance several months later back in Brussels, and that this chance

¹¹ “That with every forward step the air was growing thinner and the weight above me heavier” (*Ae* 24-25).

¹² This important passage will be addressed in more detail in the following chapter on indirect narration.

meeting leads to the first real confirmation of what would be a peculiar friendship that would take the form of dispersed meetings over the course of many years, maintained through sparse correspondence across a 25 year gap from approximately 1975 to 1996 (*Ae* 34; *Ad* 50).

In December 1996, the two are reunited. The narrator, suffering a mysterious affliction of the eye, a condition where he cannot see anything save for that in his periphery, travels to London to visit a recommended doctor. He remembers a familiar and uneasy feeling as he approaches the city, in particular the portion of train track at Liverpool Station where the train must pass through a tunnel stained with the soot of generations of passing engines. After visiting the physician, the narrator wanders the streets of London under the influence of both his affliction and the prescribed medication, until he again comes across the figure of Austerlitz in a crowded pub. Immediately noting his appearance as that like the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, the surprised narrator approaches a very unsurprised Austerlitz, who takes up their conversation where it left off many years ago, but this time in greater detail (*Ae* 36-40; *Ad* 53-59).¹³ The next quarter of the book is a retelling of the early life of Austerlitz, formerly Dafydd Elias, who as a boy in Wales was unaware of his true identity. Austerlitz begins, “Es ist nicht einfach gewesen, aus der Befangenheit mir selbst gegenüber herauszufinden, noch wird es einfach sein, die Dinge jetzt in eine halbwegs ordentliche Reihenfolge zu bringen” (*Ad* 65).¹⁴ The continuation of his narrative is, as admitted by Austerlitz, not made easily clear. In fact, in this admission we find that understanding his tale has taken great work

¹³ The importance of the image of Wittgenstein is discussed in greater detail in chapter 3, which covers photography and intertextual references.

¹⁴ “It hasn’t been easy to make my way out of my own inhibitions, and it will not be easy now to put the story into anything like proper order” (*Ae* 44).

and that to listen will take an attentive listener, someone who Austerlitz believes the narrator is (*Ae* 44; *Ad* 64). Delving into the story of his life, Austerlitz makes clear some interesting experiences that elucidate that there are two sides to the coin concerning action and reflexivity. His adoptive father, Elias, represents the other side of this coin, as he contributes to the inhibition of Dafydd's (Jacques's) ability to reconstitute his life, and, furthermore, of his ability to interact with things located in the past more generally. In one key passage, Elias shows Dafydd photographs of the town he grew up in. The town had been subsequently submerged during a period of massive flooding that left it erased, save for the photographs. Dafydd, too, expressed the feeling that his own life was submerged, expressing the desire to interact with the past (*Ae* 53; *Ad* 78). Elias impeded this desire when he stated simply that Dafydd was forbidden to do so; "Elias untersagte mir, von derlei Dingen zu reden" (*Ad* 78).¹⁵ Dafydd disobeys his father and learns both Welsh and the unique skill of seeing the dead from his friend Evan, a skill that leads him to perceive the distance between the afterlife and reality as a thin line, but one that can be walked. These lessons lead Dafydd to walk this line, feeling that, "Manchmal war es, als versuchte ich aus einem Traum heraus die Wirklichkeit zu erkennen; dann wieder meinte ich, ein unsichtbarer Zwillingsbruder ginge neben mir her, sozusagen das Gegenteil eines Schattens" (*Ad* 80).¹⁶ From here Dafydd's own journey to find his identity begins, which itself is an action created in relation to a lesson aimed at interpreting the past, the pasts of others, but also of one's own understanding of that past and the ability to shape life moving forward. His disconnection, a result of the prohibition put in place by his foster parents to explore his origins, or what he felt existed in his past, leads him away from his

¹⁵ "Elias said I was not to speak of such things" (*Ae* 53).

¹⁶ "Sometimes it was if I was in a dream and trying to perceive reality; then again I felt as if an invisible twin brother were walking beside me, the reverse of a shadow, so to speak" (*Ae* 54-55).

adoptive home, to a boarding school. It is here that he finds that his suspicions are well founded and that he is, indeed, not Dafydd Elias, but Jacques Austerlitz, a name that as of yet had no meaning and remained strange (*Ae* 67; *Ad* 98). It is not until later that the boy learns of the *Kindertransports* and of his family's tragic past.

It is in this early half of the novel that the primary examples which illustrate and constitute the disorienting relationship between the narrator, Austerlitz, and the past become most apparent. The above passages serve as the points of origin of the journeys to be carried out by the characters, the impetus for the interactions that follow. As we have seen, the interaction between the child Austerlitz, his father, and the oppositional influence of Evan resulted in the founding of a search for lost meaning and identity for the older Austerlitz, all of which is, in turn, relayed to a figure—the narrator—deemed appropriate. The result of their interaction with Austerlitz's life narrative led to action through the reflexivity of the narrator as he seeks out the points of narrative reference to experience them for himself, which he does, and which again influence his own path.

While this chapter has not sought to describe the novel in its entirety, the pathways and linkages related to the narrative journey and the other functions I will illustrate have been outlined. We have seen how the present interactions have shaped the futures of the characters. In relation to the theories of Arendt and Adorno presented in the first half of this chapter, we glean something of the importance of a narrative that takes such an aesthetic form. The way the work manipulates time and the ways in which these times are presented, creates an atmosphere where a particular reflexivity is required, where attention becomes tantamount if we are to read the possibilities of the narrative, that in itself is a representation of loss and the trauma that history can bring. The oblique

manner in which the narrative is presented allows the characters (as well as the readers) to come close to the points of trauma, but never so close as to gain any proper understanding. We may only grasp at the traces of the past. In this way, the grasping is an action toward understanding, this understanding representing a mode of looking forward to the future in a fashion that maintains and does attempt to transcend the epistemological distance created by the location of past traumas.

CHAPTER TWO

Seeking the Past: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Refracted Narration

Within the overall structure of *Austerlitz* there exists, as in other works, various modes of delivery that allow the structure its effect. In the previous chapter, I argued that there is a circuitousness to the work's structure, an oblique approach to the telling of the tale of Austerlitz that, in essence, represents a manipulation of standard concepts of time. This manipulation allows, as we have seen, for the possibility of a reconception of our own time and space; that which is represented may be recontextualized and, through action, made functional for approaching and creating narratives related to past both in the present and future. Sebald accomplishes much in his use of this strategy, the disorienting nature of the work promoting the action I have described. With this in mind, this aesthetic is also reliant on two specific support structures: his use of a particular character narration and his use of photography.

The present chapter is concerned with the first and less visually distinct of the strategies I will analyze: Sebald's use of indirect character narration. Indirect character narration is defined simply as, "an art of indirection: an author communicates to her audience by means of the character narrator's communication to the narratee" (Phelan 1). In more detailed terms, this mode of narration provides connectivity between the various layers and figures of transmission and reception that appear within a text. These may include the characters, author, and authorial audience and the effects of that transmission and reception, which may include the emotional, the physical, or the ethical (Phelan 4-5). Sometimes referred to as "periscope" within discourse on Sebald (see Sebald, interview,

“Ich fürchte das Melodramatische”; McCulluh; Zilcosky), this strategy is employed, I argue, to create and outline the space needed for an ethical dialogue concerning both memory and trauma within the text and between the characters, and for the transmission of this dialogue outward to the reader. I read the use of indirect narration as an outgrowth of the overall narrative outlined in the previous chapter and locate its employment at the intersection of the ethics of representing memory and trauma, and narrative aesthetics. In many ways, the ‘Sebaldian’ narrative strategy applied to the novel is not simply “aesthetic, but intimately concerned with questions of morality” (McCulloh 146) and is an argument for confrontation and dialogue with the past. For his part, Sebald explained his form of narration, heavily influenced by Thomas Bernhard, as a “mediated” style that seeks to establish a functioning ethical perspective in relation to historical notions of aesthetic authenticity, not as evidentiary, but as a means of establishing and supporting discussion (Sebald, “Ich fürchte die Melodramatische” n.p.). In this way, indirect narration in *Austerlitz* represents the transmission of moral and ethical perspectives, characterized as “the passing of stories from speakers (characters) to listeners (narrators), and from authors to readers [that becomes] the very subject of Sebald’s work” (Torgovnick 130). Inherent in this passing of stories is an exchange, “[a] linking of self and other by dialogue, awareness, respect, and responsibility [which] forms the core of many ethical theories [...] In Sebald, looking, listening, and memorializing what deserves to be memorialized emerge not just as appropriate but also as necessary for the condition of being human” (Torgovnick 130).

Before turning to a close analysis of the text and its use of these elements, I will outline the philosophical basis for which I believe makes the inclusion of such elements

vital to Sebald's ethics as a writer concerned with trauma and memory. This is what has been called the philosophy of the 'cinder' (Eaglestone 28), and which is intimately related to the notion of the trace, which for my purposes constitutes the spaces of time and memory that Sebald is attempting to delineate through his work. The notion of the trace is perhaps best explained through the work of Jacques Derrida, who sought to offer a way of thinking, or "perhaps a rationale for and a way of doing philosophy, that responds to rather than 'resolving' or 'explaining' the Holocaust" (Eaglestone 28). The very project of philosophy and, through Derrida and similar thinkers, deconstruction was to be about approaching traumatic events and memory to promote a continued dialogue but not to provide concrete ontological or epistemological understanding. This model of thinking has been described as a process of inquiry or thinking that was to

evoke a post-war condition that unfolds in the vicinity of events so unfathomably horrific as to have excluded the possibility of punctual comprehension, and which, for that very reason, insistently demand expression, even as such expression betrays its utter incommensurability with those events by seeking to weave minimal threads of signification around a yawning absence of meaning. (Crosthwaite 18)

Put another way, comprehending the "unfathomable" is not possible, but may be approached, by necessity and nature, obliquely. Derrida's project of deconstruction has been described further as a process of performativity, where trauma, particularly that of the Holocaust, is figured as an 'absent referent' (Crosthwaite 19).¹⁷ In this way, traces of traumatic events, found in either memory or history, can only be that: fragments of time

¹⁷ Here Crosthwaite is borrowing the term "absent referent" from James Berger's, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

and reality that cannot be grasped, but which allow for and promote their attempted capture by virtue of both their having existed and the horrid nature of that existence; a continual process itself whose origins are found and rooted in the perpetuation of memory.

The rationale of this process was outlined in *Of Grammatology* (1967). A composite of the thought of Heidegger, Levinas, Hegel, and a number of others, Derrida himself located (if it can indeed be located) the notion of the trace at the intersection of lived (that which is within the world) and non-lived experience (the psychic). On this ambiguous concept between what is lived and not lived he noted that,

it should be recognized that it is in the specific zone of this imprint and this trace, in the temporalization of a *lived experience* which is neither *in* the world nor in ‘another world,’ which is not more sonorous than luminous, not more *in* time than *in* space, that differences appear among the elements or rather produce them, make them emerge as such and constitute the *texts*, the chains, and the systems of traces. The unheard difference between the appearing and the appearance [*l’apparaissant et l’apparaître*]¹⁸ (between the “world” and “lived experience”) is the condition of all other differences, of all other traces, and *it is already a trace*.

(Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 65)

In applying the above to linguistic concepts and to the act of writing, Derrida viewed the articulation of the trace as both its origin and death, the point of its existence and extinction. This paradox, though, was considered a great asset (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 73). In an earlier work, Derrida alludes to this resource through metaphor: “Writing is the moment of the desert as the moment of Separation [...] We must be

¹⁸ Translator’s italics.

separated from life and communities, and must entrust ourselves to the traces, must become men of vision because we have ceased hearing the voice from the immediate proximity of the garden” (Derrida, “Edmond Jabès” 69). The value of the trace is found in its capacity to suggest a portion of the essence of that which cannot be obtained, those echoes of occurrences, of memory, and of trauma that are ever present and ever fleeting.

In terms of Sebald’s indirect narrative approach, I read his particular engagement with the past, as described above, as reflecting Derridian thinking; that the past, its memories and traumas, can be approached or grasped at as a means to promote and engage ethical ways of perpetuating memory. As these traces are not obtainable as sources of knowledge, the process of seeking the trace becomes less about understanding the past and its vestiges (as this may not be possible at all) than with creating a viable platform for present and future acts, a place where new forms can productively shape remembrance. The following portion of this chapter illustrates and examines some of the key passages found in *Austerlitz* that support the ethical dimension of narrative points of exchange, namely those places in proximity to historical traumas—how they are traced and outlined by the character narrators—and those places where memories are sketched at a remove, often several times, with the difficult—and perhaps impossible—goal of providing clarity across time.

Grasping at Traces: The Process of Refracted Narrative in Austerlitz

The use of indirect character narration employed as a means of negotiating memory and the temporal spaces around trauma is found in several important passages. The earliest portion of the text that provides the most striking example of indirect character narration are the passages concerned with the primary narrator’s memory of his trip to Breendonk,

Belgium, which takes place after a conversation, as we have seen, with Austerlitz about the area and its various uses. Although the primary narrator is making the trip, the memories of this space are like vespers, the perspective of whose memory is being relayed always shifting and unclear. The description begins, “Die Erinnerung an die vierzehn Stationen, die der Besucher in Breendonk zwischen Portal und Ausgang passiert, hat sich in mir verdunkelt im Laufe der Zeit, oder vielmehr verdunkelte sie sich, wenn man so sagen kann, schon an dem Tag, an welchem ich in der Festung war [...]” (Ad 34).¹⁹ As the narrator speaks of this obscuration and the uncomfortable feeling that came with his visit, he quickly shifts to a memory of something he read and the description of yet another figure, to that of writer Jean Améry and his experience as relayed through his book, *Le Jardin des Plantes*:

Es war nicht so, daß mit der Übelheit eine Ahnung in mir aufstieg von der Art der sogenannten verschärften Verhöre, die um die Zeit meiner Geburt an diesem Ort durchgeführt wurden, denn erst ein paar Jahre später las ich bei Jean Améry von der furchtbaren Körpernähe zwischen den Peinigern und den Gepeinigten, von der von ihm in Breendonk ausgestandenen Folter, in welcher man ihn, an seinen auf der Rücken gefesselten Händen, in die Höhe gezogen hatte, so daß ihm mit einem, wie er sagt, bis zu Stunde des Aufschreibens nicht vergessenen Krachen und Splintern die Kugeln aus den Pfannen der Schultergelenke [...] (Ad 37-38)²⁰

¹⁹ Translated as, “My memory of the fourteen stations which the visitor passes between the entrance and the exit has clouded over in the course of time, or perhaps I could say it was clouding over even on the day when I was at the fort” (Ae 23-24).

²⁰ Translated as, “It was not that as the nausea rose in me I guessed at the kind of third-degree interrogations which were being conducted here around the time I was born, since it was only a few years later that I read Jean Améry’s description of the dreadful physical closeness between torturers and their victims, and of the tortures he himself suffered in Breendonk when he was hoisted aloft by his hands, tied behind his back, so that with a crack and a splintering sound which, as he says, he had not yet forgotten when he came to write his account, his arms dislocated from the sockets in his shoulder joints [...] (Ae 26).

And within this passage the narrative suddenly switches to the perspective of one Claude Simon, a character in Améry's work, who narrates the story of Gastone Novelli whose tale of detention and deportation mirrored that of the author Améry and who "like Améry, was subjected to this particular form of torture" (*Ae* 26) described above.

In these passages the whole process of narration is decentralized, allowing for the inclusion of multiple perspectives within the memory of the space of Breendonk. As a result, we see that the narration consistently avoids providing a direct sense of what had passed. What is told is based on memory or descriptions of memories, obscured by time and perspective, completely indirect, therefore not constituting representations based in historical factuality or a result of what can be understood directly. Spatial and personal difference stands between the point(s) of trauma and the time of reception. Within this spatial divide can be only traces of this past. In this way, there is little possibility for the text to make epistemological claims regarding the space or of what occurred within it in the past. The character, in this case the narrator, can only look at what stands today and marvel at the way in which the history of every place is continually lost in oblivion in a process of memory extinction (*Ae* 24; *Ad* 35). While these pasts may not ever be fully understood, the process of discovering or attempting to delineate the traces of memory continues.

In the decades following their first meeting and the few subsequent, *Austerlitz's* narrator lost touch with the man who had relayed to him the tale of Breendonk, its histories, and its horrors. While maintaining a connection until 1975 when he returned to Germany for his studies, it was not until late 1996 that our narrator, upon a strange chance, came to see the man again. During the aforementioned trip to address his

inexplicably failing eyesight, and upon receiving a treatment that left his skin a pale yellow colour, the narrator visited a bar (*Ae* 34-39; *Ad* 49-58). It is here that Austerlitz fills the narrator in on much of what he had come to learn about his past. This pivotal section begins: “Seit meiner Kindheit und Jugend, so hob er schließlich an, geradezu indem er wieder herblickte zu mir, habe ich nicht gewußt, wer ich in Wahrheit bin” (*Ad* 64).²¹ Beginning with his childhood in Wales, Austerlitz continues to explain his origins and some of the discoveries of his formative years, including the fact that he was adopted and that his name was not Daffyd, but the rather rare and, to him, strange sounding Jacques Austerlitz. Among these details is also the telling of his time at Stower Grange, a private boarding school for boys, where we find specifics of a very important relationship to Austerlitz’s life. The narrator is introduced to Gerald Fitzpatrick, a homesick boy also attending the school, who quickly becomes attached to Austerlitz. The passages retelling their time together exhibit many of the oblique narrative techniques described above, though over a much larger portion of the book. In particular, we find that through this technique many aspects of this section of narrative are, similar to the above passages, about loss, mourning, and the effects of tragedy on memory.

Of particular importance is a non-sequential grouping of details regarding the relationship between the two boys, Gerald and Jacques. While sitting in their dark booth in London, Austerlitz tells the narrator (who is telling the reader) about Gerald’s fascination with homing pigeons, a gift from his uncle Alphonso. The pigeons possessed an uncanny ability to find their way back to their cage, regardless of disorientation or unfamiliar terrain, until one day when one of the birds did not return as usual. Gerald

²¹ Translated as, “Since my childhood and youth, he finally began, looking at me again, I have never known who I really was” (*Ae* 44).

waited nervously until the next day, not expecting that the bird had made the journey. When he had given up hope, the tiny animal was, inexplicably, seen stumbling up the drive, on foot, with a broken wing (*Ae* 77-78; *Ad* 114). While certainly a touching display of natural ability, the affect of this episode on Austerlitz, his memory of that time and his friend is vital, for the relationship of Gerald to the homing pigeons came to symbolize the memory of a great loss. Austerlitz explains,

Ich habe später oft über diese Geschichte von dem allein über eine lange Wegstrecke heimkehrenden Vogel nachdenken müssen, darüber, wie er quer durch das steile Gelände und um die vielen Hindernisse herum richtig am seinem Ziel anlangen konnte, und diese Frage, die doch noch heute bewegt, wenn ich irgendwo eine Taube fliegen sehe, was für mich auf eine eher unlogische Weise immer verbunden mit den Gedanken daran, wie Gerald zuletzt ums Leben kam. (*Ad* 114)²²

The text continues, describing the various trips made to Gerald's family's residence, the focus of which becomes the family's connection to the natural world, a feature of their lives that comes to be narrated to Austerlitz through Gerald's mother, Adela, a distant relative of a lesser known naturalist, parrot collector, and friend of Charles Darwin (*Ae* 83; *Ad* 123). And through another family member, Alphonso, something of the nature of their world, so full of curiosity and wonderment, is described to Austerlitz and Gerald: "Ich entsinne mich, sagte Austerlitz, wie Alphonso einmal seinem Großneffen und mir gegenüber die Bemerkung machte, daß vor unseren Augen

²² Translated as, "I often thought later of this tale of the bird making her long journey home alone, wondering how she managed to reach her destination over the steep terrain, circumventing numerous obstacles, and that question, a question which still exercises my mind today when I see a pigeon in flight, is one that, against all reason, seems to be connected with the way Gerald finally lost his life" (*Ae* 78).

alles verblasse und daß die schönsten Farben zum größten Teil schon verschwunden oder nur dort noch zu finden seien, wo sie keiner sehe in den submarinen Gärten klaftertief unter der Oberfläche des Meers” (*Ad* 130).²³ That which provides intrigue, connections, as well as beauty will disappear with the fluctuations and expansion of time and memory: that in fact these things do not exist, but are “nur Phantomspuren” (*Ad* 135) or “only phantom traces” (*Ae* 93). The implied lesson of this particular perspective was that the boys were to include themselves in this cycle. And it is in this very process that Austerlitz begins to see out of his periphery that which will cloud and encroach upon his memories and lead to his own lapse. The evidence of this natural process is found in the nature of his friend’s death in a tragic accident in the skies over the Alps, as Gerald himself sought the best vantage point grasp at the traces most important to him (*Ae* 116; *Ad* 169).

Sebald’s use of the natural world as a lens by which to explore loss is a strategy to do so at a remove. Similar to the way in which *Austerlitz* uses architectural history as a lens earlier in the narrative (see the passages described in the previous chapter, for example), the narrative technique found within these expositions on the natural world compounds the obliqueness, the tales coming from multiple sources, and reflecting the passing of past knowledge as it can be passed, through proxies. As a narrative strategy, the lines between natural history, personal history, and memory become blurred and complicated. Mark Ilseman observes Austerlitz’s own retelling of this tale signifies a

²³ This quotation is particularly interesting in that the original German uses the grammatical form Konjunktiv I, a form that does not exist in English. Konjunktiv I in modern German is used to express indirect discourse, such as relaying what others have said or claimed. As there is no equivalent in English the translator has chosen, as will be shown in the rest of this footnote, to separate the individual voices the only way English allows. The use of this form in German suggests the oblique approach this paper highlights. Translated as, “I remember, said Austerlitz, how Alphonso once told his great-nephew and me that everything was fading before our eyes, and that many of the loveliest of colours had already disappeared, or existed only where no one saw them, in the submarine gardens, fathoms deep below the surface of the sea” (*Ae* 88).

transition from traumatic mourning to melancholy (Ilseman 303). As a transitional period, the evasiveness of the narrative style and thematic are only further underscored. The blurring between narrators, time, and memory is so complete that finally, “through the lens of Austerlitz [and the integral connection to the natural provided by his friend’s family], history reveals itself as history’s other: it becomes indistinguishable from natural history” (Ilseman 303).

Another example of this form of narration is found in a section of the novel where Austerlitz is hosting the narrator at his home in 1997. Of the fragments passed to the narrator over the course of their many conversations, this one relates to Austerlitz’s meeting with his former nanny, Vera, in the Czech Republic. Unlike the previously discussed lenses of architecture or natural history through which Austerlitz has approached the subjects and questions that plague his mind, these passages come closer to relaying or describing events as they happened. It is there in Prague that his family’s history, one that he has seemingly lost, is relayed to Austerlitz, who, in turn, explains to the narrator, “Es war nach dem Gang durch den Schönborngarten, daß mir Vera, als wir wieder in ihrer Wohnung beisammen saßen, das erstmal ausführlicher von meinen Eltern erzählte, von ihrer Herkunft, soviel sie davon wußte, von ihrem Lebensweg und von der innerhalb weniger Jahre erfolgten Vernichtung ihrer Existenz (*Ad* 239).²⁴ The portions of these later conversations relating to his family’s persecution by the Nazis similarly reflect the deflection of the narrative from Austerlitz’s ability to understand the past, but do so at less of a remove. This juncture of the novel is as close as Austerlitz

²⁴ Translated as, “It was when I had returned from Schönborn Garden, as we were sitting in Vera’s flat again, that she first told me about my parents at greater length: their origins so far as she knew them, the course of their lives, and the annihilation, within the space of only a few years, of their entire existence” (*Ae* 166).

comes to acquiring any fragments of the past. While gaining important details regarding his mother, Agáta, such as the fact she appeared “melonchologisch” but was a truly content woman, and of his grandfather, who possessed a similar nonchalant disposition (*Ae* 166; *Ad* 239), Austerlitz does not come to understand the plight that befell his family, nor did Vera understand things herself for she could only tell things as they occurred.

The clearest and most literal example is found as Vera relayed to her former charge his mother’s feelings, words, and thoughts regarding the German decrees imposed on the Jewish-Czech population at the time before her deportation: “Ich sehe sie jetzt wieder hier im Zimmer auf und ab gehen, sagte Vera, sehe, wie sie sich an die Stirne schlägt mit der gespreizten Hand und, die Silben einzeln skandierend, ausruft: Ich be grei fe es nicht! Ich be grei fe es nicht! Ich wer de es nie mals be grei fen!!” (*Ad* 247-248).²⁵ The confusion of the time comes out clearly in the memory of Vera, who also was able to remember the other side of the confusion, the side that lulled members of Austerlitz’s family into a sense of safety. Her narrative of the period shifts from family member to family member, into the voice of Austerlitz’s grandfather, Maximilian, who believed the time of the Nazis would soon pass, and who had, to some degree, been impressed with the total organization of their industry (*Ae* 168; *Ad* 241), until fear began to spread like a “schleichendes Miasma” (*Ad* 252).²⁶ And as the fear gave way to both panic and a strange resignation, Vera recalled of Austerlitz’s mother’s final days:

Dort warteten wir in der nur ab und zu von einem angstvollen Gemurmel
aufgerührten Schar der Vorgeladenen, unter denen Greise und Kinder, vornehme

²⁵ Translated as, “I can see her now pacing up and down this room, said Vera, I can see her striking her forehead with the flat of her hand, and crying out chanting syllables one by one: I do not un der stand it! I do not un der stand it! I shall ne ver un der stand it!!” (*Ae* 172).

²⁶ Translated as, “creeping miasma” (*Ae* 175).

und einfache Leute gewesen sind, und die alle, wie es ihnen vorgeschrieben war, ihre Transportnummer um den Hals trugen und einem Spagat. Agáta bat mich bald, sie zu verlassen. Beim Abschied umarmte sie mich und sagte, dort drüben ist der Stromovka-Park. Würdest du dort manchmal spazierengehen für mich? [...] Vielleicht wenn du in das dunkle Wasser der Teiche schaust, vielleicht siehst du an einem guten Tag mein Gesicht. (*Ad* 256-257)²⁷

These passages demonstrate the quality of living memory. While the period is clearly outlined and Austerlitz comes to learn something of his family's last days as a whole, Vera's reliance on her own memory, coupled with those she has incorporated into her narrative and explanations, are not wholly reliable. Living memory, outside the lenses of other forms of historical understanding employed by Austerlitz previously, cannot bring him any closer to the events that befell his family. Their value, however, cannot be understated, as they contribute to Austerlitz's personal conception of identity (as a member of that family) and function as a catalyst for further inquiry. As we see, the journey of Jacques Austerlitz does not end with this visit. On the contrary, he continues through Europe seeking the places where his family members used to exist, seeking their traces.

The end of the novel constitutes the possible coming of a full circle, where the last discussions of the fallibility of memory are had, but where the journey to explore them continues. In a silent library in Paris, Austerlitz encounters a librarian, Henry Lemoine,

²⁷ There were men and there were women, families with young children and solitary figures, there were the elderly and the infirm, ordinary folk and those who had been well-to-do, all of them in accordance with the instructions they had received, with their transport numbers round their necks on pieces of string. Agáta soon asked me to leave her. When we parted she embraced me and said: Stromovka Park is over there, would you walk there for me sometimes? [...] If you look into the dark water of the pools, perhaps one of these days you will see my face (*Ae* 178-79).

who he had met some years before. The two take up conversation, as is explained to the narrator, and comment on the processes of disintegration, particularly as a result of the spread of technology, that have come to plague man's capacity to remember, but also on the various misuses of institutional power that have led to such breaks with the past (*Ae* 286; *Ad* 400). The pair climb to the eighteenth floor of the library, what will be a vestige of a time passed, to take in from above the changes that are unfolding. Austerlitz describes the observations:

Manchmal, sagte Lemoine, sagte Austerlitz, sei es ihm, als spüre er hier heroben die Strömung der Zeit um seine Schläfen und seine Stirn, doch wahrscheinlich, setzte er hinzu, ist das nur ein Reflex des Bewußtseins, das sich im Laufe der Jahre in meinem Kopf ausgebildet hat von den verschiedenen Schichten, die dort drunten auf dem Grund der Stadt übereinandergewachsen sind. (*Ad* 402-403)²⁸

The indirection of the passage is clear, the perspective ever shifting as they take in the view. What is also evident is the way in which the narrative describes the ever-shifting landscape. The function of the indirection serves to further illustrate the palimpsestic nature of time and its effect on both the physical and memorial worlds; the world as a composite of layers, that demand, at times, recognition and restitution from the powers of time that bury them. This demand is driven by the traces found within the palimpsest, those that lie bare and those that lie hidden from view.

The journey undertaken by Austerlitz to understand his origins, the fate of his family, and nature of the way they lived, constitutes a continual narrative process of

²⁸ Translated as, "Sometimes, so Lemoine told me, said Austerlitz, he felt the current of time streaming round his temples and brow when he was up here, but perhaps, he added, that is only a reflex of the awareness formed in my mind over the years of the various layers which have been superimposed on each other to form the carapace of the city" (*Ae* 288).

action, where the very questions that are being asked and observations made ensure the open-endedness of the process. As he cannot come to fully understand history, memory, or the traumas therein, his journey goes on. As a fitting end to the work, and where this continuum is exposed, the narrator leaves Austerlitz and retraces his (their) steps in reverse order along the path earlier described, from Paris back to the Nocturama and, finally, back to Breendonk (*Ae* 294; *Ad* 412). The layers, covered and covered again by time, are examined and examined again.

Criticism and Continuation

The mode of narration I have described, contrary to my own perspective, has been criticized as ethically problematic. Perhaps the most notable criticism has come from Canadian literary scholar, John Zilcosky. Zilcosky argues that *Austerlitz* exhibits themes of the melodramatic. In his view, the mode of periscopic narration does “little to distinguish it stylistically from a likewise concentrically-narrated Thomas Bernhard novel” (687). In effect, and through Chinua Achebe, Zilcosky concludes that Sebald’s attempt to avoid expressing the inexpressible fails as a result of the nostalgia brought with the narrative telling and subsequent unraveling of the memory of Austerlitz, resulting in a “desire for ‘total expressivity’” that possibly precludes an ethical position (Zilcosky 695). For Zilcosky the failure is not total, noting the possibility that themes related to melodrama may contain possibilities as an ethical genre of literature, but also notes that there has been little research on the matter (698). While it is not the intention of this thesis to argue that *Austerlitz* is thematically itself a melodrama, the notion and relevance of melodrama must be briefly examined in light of such criticism.

Recent work has highlighted the possibility and functionality of melodramatic literature in relation to ethics and the representation of traumatic memory. In particular, Agustín Zarzosa has noted that melodrama may be viewed as a mode rather than a genre. His position is put as such: “*melodrama* [is a] mode that, in order to ameliorate suffering, tests the efficiency of ideas” (237). In this conception Zarzosa sees melodrama “as a response to a practical or existential [problem], namely, the problem of coping with suffering” (243). He continues:

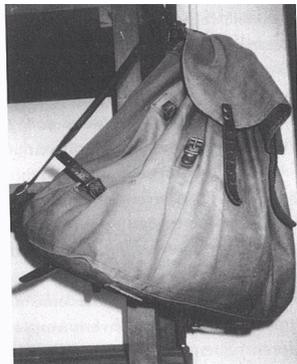
Consequently, I do not define melodrama in relation to epistemological positions but rather in relation to practical philosophies that offer solutions to problems of experience. Since practical philosophies are primarily concerned with orienting human behavior, they subordinate epistemological questions to ethical problems. (243)

In applying this view, one that Sebald himself may not have considered (see “Ich fürchte das Melodramatische”),²⁹ the mode of the melodramatic as described by Zarzosa (but not by Zilcosky) may be mirrored in *Austerlitz* with notable ethical implications. The mode of narration, as I show above, is concerned with the practical exchange of stories across the boundaries of character, authorship, and readership. Similarly, the overall structure—what I argue provides ethically motivating and motivated prompts—supports this practicality. The concept of melodrama as a mode would support the practical and authorial project of *Austerlitz*, which is to convey the difficulties of memory, history, and trauma without providing direct representations or epistemological claims across temporal or generational divides. In many ways, through its structure and method of narration, Sebald and *Austerlitz* are testing the idea that those who did not experience

²⁹ Translated literally as, “I fear the melodramatic.”

traumatic events cannot write about them. Fiction created outside of direct experience may still possess the ability to affect concepts of justice and peace, suffering and mourning, remembering and forgetting, within historical and for future frameworks, in the present and moving forward.

The process of indirect narration as it unfolds at particular points of the novel is vital to the overall aesthetic conception of the work. The success of representing themes of memory and trauma ethically, that is, without making specific claims about the traumatic past or traumatic memory through fiction, hinges on the affect of this oblique approach. The traces of the past, wherever found, cannot be obtained and therefore, when focused on, allow for the continual process described above. Coupled with the structure of these conversations, which is often difficult for a reader to follow, we find that their content reflects the same difficulties for the characters involved, that memory (like fiction) is not reliable but can serve as stimulus for inquiry or journey into what has been given to us.



30

³⁰ Image appears on pages *Ae* 40 and *Ad* 59.

CHAPTER THREE

Photography and the Palimpsest of Meaning

The previous chapters have dealt with both narrative aesthetics and the ethics of relaying tales of traumatic memory in fiction. I have attempted to convey something of the nature of the approach employed by Sebald in terms of his use of a very unique structural technique as well as his use of a specific form of indirect narration. I have suggested that overall these methods operate together to outline the traces of trauma and specific memories, while maintaining distance from the events that are being probed. The distance I describe, in effect, acts as a form of catalyst, promoting the possibility of an active and ongoing engagement with points of trauma and memory that would not be possible if the representations of such were done in a more direct manner. Direct representations could suggest notions of closure or comprehension that are problematic when such ideas, related to historical trauma, are derived from fiction. In contrast, I argue that the evasive narrative strategy allows not only for preliminary engagement with the traces of historical memory and trauma, but also provides the cues for action forward through time, a way to discuss memory and its various traumas when we no longer have access to living memory. With the aesthetic of *Austerlitz* and the implications of its use in mind, the following portion of this thesis is concerned with the more visual aspects of Sebald's novel, in particular the extensive use of photography within the text.

Examining Sebald's use of in-text photographic imagery is perhaps one of the most dominant approaches to both his fictional and non-fictional works. In particular, the mnemonic function of this visual facet of his work has been nearly exhaustively analyzed, with a primary emphasis on the indexical nature of photographs in regard to

trauma or memory of the Holocaust (see Barzilai; Harris; Szentivanyi). The images, it would seem, are provided by the author as a means to broach the subject of the Holocaust in a way that is indirect, providing fragments of time and space, fragments that refer to the past and its trauma, without constituting direct representations. While this area of research is certainly helpful as a mode of overarching narrative and thematic analysis, the focus on the images contained in his work as being representative signposts to the past is somewhat reductive.

The purpose of this chapter is to show that the mnemonic function of photography, signaling a certain exteriority and connection to historic traumas in *Austerlitz* must be noted as present, but that the images must also be read in terms of their overall aesthetic function within the narrative itself. This is important to note when meditating on the possible purpose of the photos within the text, when it is asked, are they positioned therein to stimulate historical memory for the characters and reader, or do they have more to say in the present or future? I argue that the interiority of the images and their relationship to the narrative found in *Austerlitz* may be read as a means of creating a disorienting narrative space in the present, and, importantly, for the purpose of creating inter-textual spaces that work to transcend the memory paradigm, engaging in a dialogue that crosses the temporal boundaries often supported by photography. As Emir Eshel argues, “By *reordering* and *representing* a certain historical event through innovative modes of emplotment, fictional narrative can cause us to view the past differently and allow us to *reshape* how we conceive ourselves in relation to the past” (8, Eshel’s emphasis). In this way, the unique visual emplotment, coupled with the previously discussed nature of the written narrative in *Austerlitz* allows for the

reconfiguration of our own conceptions of historical time and memory—a reconception of a peripheral understanding of what is gazed upon into something primary or meaningful in the present. Similar to the textual aesthetic approach considered in the previous chapter—the periscopic—we find that, in effect, the photographic elements of the aesthetic utilized by Sebald impart in the text a palimpsest of possible meanings: an oblique relationship to historical trauma, an active engagement with authorial predecessors through allusion and visual reference, as well as an opening for contemporary dialogue. In this way, linkages—or aesthetic connections—to various temporal spaces are multiple: to historical trauma but also to traces of modern and contemporary thought. A recent study by Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (2012), would suggest that photographs presented in any context touch those who gaze upon them. They possess a tactile and personal ability that provides varied individual and collective meanings, a “gesture” that signifies possible ideas in the present (11). For Olin, the photograph links communities, not on an interpretive level, but in terms of context. In her own terms, Olin suggests, “photographic gestures indicate that photographic practices do more than merely represent the world. Gestures turn photographs into presences that populate the world like people and act within it to connect people” (14). The images found within *Austerlitz* may also represent a variety of meanings to all who touch and are touched by them.

The approach I undertake in this chapter mediates between and attempts to reconcile the approaches of the memory paradigm and the intertextual offered by the pictorial within *Austerlitz*, with the purpose of showing that the images might serve a larger aesthetic and ethical function. This function, I contend, is not singularly about

remembering, but about engagement with the present and future. The plurality of meaning allowed by the mnemonic processes or indexicality of photographs, along with the power of the intertextual relationship found in the images, together, allow for remembering, forgetting, as well as the creation of new connections to the present, a kind of reevaluation of our own time and space, which will prove valuable in the future.

To continue, the origins of these specific areas of research, including some key concepts, are examined. I begin with an overview of the study of photographs, as well as the use of images in books, sometimes referred to as in-text photography, as these origins directly inform the contemporary study of Sebald's texts. This will be followed by an analysis of one important strand of intertextuality—the vital connection with Ludwig Wittgenstein—found in his work in relation to my own interpretation of the imagery in *Austerlitz*.

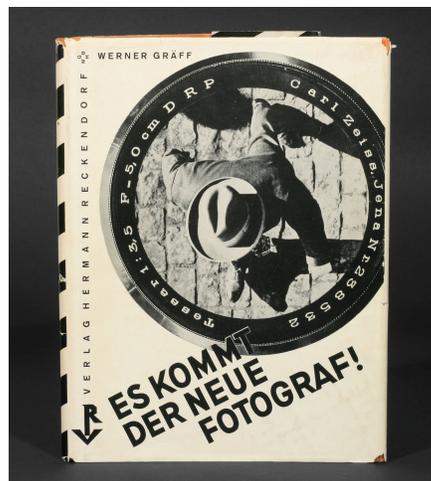
Indexes: Photographic Representation in Time and Text

The linkages of the photographic form to representations of the past as well as to questions of memory have been a logical preoccupation of artists, theorists, and critics for many decades, leaving a wide field of debate over the temporal and spatial importance of images. Within literary discourses, photographs and notions of the image-text have been considered widely since the work of French and German modernists, most notably Baudelaire, Proust, Mann, and Kafka, whose mediations on the form helped to shape the importance of photography and photos as not only a supplement to the written word, but also insofar as their importance to the imagination and creation of literary works more generally (Richter 156). The work of Proust, particularly his *A la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*] (1913), was vital for its conception of the image and its

relationship to memory and the text. For Proust, images were viewed, “as immediate realizations rather than representations of the past, [suggesting] an originality and totality where dream, memory and (past) reality, image and signification still seem undivided” (Haustein 19). In this conception there is spontaneity of meaning. The image is inscribed with new meaning when gazed upon, “the act of remembering the original impressions are not simply reproduced; they are also transformed” (Haustein 23). Fundamentally an issue of perception, the Proustian model questions the viability of relationship of the viewed image with reality, asking: to what extent is what we see grasped for what it *could* mean? The possible variability of meaning found in images leads to new conceptions of the time and space gazed upon, and, for that reason, remembering or looking backward becomes a process in the present, an act of generative and stimulatory power (Haustein 30). In terms of memory—or in the case of photographs, looking at representations of the past—remembering itself is contingent on this form of forgetting. It may be said that we don’t remember events that happened when they are placed before us. Rather, we interpret, or in Haustein’s terms, “translate” the memorial image as an act of creation (30), one that generates value at the time it is viewed.

Proust’s thoughts on the relationship between memory and image as well as image and text had practical as well as theoretical implications. In the post-World War One era, the problematic of the image versus the text became a real preoccupation of thinkers as well as photographers. During this time, photographic images began to encroach more prevalently on the areas of literature and modernist art. The time came when “photographs [...] eroded the text-image distinctions and made it necessary to reconceptualize them entirely. Photographs *became* the text by adopting the functions of

written and spoken language” (Magilow 96; his emphasis). Modernity, catching up with literary forms, imposed itself on the process of creation, complicating the traditional relationship the forms once shared. The result of this alteration in the relationship, toward something more symbiotic, was demonstrated by a number of influential works of literature and photography. In the German context, the arrival of Werner Gräff’s, *Es kommt der neue Fotograf* (1929), signaled the new connection between the written word and the image in popular works, as it placed the two mediums side by side as art on equal terms. First presented at the German Werkbund’s *Film und Foto* exhibition, the compilation of new photography, “corresponded to a key moment in modern aesthetics, as it concerned photography’s reorientation in relation to the written word” (Magilow 94-96). Photography was lent a legitimacy not previously seen and came to be viewed as a functional rhetorical form.



31

Subsequent thinkers, such as Walter Benjamin, sought to convey something of the nature of the image in time. Examining Proust’s notion of *mémoire involuntaire*, or “the concept of immediate, momentary, yet arbitrary cognition” as it relates to gaze and the

³¹ Original dustcover for Werner Gräff’s *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* Berlin: Hermann Reckendorf, 1929.

trigger of memory (Haustein 3), and coinciding with Gräff's work, Benjamin wrote "Zum Bilde Prousts" ["The Image of Proust"] (1929). Within this eloquent piece on the importance of Proust's work, Benjamin interprets Proust's conception of time as a "rejuvenating force" (Benjamin, "The Image of Proust" 211), calling the overarching concept of *mémoire involuntaire* utilized in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, "a constant attempt to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost awareness" (Benjamin 211). Within this conception of viewing the past, or perception regarding the mechanisms within acts of remembering, the instantaneity of past projections are forced into the present, and demand to be evaluated in the time they appear. This becomes an important and influential notion for Benjamin, one that led to a more nuanced analysis and synthesis of image as an underpinning of his later work.

With *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1936; English, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1955), Benjamin presented this synthesis. Out of this work came an idea that was important to later conceptions of the image, the photograph, and photography: the aura. Conceptually, Benjamin's term refers to a differentiation between what is perceived with the naked eye as authentic and what is gazed upon after production and reproduction. The object gleaned by the naked eye after reproduction lacks a particular authenticity. In Benjamin's view photographs were seen as impossibly imperfect reproductions of authentic forms. Attempts at the reproduction of the authentic physical object would inevitably be "depreciated" in their authenticity, the distance from authentic and the reproduced becoming greater with every reproduction. This distancing effect effectively occurred even as those who gaze upon the object do so to bring it "closer" (Benjamin, "The Work

of Art” 221). That said, it can be inferred that the distance between object and subject is both opened and closed at once. The altered object, now reproduced image, not as it was in its own time and not the same, travels away from itself and is re-inscribed with new meaning by those who strive to bring it close and to make it their own. Images are projected inward, traversing the temporal divide and are given their own meaning in the present.

Carolyn Duttlinger has meditated on more positive aspects endowed in the concept of the aura and the relationships it may allow with the original image. She notes that in Benjamin’s time this depreciation of authenticity was taking place in hindsight, that what Benjamin was arguing regarding the nature of the original object had already taken place, and that the aura was lost. She argues that this loss has been taken at face value and has neglected the possibilities presented by the aura; that there is, rather, not loss but a complex temporal interaction between aura and photography, leading to new dialogic processes (Duttlinger 80-81). Regarding Benjamin’s view on portrait photography as a captured instance in time,³² Duttlinger captures something of a different aspect inherent in the aura; “Photography emerges here not only as the tool of aura’s destruction but also, in the form of the early photographic portrait, as the site of its last appearance” (Duttlinger 82-83). This last site is a fragment of that piece of time that was to be lost. We see that Benjamin himself noted its presence. It is this presence-as-trace that allows for an interpretive opening, a change in the capacity of the image. The

³² Benjamin wrote, “It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. *For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face*” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art” 226; my emphasis denotes the passage Duttlinger focuses on, though in a different translation).

concept of the aura and the trace, distinctly separate theoretical concepts, are brought together, the depreciative function of the aura itself negated by the possibility of gazing upon the trace as it existed.

While Benjamin's argument behind the articulation of the aura as a term of analysis was based on articulating the function of art as intrinsically secular and political, divorcing it from previous modes of ritualistic thought (Benjamin, "The Work of Art" 225), the concept has proven to be very influential in areas not singularly political in their theoretical outlook. This influence can be felt in work that has been hugely influential in its own right. In particular, Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1973) and Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980) have utilized and extended, in my reading, Benjaminian thought regarding images, including some of the political implications of the form, into the realms of memory studies and critical theory. Sontag's own adaptation of the aura is made evident in *On Photography* where she observed, "Photographic images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire" (2). The snippets of represented objects and time bear a great resemblance to the fractions of authentic objects represented by the aura in Benjamin's accidental conception. Utilizing the concept of the aura, Sontag imbues the notion with a more possessive power, "as photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure" (6). A false ownership is granted the eye of the beholder, and this is not without negative implications. In Sontag's view, the proliferation of the image and its privileged status in society is extremely problematic. It is a method of detachment from the present, "a pseudo-presence and a token of absence" (12), a trace to which we cling. On memory

and the specific historical event, Sontag argues that the images depicting such events become closer to the actual presence, stating, “images that mobilize conscience are always linked to a given historical situation” (12). In this way, the historical image may be linked to conceptions of morality, but not a concrete understanding of the presence that is gazed upon. Again, Sontag seems to point to a particular indexical nature, both in photographs of people and historical events that correspond to a spectrum of authenticity by which the viewer may grasp at the captured trace, itself a privileged part of conceived past truth.

Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* took a far more mournful and personal stance than that outlined by Sontag, but the concepts employed allude to a shared theoretical lineage.³³ For Barthes, “the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star” (80-81). The aura of the object emanates outward through time to form an index, framing time and space as having happened. However, the index “is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed” (82). Barthes is clear in his argument that what is gazed upon is not, in the present, the same as what was in the past. Rather, he posits that the image is an evidentiary fragment of past reality. Its influence in the present is to function as evidence of a happening or having-been. In rather opaque terms, Barthes explains the functionality of these photographic images as, “a bizarre

³³ Notably, there is no mention of Benjamin in Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*. For this reason, I have used the term ‘lineage’ to describe, perhaps, an implicit relationship between the thinkers and their views on photography. For more see Katja Hausteijn’s *Regarding Lost Time: Photography, Identity, and Affect in Proust, Benjamin, and Barthes* 8.

medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand “it is not there,” on the other “but it has indeed been”): a mad image, chafed by reality” (115; Barthes’ emphasis).

For both theorists, Sontag and Barthes, the photographic image is evidence of the past, an index of an original of which has been obscured by time. The obfuscation provided by time never allows for a completely intelligible understanding of the past. As a mnemonic structure, then, the photograph may serve a memorial purpose as a connection to the having-been-ness of a time and place, but not to the object or events themselves. As a type of temporal evidentiary trace, the photograph has become extremely important for the study of historical memory and trauma, with the Holocaust representing the limit event of analysis in public and private historical and memorial discourses. The image acts as a witness, the evidentiary connection to historical events concretized through chemical processes for posterity. Though the past presented by photographs may represent snapshots of time, of evidence of trauma and horror, both extremely important to historical and memorial processes, their conception as only being valuable insofar as their ability to convey a particular past is somewhat problematic. We may ask, what do they *mean* in the present? – not simply, what do they represent? In asking such questions we do not question the authenticity of evidence, but rather allow for the reconstitution of the relationship of what is viewed as the past with the present.

This theoretical function of the photograph—the indexical nature of them and their presentation of time as it once stood—has provided a contemporary model for approaching the image as a generative catalyst for the literary work and for the analysis

of photographs placed within modern texts. The application of this model has manifested itself in yet another powerfully influential framework: postmemory. Coined by Marianne Hirsch in the early 1990s, her work built (and continues to build) on the concept of generational memory transmission. According to Hirsch, postmemory is “a structure of inter-and transgenerational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of *traumatic* recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (205; Hirsch’s emphasis). The force of memory, as it relates to trauma, is passed on through time, seemingly to “constitute memories in their own right” (205). As transmissive fragments of time, Hirsch views photographic images as a massively important medium. In line with the predecessors I have outlined, the indexical nature of the image is vital to Hirsch’s understanding of their power. Yet her theory takes on another important layer, for the image “enable[s] us, in the present, not only to see and to touch the past, but to also try and reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic ‘take’” (215). In this way, Hirsch allows for a provisional generational reevaluation of historical memory. The photographic “take” is no longer fixed in time, but exhibits a variety of new meanings in the present, while maintaining a connection to the past fragment viewed.

The expansion of the constitutive elements engendered by the photographic image, from a legitimate craft, to memorial index or marker of the past, to something more valuable as a present means of communication, has created a new realm for the power of the image. While somewhat theoretical, it may be said that the constant reevaluation of the place of photographs in time and space has taken place in line with the reevaluation of the literary text. In very similar terms to that of the literary world, the

image, photographic practices, as well as photographic understanding experienced its own linguistic turn (see Magilow), creating new ways of articulating and interpreting what was depicted in photographs. The aesthetic situation of the image, beyond the initial “turn” and reevaluation, has, as we have seen in the arguments of Hirsch, continued to change, providing a useful model for interpreting the past vis-à-vis the present. The transformative processes related to the photographic form will, seemingly, continue to change across time and text.

Remnants and References: Sebald, Austerlitz, and the Image

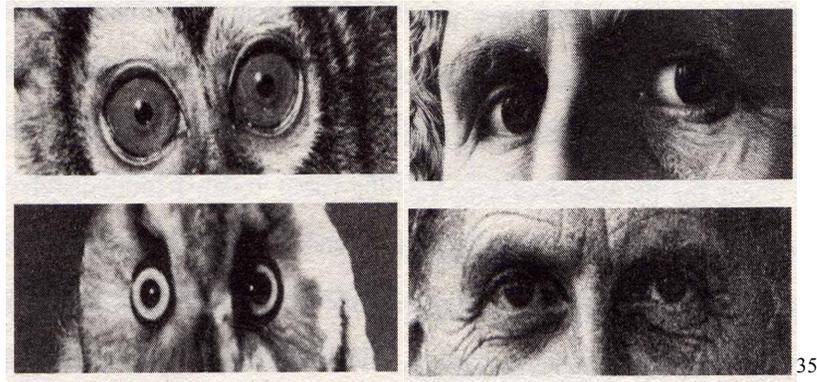
Sebald’s own thinking on photographs has been somewhat well documented through interviews and access to his annotated notebooks and photos. Perhaps most notable is the influence of Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, and Roland Barthes regarding visual imagery’s place in time and space, his own ideas an amalgamation of their sometimes contradictory theories (Scott 217). Most evident is Sebald’s insistence of the power of the photographic image to contain memory, a link or trace to what it serves to depict, but also in this past connection’s ability to disorient or shock those who gaze upon them (Long 46). This shock manifested itself for Sebald as the image demanding something of the onlooker, particularly old black and white images that, “have a mysterious quality where the subject seems to come out of the image and seems to demand an answer about one thing or another. And this kind of appellative presence that these departed persons still have in these pictures [...] I have to attend to” (Sebald, “In This Distant Place” 366). This demand can be linked to the notion of an ethics, that the images demand a response to the question that he found they begged: “Well—what about this? You know I’m no longer here but I still want an answer”—referring to the interrogative plea for investigation, or,

in other terms, for action in relation to the depicted image (Sebald, “In This Distant Place” 366-67).

It is precisely this action, though not spoken of directly, that is allowed and driven by interaction and dialogue with the photographs within *Austerlitz*. The photographic interventions found within W.G. Sebald’s text form a unique relationship to both time and the text itself. The indexical projections of the past, along with an unreliable but discernible intertextual system of reference weave the temporal fabric together, exposing the spectrum of time. Both functions, the exterior and interior, work to create a palimpsest of meaning, where time and space are brought together to reveal the continuum of history and its relationship to the present. This aesthetic decision, I argue, operates in a manner that does not simply offer projections of the past as evidence, but rather functions as cues or prompts for engagement in our own time. This prompting of literature, “permits—rather than prescribes—thought and debate, emancipation from custom and ritual” (Eshel 12). Rather than providing notions of factuality related to the past, Sebald’s text presents images often without specific contextual cues to disorient. The resulting disorientation allows for the formation of unique relationships with various points of time and space and with the text itself. The images are both about the processes of recall or historical reconstruction and contemporary modes of thinking about our situation in time and how the past can be utilized within it. While seemingly anachronistic, the process of looking backward differs from traditional historical inquiry in that it asks a fundamentally different question, namely: What use or relevance will the work presented have for present concerns? This is a much different question from the more traditional investigation of what we can discover through the picture about the past

(Eshel 10). The distinction made by Eshel is a simple one, but one that is vital if artists, theorists, and authors are to move forward in addressing the past ethically in the present.

Very early in the novel, we are presented with the first of the images that come to shock or draw the reader further into the narrative. The unnamed narrator, telling of a journey taken to the Antwerp Nocturama, a type of zoo housing all manner of nocturnal creatures originating from all expanses of the Earth, and possessing the specific traits of highly evolved beings of the twilight, including saucer-like eyes, bestows upon the reader the first textual images Sebald translates into the pictorial. As he relays his wander through the Nocturama, the narrator, not remembering much more than a raccoon he watched for some time, likens the gaze of the other creatures he manages to remember with that of the “forschenden Blick, wie man ihn findet bei bestimmten Malern und Philosophen, die vermittels der reinen Anschauung und des reinen Denkens versuchen, das Dunkel zu durchringen, das uns umgibt” (*Ad* 7).³⁴



The juxtaposition between the gaze of the nocturnal lemur and owl with the penetrating eyes of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and Sebald’s personal friend and artist Jan Peter Tripp speaks to the endeavor of seeing and of perception through the literal and

³⁴ Translated as, “inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking” (*Ae* 4-5).

³⁵ Image appears on pages *Ae* 4-5 and *Ad* 7.

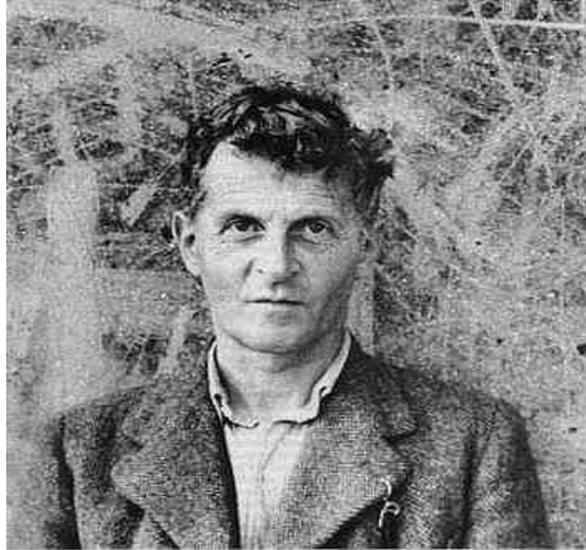
figurative darkness of experience.³⁶ Taking place so early in the work, Sebald alludes to the vital relationship of Wittgenstein in order to set the stage for his literary expositions on the nature of the journey and interactions that are to follow, the nature of which is challenged and informed by concepts of both memory and ethical representation. In terms of memory, the image of Wittgenstein becomes a recurring one for the narrator, the initial image of the philosopher fading early in the novel, lost with the other images of the Nocturama as, “Die Bilder aus dem Inneren [des Raums wurden] in meinem Gedächtnis im Laufe der Jahre durcheinandergeraten mit denjenigen, die ich bewahrt habe von der sogenannten *Salle des pas perdus*” (Ad 8),³⁷ another of Antwerp’s massive structures, only to reappear. The fleeting image is brought rushing back later in the text, the narrator seeing Austerlitz again, remembering how Austerlitz resembled Wittgenstein:

jedenfalls ist mir erinnerlich, daß ich, ehe ich hinübergegangen bin zu ihm, mir länger Gedanken machte über die mir jetzt zum erstenmal aufgefallene Ähnlichkeit seiner Person mit der Ludwig Wittgensteins, über den entsetzten Ausdruck, den sie beide trugen in ihrem Gesicht,” and later noting that, “sobald ich irgendwo auf eine Photographie von Wittgenstein stoße, als blicke mir Austerlitz aus ihr entgegen, oder, wenn ich Austerlitz anschau, als sehe ich in ihm den unglücklichen [...]” (Ad 58-60)³⁸

³⁶ For more on the relationship between Jan Peter Tripp and W.G. Sebald, please refer to the collaborative work published posthumously, *Unrecounted* (2004), a collection of poetry by Sebald with lithographs by Tripp.

³⁷ Translated as, “images of the interior of the [space became] confused in my mind with my memories of the *Salle des pas perdus*” (Ae 5).

³⁸ Translated as, “I recollect that before approaching him I had been thinking of his personal similarity to Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the horror-stricken expressions on both their faces” and “whenever I see a photograph of Wittgenstein somewhere or other, I feel more and more as if Austerlitz were gazing at me out of it, and when I look at Austerlitz I see in him the disconsolate philosopher [...]” (Ae 40-41)

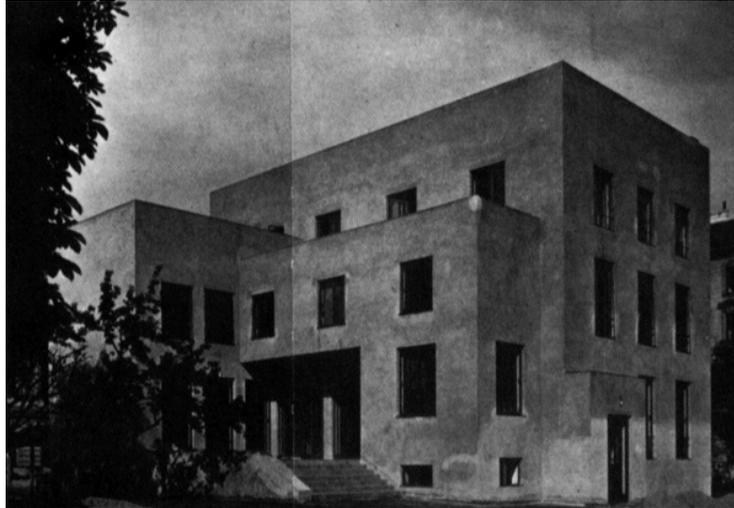


39

For the narrator, the appearance of Austerlitz casts the shadow of Wittgenstein, the similarities pervading most aspects of the way the character is perceived. Clearly, as it is put in the novel, the image of Wittgenstein is coupled with a recounting of specific memories of his journey. In this way, the mnemonic function is apparent. But what are we to think of the intertextual connection—the usefulness and exterior relationship the image casts outside the text and to the reader—other than as an erudite example of the referential? Nina Strauss views this layer of *Austerlitz* as integral to the novel’s conception of time, linking Sebald to both Wittgenstein’s philosophical method (associated to his ethics as we shall see) as well as his views on memory (Strauss 44). Strauss argues through Hirsch’s concept of postmemory that “Wittgenstein’s troubled relation to previous (Jewish) generations, his skeptical response to language, his lack of confidence in the empirical nature of representation, indeed his traumatic relation to memory, connect him psychologically to the sense of self-division, isolation, and inauthenticity that Sebald calls upon in creating Austerlitz” (Strauss 44). Austerlitz has, it

³⁹ Wittgenstein shortly before his death. Found in Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. (New York: Penguin, 1990), n.p.

seems, inherited many of the interests Wittgenstein is said to have had, including a fascination with photography and architecture, of which both are manifested in the novel (Strauss 44).



Telling the narrator of his first photographic experiments, Austerlitz links the two subjects well: “In der Hauptsache hat mich von Anfang an die Form und Verschlossenheit der Dinge beschäftigt, der Schwung eines Stiegegeländers, die Kehlung an einem steinernen Torbogen, die unbegreiflich genaue Verwirrung der Halme in einem verdorrten Büschel Gras” (Ad 113).⁴¹ And, continuing, Austerlitz links this preoccupation to the capture of individual fragments of time when he explains that,

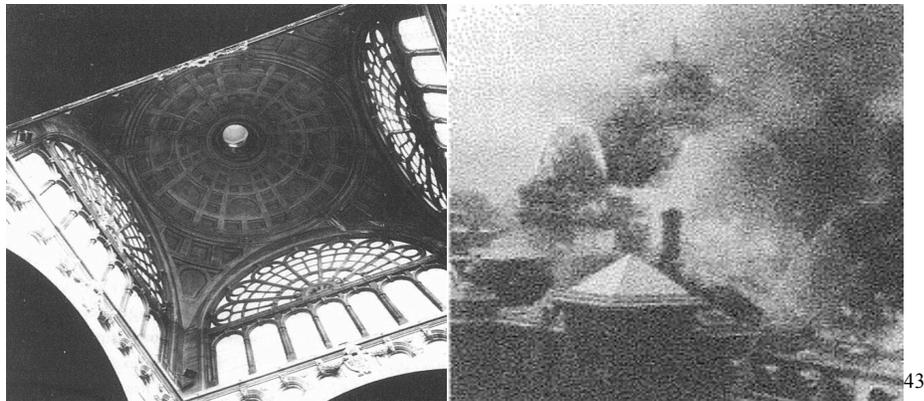
Besonders in den Bann gezogen hat mich bei der photographischen Arbeit stets der Augenblick in dem man auf dem belichteten Papier die Schatten der Wirklichkeit sozusagen aus dem Nichts hervorkommen sieht, genau wie Erinnerungen, die ja auch inmitten der Nacht in uns auftauchen und die sich dem,

⁴⁰ Photograph taken by Wittgenstein of a home he planned and had built. Found in Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. (New York: Penguin, 1990), n.p.

⁴¹ Translated as, “From the outset my main concern was with the shape and contained nature of discrete things, the curve of banisters on a staircase, the molding of a stone arch over a gateway” (Ae 76-77).

der festhalten will, so schnell wieder verdunkeln, nicht anders als ein photographischer Druck, den man zu lang im Entwicklungs liegenläßt (*Ad* 113).⁴²

On architecture, one such example of the connection between the two figures is the exposition by Austerlitz to the narrator on the architectural history of the Antwerp Centraal Station, built by King Leopold, which itself is coupled with photographs of the Lucerne Station, its destruction by fire in 1971 relayed from memory by the narrator in a footnote to the conversation he was having with Austerlitz (*Ae* 8-12; *Ad* 13-19).

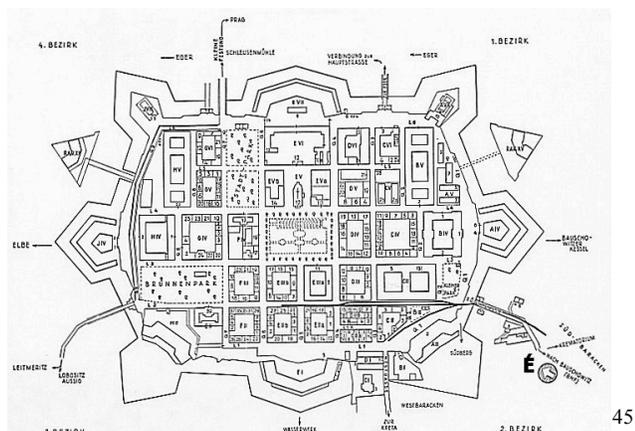


The employment of photographic reproductions of structural schematics, as described by Austerlitz to the narrator, provide further linkages to the fascination and preoccupation with architecture also held by Wittgenstein. Of particular importance to Austerlitz's journey to find information regarding his past is his work and travels to Theresienstadt, the place of his mother's death. Austerlitz's attempts at understanding the area only come through intensive linguistic research into the schematic's technical language and its relationship to the space (*Ae* 236; *Ad* 334). Architecture and language are melded as

⁴² Translated as, "In my early photographic work I was always especially entranced 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" (*Ae* 77).

⁴³ Images appear on pages *Ae* 11 and *Ad* 15.

related concepts, unifying Wittgenstein and Austerlitz in practice and action, as they attempt to determine their place in the world.⁴⁴



The aesthetic employed by Sebald to link the fictional character Austerlitz with the historical figure Wittgenstein implies a specific ethics of representation, not by virtue of allusion, but rather through philosophical dialogue found in the actions of the character in relation to Wittgenstein (Straus 47). This dialogue is allowed by a palimpsestic layering of visual and narrative imagery, where the problems of representing the past are made bare across these layers, but are engaged with through a common framework, and, in this case, represented in literature. In this instance, it would seem that this particular example of intertextuality is an exploration by Sebald of specific elements of Wittgenstein's thought, namely, of the dialogue the latter saw between ethics and aesthetics, which he explored through both philosophy and architecture (Pook 77). For Wittgenstein, ethics could only be manifested through action. Such action—toward the production of productive solutions to problems of artistic representation—was at the

⁴⁴ For information—vastly too extensive for inclusion in this thesis—on the relationship of language to philosophy please see Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

⁴⁵ Image appears on pages *Ae* 234-235 and *Ad* 332-333.

heart of his ethics (Pook 74).⁴⁶ Sebald presents *Austerlitz* as a journey of recall, the trip an action of historical reconstruction. As it pertains to the novel and the possible use of this intertextual aesthetic, the dialogical nature of this relationship between art and the form of its presentation permits an engagement with the present, one that is upheld by the elements that constitute its form. The element of photography works to transcend the concept of memory seemingly presented by the narrative, the transcendence supported by aspects of the commonalities found between characters and historical figures. The dialogue created by the interaction of text and image projects outward across time producing possibilities in the present and alters the fixity usually associated with images.

⁴⁶ Wittgenstein is not generally known for his work as an ethicist, though one famous speech does exist where he explicitly discussed ethics. Please see Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics."

CONCLUSION

In the preface to his powerfully influential work, *The Function of Criticism* (1984), Marxist intellectual Terry Eagleton argued that, “criticism today lacks all substantive social function” (Eagleton n. pag.). He went on, somewhat pejoratively, to divide the contemporary state of criticism into the categories of “the public relations branch of the literary industry [and of a matter] wholly internal to the academies” (Eagleton n. pag.). While my own paper is far from a political polemic, the conclusions stated by Eagleton, even thirty years ago, that we must transcend contemporary and dominant modes of interpretation and strive for something more substantive within the process of criticism carry significant weight (Eagleton 123). His own call for engagement with the various public spheres of political knowledge skirts around the outline of the processes that I have been trying to trace: that there must be a reconceptualization of the functions and structures of public discourse toward something viable as a productive means of engagement with the past. In this case, I am concerned with memory and the extent to which a literary process that highlights the productive value of subjective experience in relation to literature is possible. Noting, again, the abstractness of this as an end goal, I believe that a proactive discourse on these functions is vital for a future where the past, and the traumas that so often come with it, will be made less ambiguous—that from the abstraction that often comes with critical theory and memory studies, we may derive a utilitarian end.

I have sought to illustrate the processes by which this utilitarian end may be achieved in my approach to *Austerlitz*. The first chapter outlines the particular aesthetic and ethical functions—the aesthetics and ethics of refraction—that are present in the

structure of Sebald's novel. This important discussion provides the intellectual and philosophical context of my reading and established the vital link I see between the processes of remembrance and critical literary theory. The textual analytics of this chapter highlight my thinking on *Austerlitz*'s place in these processes, not as a template, but as a pillar of the process itself, a hopeful extension and recognition of our place in space and time, its aesthetics and ethics a call for a revision in memorial thought.

Chapters two and three differ in that they both focus on very particular elements of the aesthetic and connect them to distinct ethical theories. Chapter two is concerned with a very specific interior function of the text's aesthetic: indirect narration. The purpose of this analysis is to show how *Austerlitz* exposes the very precarious nature of memory and of our positionality in relation to it. By reading portions of the text through Derridian "trace" theory, I show that it is the very precariousness of memories that contribute to our wanting to understand them, to be close to them, and pursue them. This action of memorial pursuit is exemplified by *Austerlitz* and the manner in which the various conversations and memories are presented and relayed. In the conclusion of this chapter, I present the argument that this process of grasping at traces of traumatic memory is and will be increasingly more important as time moves on, creating wider gaps in our understanding.

Similarly, chapter three is interested in a specific portion of the aesthetic as found in *Austerlitz*. While the explicit though ambiguous use of photography within the work has been a popular and, indeed, fascinating angle by which to approach Sebald's work, I have tried to create a new reading of the function of these images both within the text and outside of it. The interior functionality of the images, or how they operate parallel to the

textual elements, is explained in terms of the refractive quality they present; the images provide a purposeful distance from the presented events in history and memory, the oblique nature of this functionality being integral to avoiding epistemological certainty. Consequently, there is what I refer to as a palimpsest of meaning where the images are endowed with possibility, with links to modes of thinking that are not immediately evident, but which may be pursued in terms of examining the various layers present. The exteriority I speak of, the images as operating outside the text, is exemplified by the possible connections that may be derived from these layers. I explain this exteriority in my reading of *Austerlitz* in relation to the thinking and biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein, his connection to aesthetic projects, and the ethical underpinning of his thought.

Complicating my approach is the fact that I have chosen to analyze a work of fiction. I have done so for the simple reason of showing that one may purposefully participate in dialogue with interpretations and representations of the past, not only with what is represented, but also with what those representations may project forward through time. Fiction allows for an opening up of a dialogue in ways not typically permitted by other forms, such as testimonial literature and memoir, and most certainly memory work in the monumental realm. While engaging, each form carries its own important methodological approaches and limitations. I have argued that fiction possesses a flexibility that allows for a plurality of techniques that may capture and highlight the myriad issues involved with representing memory and trauma. As Bernhard Schlink has noted, the process of writing and reading fiction is a particularly powerful tool for working with the past. He noted in his work *Guilt About the Past* (2010) that, “fiction is

true if it presents what happened or could have happened [...] or that which opens our eyes to something that happened or could have happened. What it presents doesn't have to be the full truth; it can be just a tiny element of the truth as long as it doesn't pretend to be more than it is" (133).

A natural criticism of this mode of thinking is that it is purely interpretive, meaning what is represented is exposed to any number of possibly distorting interpretations. In many ways, this is certainly a valid concern, particularly when dealing with traumas of the past. In the case of *Austerlitz*, however, I have argued that the employment of Sebald's particular aesthetic framework allows for and supports a distancing effect that, in essence, precludes a strict epistemological certainty while simultaneously providing contextual connective cues to the past that is represented. In this aesthetic space there is a logical extent to which the interpretive act can be taken. To take this a step further, I argue that there is an ethical logic to this mode of representing the past, one that is driven by the aesthetic, but which also supports it. This important relationship between the ethics of representation and narrative aesthetics enables *Austerlitz* to confront a great number of conceptual issues through a number of different historical lenses, while maintaining a central focus: that memory, trauma, and history may never be understood as they were, but that they may inform and, more importantly, propel the subjective processes of engagement in the present and future.

The practicality of such an approach can be identified as a recognition and awareness of the always-precarious situation of memory as something that is perpetually fleeting. In terms of remembering trauma, the recognition of these expanding and contracting temporal boundaries is vital if those concerned with remembering are to do so

after periods of testimony pass. Without an awareness of our situation in time, there can be no action toward the subjective, individual processes of commemoration and remembrance that will, themselves, come to constitute the core of what will become the memory of the past.

As I note earlier in this thesis, the emphasis on these subjective processes of confrontation with the various levels of temporality found in *Austerlitz* is not something that appears in the existing literature on Sebald—at least not in terms of the (re)formation of the present and future. There is, indeed, a wealth of extremely valuable material on Sebald’s techniques, including most obviously his use of imagery and much of this material has been consulted in preparation for this thesis. However, I have tried to maintain and create a distance from these analyses, particularly in terms of my philosophical approach, opting to undertake an effort to produce a pro-active reading toward something pragmatic, but also constructive in scope. With this in mind, I suggest that this thesis, while fuelled by and bordering on an over-positive outlook, provides an imaginative contribution to contemporary memory work. The relationship of memory and literary studies has certainly already been solidified. However, with the ever-shifting nature of time that we work within, new processes (and outlooks) within this relationship must be employed for both for the perpetuation of memories (or representations of memories) and toward something of an expanded comprehension of the practical possibilities to be found within memorial and literary investigation.

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor. "Cultural Criticism and Society." *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. 146-162. Print.
- . *Negative Dialektik*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966. Print.
- . *Negative Dialectic*. Trans. E.B. Ashton. London: Routledge, 2004. Web. Nov. 2013.
- . *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955. Print.
- Ankersmit, F.R. *Historical Representation*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Viking Press, 1961. Print.
- . *The Human Condition*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998. Print.
- Auer, Dirk. "Theorists in Exile: Adorno's and Arendt's Reflections on the Place of the Intellectual." *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations*. Ed. Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesha. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012. 229-246. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Ed. and Trans. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. Print.
- Barzilai, Maya. "On Exposure: Photography and Uncanny Memory in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*." *W.G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*. Ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulluh. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006. 205-218. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Image of Proust." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 201-216. Print.

- . “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 217-252. Print.
- Crosthwaite, Paul. *Trauma, Postmodernism, and Aftermath of World War II*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Web. Feb 2014.
- Darby, David. “Landscape and Sebald’s Redemption of History.” *W.G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*. Ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulluh. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006. 265-278. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book.” *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1978. 64-78. Print.
- . *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1997. Web. March 2014.
- Duttlinger, Carolin. “Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography.” *Poetics Today* 29.1 (Spring 2008): 79-101. *Ebscohost*. Web. Nov. 2013.
- Eagleston, Robert. “Derrida and the Holocaust: A Commentary on the Philosophy of Cinders.” *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 7.2 (2010): 27-38. Web. Jan 2014.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Function of Criticism*. London: Verso, 2005. Print.
- Eshel, Amir. *Futurity*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013. Print.
- Freyenhagen, Fabian. *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. Print.
- Fuchs, Ann, and J.J. Long, eds. *W.G. Sebald and the Writing of History*. Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen und Neumann, 2007. Print.
- Gussow, Mel. “W. G. Sebald, Elegiac German Novelist, Is Dead at 57.” *The New York Times*. 15 Dec. 2001: n. pag. Web. March 2014.
- Hammer, Espen. “Metaphysics.” *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts*. Ed. Deborah Cook. Stocksfield: Acumen Press, 2008. 63-75. Print.

- Harris, Stephanie. "Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgerwanderten*." *The German Quarterly* 74.4 (2001): 379-391. JSTOR. Web. Nov 2013.
- Haustein, Katja. *Regarding Lost Time: Photography, Identity, and Affect in Proust, Benjamin, and Barthes*. London: Legenda, 2012. Print.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory." *On Writing with Photography*. Ed. Karen Beckman and Liliane Weissberg. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013. 202-230. Print.
- Homberger, Eric. "WG Sebald: German Writer Shaped by the Forgetfulness of his Fellow Countrymen After the Second World War." *The Guardian*. 17 Dec. 2001: n. pag. Web. March 2014.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.
- Ilsemann, Mark. "Going Astray: Melancholy, Natural History, and the Image of Exile in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*." *W.G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*. Ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulluh. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006. 301-314. Print.
- Lang, Berel. *The Future of the Holocaust: Between History and Memory*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999. Print.
- Long, J.J. *W.G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007. *Durham Research Online*. Web. Oct. 2013.
- Lotte, Jakob, Susan Suleiman, and James Phelan. "'After' Testimony: Holocaust Representation and Narrative Theory." *After Testimony: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narrative for the Future*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. 1-19. Print.
- Magilow, Daniel H. "Photography's Linguistic Turn: On Werner Gräff's Here Comes the New Photographer." *On Writing With Photography*. Ed. Karen Beckman and Liliane Weissberg. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013. 94-116. Print.
- McCulluh, Mark R. *Understanding W.G. Sebald*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2003. Print.
- Monk, Ray *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. New York: Penguin, 1990. Print.
- Olin, Margaret. *Touching Photographs*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2012. Print.

- Pane, Samuel. "Trauma Obscura: Photographic Media in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*." *Mosaic* 38.1 (2005): 37-54. *ProQuest*. Web. 30 Oct. 2013.
- Phelan, James. *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2005. Print.
- Pook, David O. "Working on Oneself: Wittgenstein's Architecture, Ethics and Aesthetics." *Symploke* 2 1 (1994): 48-82. *JSTOR*. Web. Nov. 2013.
- Rensmann, Lars, and Samir Gandesha. "Understanding Political Modernity: Rereading Arendt and Adorno in Comparative Perspective." *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations*. Ed. Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesha. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012. 1-27. Print.
- Reynolds, Nigel. "Car crash kills author tipped for Nobel Prize." *The Telegraph*. 17 Dec. 2001: n. pag. Web. March 2014.
- Richter, Gerhard. "Unsettling Photography." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 7.2 (2007): 155-173. *Project Muse*. Web. Oct. 2013.
- Sebald, W.G. *Austerlitz*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2001. Print.
- . *Austerlitz*. Trans. Anthea Bell. New York: Modern Library, 2001. Print.
- . "Ich fürchte das Melodramatische." Interview. *Der Spiegel*. 11/2001. Web. Nov. 2013.
- . "In This Distant Place: A Conversation with Steve Wasserman." *Saturn's Moons: W.G. Sebald—A Handbook*. Ed. Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt. London: Legenda, 2011. 364-375. Print.
- . "The Last Word." Interview. *The Guardian* 21 Dec. 2001. Web. Oct. 2012.
- Schlink, Bernhard. *Guilt About the Past*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2010. Print.
- Schwarz, Daniel R. *Imagining the Holocaust*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. Print.
- Scott, Clive. "Sebald's Photographic Annotations." *Saturn's Moons: W.G. Sebald—A Handbook*. Ed. Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt. London: Legenda, 2011. 217-246.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Rosetta Books, 2005. Web. Oct 2013.

- Straus, Nina P. "Sebald, Wittgenstein and the Ethics of Memory." *Comparative Literature* 61.1 (2009): 43-53. *Ebscohost*. Web. Nov. 2013.
- Swanson, Gillian. "Memory, Subjectivity and Intimacy: The Historical Formation of the Modern Self and the Writing of Female Autobiography." *Memory and Methodology*. Ed. Susannah Radstone. Oxford: Berg, 2000. 111-132. Print.
- Szentivanyi, Christina M.E. "W.G Sebald and Structures of Testimony and Trauma: There are Spots of Mist That No Eye can Dispel." *History, Memory, Trauma*. Ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulluh. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006. 351-363. Print.
- Torgovnick, Marianna. *The War Complex: World War II in Our Time*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005. Print.
- Ulin, David L. "Memory and Myth." *Los Angeles Times*. 2 Dec. 2007: n. pag. Web. March 2014.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. "A Lecture on Ethics." *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 3-12. Web. Dec. 2013.
- . *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. C. K. Ogden. *Gutenberg Ebooks*. Web. Feb. 2014.
- Young, James E. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993. Print.
- Zarzosa, Agustin. "Melodrama and the Modes of the World." *Discourse* 32.2 (2010): 236-255. *Project MUSE*. Web. Jan 2014.
- Zilcosky, John. "Lost and Found: Disorientation, Nostalgia, and Holocaust Melodrama in Sebald's *Austerlitz*." *Modern Language Notes* 121.3 (2006): 679-698. Web. Jan 2014.