W.G. Sebald and the Condition of Exile

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'The moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory.' (W.G. Sebald, in an interview with *The Guardian*, Jaggi, 2001)

'Those who are guilty of this can never imagine what it's like to be suddenly expelled from a country.' (W.G. Sebald, in an interview with *El País*, Krauthausen, 2001)

THE GROUND floor of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin comprises three axes. These dramatize three possible Jewish fates in Germany. They are called the Axis of Continuity, the Axis of Holocaust and the Axis of Exile.[1]

Follow the Axis of Exile and you find yourself peering into a series of glass cases – *Vitrinen* in German. Each case contains objects that tell the tale of a Jewish family or individual compelled to leave Germany to seek a new life and home elsewhere. The *Vitrinen* portray the bric-à-brac of memory. The Axis lists the exiles' destinations around the globe. The stories contained in the cases are mere moments of their existences, snapshots, summed up in no more than a few lines of narrative. They offer a glimpse of lives transformed and, for the visitor, the prospect of identification with those in exile. The *Vitrinen*, therefore, are 'cases' in another sense – microstudies intended to reflect the fate of those victimized by Nazism but fortunate enough to escape extermination. These are 'human interest' stories realized with a solemn rather than a trivial purpose.[2]

The Jewish Museum's *Vitrinen* ask you to fill in the gaps; to imagine how it was for them and how it would be for you, if you too were uprooted and followed the Axis of Exile. The case studies of Berlin's Jewish Museum are typical enough. They are poignant for those who are open to what such

stories tell us. That is how museums may seek to engage us in the work of bridging the past and the present.

Much as the permanent exhibition in Berlin recounts the tales of Germany's displaced Jews, so did the temporary exhibition held at the Jewish Museum of London in May–October 2002. The 'Continental Britons' that were its subjects also included those who came from Austria and Czechoslovakia. In effect – though this was not the language used – the Axis of Exile leads to the Axis of Homecoming. To be in exile is to flee to somewhere else. The museum in Berlin therefore deals with departure and that in London with arrival. They are two parts of the same narrative. And in reaching their new British home, the exiles – in official parlance – became 'refugees' (Grenville, 2002). Listen to their stories, see their faces – recorded on the replaying loop of a videotape – and you are invited to think that they have achieved a new hybrid identity – that of the 'Continental Briton'. Such a label reveals a desire for acceptance and integration in a new land. Minted more than 60 years after those who bear it arrived in the United Kingdom, it holds comfort, not least if synthesis is thought of as capable of healing the wound of separation. Finding a new home for the displaced self is indispensable. Writing some 30 years ago on the 'anatomy of exile', the émigré Hungarian Paul Tabori (1972: 37) observed that 'the search for a stable identity . . . is an integral part of exile itself'. But what if the quest for stability proves impossible – if the wound does not heal and keeps producing psychological damage? That proposition is central to the work of W.G. Sebald in his successive meditations on what I shall call the *condition of exile*. This article traces the theme of exile in Sebald's work and illustrates how his literary project connects to present debates in the social sciences.

Six months before his death in December 2001, in an interview with the Spanish newspaper *El País*, Sebald reflected on his work. Speaking of his great novel, *Austerlitz*, he said that he had intended to 'create an alternative Holocaust museum'. As those who have read Sebald's work will know, the method of *Austerlitz* is precisely that of the case study, a *Vitrine* that illuminates a life and the wider processes that have made it what it is. It is the showcases of the Berlin and London museums writ large and long. It is the novel as an account of what we might term the *exilic process* and takes the form of a gradually assembled life history with an undisclosed denouement. Sebald, who was highly sensitive to the difficulties of writing about these matters as a German, adopted a method both 'indirect and tangential' to illuminate an historical tragedy that could not be confronted head on (Krauthausen, 2001: 2). Sebald's awareness of the problem of how to represent the Holocaust, therefore, was profoundly connected with the kind of authorial voice that he felt himself able to use. In the terms outlined by Dominick LaCapra (1994: 46), Sebald sought an appropriate 'subject-position' for one with his particular sense of responsibility about the historical relations between Germans and Jews.

Sebald, the Author

W.G. Sebald was born in the Alpine village of Wertach im Allgäu, Germany, in 1944. He studied German language and literature at the Universities of Freiburg, Switzerland and Manchester, England. In 1966 he began to work at the University of Manchester, settling permanently in England in 1970. He was Professor of European Literature at the University of East Anglia until his death in December 2001. Born a German, choosing to settle in England, Sebald self-consciously imposed the migrant condition on himself. He *chose* to be an exile from a society that he rejected but whose language he retained and whose literary culture he critiqued. In short, he chose the role of the outsider, with its continuous 'movement between different vantage points' (Smith, 1998: 42). Despite living in England, his fiction was all written in German and has been widely translated.

Sebald lived in two different Englands: the industrial north-west and the mainly rural east – both of which are reflected in his work. His literary career – tragically cut short by his death in a car accident on 14 December 2001 – was little more than a decade in duration, and rather brief compared to his academic one, during which he produced a substantial literary critical output. His first 'fiction' *Schwindel. Gefühle* was published in 1990 (first published in English as *Vertigo* in 1993). Next came *Die Ausgewanderten* in 1993 (first published in English as *The Emigrants* in 1996). There followed *Die Ringe des Saturn. Eine englische Wallfahrt* in 1995 (in English as *The Rings of Saturn* in 1998). *Austerlitz. Bericht* followed both in German and in English (but without the subtitle) in 2001.[3] Sebald's earliest departure from academic writing was his prose poem, *Nach der Natur* (1988), published posthumously in English as *After Nature* (2002). One key work of criticism *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999) has been published in English (with some additions) as *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2003). Sebald's literary *oeuvre* owes much to his academic formation. Whether writing fiction, as in *Austerlitz*, or an oblique form of autobiography as in his earlier *The Rings of Saturn*, research in the library or in the field is always in evidence.

Although the scope of his writing was not limited to the European continent, Sebald's fiction is located – indeed profoundly rooted – in Europe. His work tells of movement through European cultural spaces with the author himself as a principal mover.[4] If his concerns reach beyond the European boundaries, to the USA, Africa or China, it is because he tells us what Europeans have done overseas. Sebald rarely treats borders in Europe as constituting barriers for the writer-traveller. The sense of Europe evoked is of a cultural area; a space of common heritage; often of a time out of time. But whatever its implied cultural commonality, Europe is also a haunted space often divided by war and violence.

In what follows, I have singled out the theme of exile in Sebald's work, concentrating most on a critical reading of his last novel, *Austerlitz*. This embodies the methods and preoccupations of his earlier 'fictions' and is the

mature expression of his style. The earlier works prepare the ground for his magnum opus. Before discussing these, however, I relate Sebald's literary project to some contemporary concerns in the social sciences.

Exiles, Identity and Memory

Paul Tabori (1972: 37) has described an exile as one 'who is compelled to leave his homeland' for whatever reason. Exile, by this account, is an outcome of forced migration. Typically, violence – actual or threatened – propels people into exile, although we cannot exclude the inner compulsion to depart (such as that which drove W.G. Sebald himself into self-exile). While for those under physical threat there may be major benefits – not least, the saving of a life – it is plain that to shift from one society to another also has costs. At the very least, it will usually mean learning how to live with, inside and through another language; it will require you to adapt to the folkways of another culture to a lesser or greater extent. It necessarily involves finding a place in the new land's social and economic structure and adapting to new political circumstances. It is one thing to migrate under your own steam – even if impelled by economic necessity or a profound disaffection with your native heath – and quite another to be violently expelled from a country, while perhaps being stripped of citizenship.

Go to another country as one seeking permanent domicile and citizenship and you will need to be 'naturalized'. Before being admitted to the 'natural' community, those who migrate are always first subject to labelling: they become aliens, asylum-seekers, foreigners, immigrants, refugees. Mostly, the expelled come to adopt the official categories that describe their new condition. But these do not normally include 'exile' as a recognized status. Politicians, religious leaders, artists and writers are the rare groups accorded the dignified status of being 'in exile'; but commonly they would still – for administrative purposes – be regarded as refugees or asylum-seekers.

'Exile' may not invariably be accepted as a designation by the expelled. For instance, such might be the trauma of a catastrophic break with the homeland that any desire to return to live once more in a country that has wronged you might be deemed inconceivable. Even to revisit old haunts might be too much to bear. To the extent that exilic separation actually ruptures a sentimental relation to a state or nation of origin, it is most unlikely that the exile will conceive of him- or herself as a member of a diaspora (Clifford, 1997; Hadj-Moussa, 2001). A key question raised by exilic displacement concerns the extent to which a new and settled – usually hybrid – sense of identity and of belonging can be achieved in the place of arrival. This query hangs over the journey presented in two separate halves by the Jewish Museums of Berlin and London, just as it is at the heart of Sebald's work.

A tale of exile in broad outline recounts a rite of passage: it is a process of symbolic transition that involves stages of separation, marginality and re-aggregation. For instance, being stripped of a national identity and

citizenship separates the exile from the context of origin. To enter the waiting room of statelessness would typify the stage of marginality characteristic of a liminal or a transitional condition (Turner, 1969: ch. 3). Victor Turner (1979: 17) has argued that liminality is a 'social limbo'. Not only does the subject have to wait out the passage of time but there may also be a movement through space – ' a long, exacting pilgrimage and the crossing of many frontiers before the subject reaches his goal'. Eventual 'naturalization' that results in admission into a new body politic, and the conferral of a different citizenship upon the exile would be an integrative moment, conferring a new form of recognition. But what if, despite his or her formal acceptance into a new society, the exile remains – in heart and soul – eternally transitional? We cannot, in that case, imagine an easy exit from that state of living in between identities. That, as we shall see, is the broad fate of the Sebaldian exile who experiences the rupturing of sentimental and even linguistic links to a nation of origin. At the same time, Sebald's exile is also depicted as an isolated individual who lives in a state of chronic psychic disturbance and social marginality in the nation of arrival, whatever may be the surface appearance of normality and worldly success.

Noëlle Burgi-Golub (1997: 435–6) has argued that one consequence of being 'in between' means that you must rethink your relations both to the place of origin and also the destination. Exile therefore necessarily throws light on how we relate to others in defining who we ourselves are; and as a condition it activates the narrative imagination in pursuing the reconstitution of the self. The condition of exile is therefore particularly apposite for telling stories about identity, or having them told about you. However, the kinds of narrative that are produced and the attitudes that inform them remain an open question. For instance, Brian Turner (2002: 59) has suggested that the 'ethic of exile' may equate to what he terms 'cosmopolitan virtue' under present conditions of globalization. Such virtue is rooted in an ironic distance from one's own traditions and respect for other cultures and for human rights. However, it is by no means certain that exile produces virtuous cosmopolitans: it can as easily produce irredentist nationalists and fundamentalists.

An intimate relation exists between exile and the role of memory in constructing an exilic identity. Sebald's stories centre on individual cases that are characteristically recounted as life histories and his literary approach has parallels with personal accounts published in the specialist field of *Exil-Forschung*. The 'little people' scattered about the globe as refugees from Nazism, whose tales were collected by Wolfgang Benz and his colleagues, have much in common with Sebald's emigrants. Witness their accounts of lifelong trauma at separation from their homes, the concreteness of their recollections, and their problems of dealing with their country of origin (Benz, 1991). The similarities of content are not surprising, as we know that Sebald collected such accounts.[5]

Sebald's approach to exilic narrative also shares common ground with the contemporary biographical method and its emphasis on historically

formed actors whose action is interpreted in context (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). Michael Rustin (2000: 49) has underlined the importance of a sociological understanding acquired through the 'luminosity of single cases' where representative biographies are studied in a wider framework. Such a contextualized life history or biography is reconstructed in part through individuals' remembering, along with other evidence (Radstone, 2000: 11–12). Since Maurice Halbwachs opened up the sociological study of memory, it has been impossible to ignore the social nature of personal testimony about who one is and the interconnections that pertain between individual and collective memories (Fentress and Wickham, 1992; Halbwachs, 1992). Methodologically, the individual subject remains crucial, because oral history draws on 'the individual testimony, narrative or autobiography' (Popular Memory Group, 1998: 84).

Those forced to migrate have discontinuous memories, as befits a narrative of rupture. There is the before of everyday life in one milieu and the exilic after of wherever one ends up, following the crisis that provoked or necessitated the move. Lewis Coser (1992: 21–2) has observed how migration brings dislocation to the known world of one's intimate experience (which typically includes family relations, friendships, what is deeply taken for granted by belonging somewhere). This can leave the migrant at sea when Halbwachsian 'collective memories' are not shared with those encountered in the nation of arrival. Often despite themselves, exiles may continue to share profoundly the most intimate of memories and collective experiences with their former neighbours from whom they are now separated by time and space (Bahloul, 1996).

The discontinuity of memory induced by exile may be reinforced by a wish to forget hard times. Luisa Passerini (1979, 1983) has suggested (in her study of Turin workers under Italian fascism) that to remember may sometimes simply be too painful. If to forget offers one escape route, another (as Passerini also remarks) is to remain silent about the wound in your experience. These points have wider relevance. In the pertinent case of Holocaust survivors, Naomi Rosh White (1998: 176) has remarked, 'Silence can be a sanctuary which protects speakers from themselves and from their histories.' Indeed, as Rachel Rosenblum (2000) has argued, to speak or write of your traumas may in some cases be to court suicide. It is hardly surprising, then, that reticence may well cross the generations (LaPierre, 1989). Jewish refugees from Nazism have sought normality for their children by abandoning their native tongue, glossing over their negative experiences, and urging 'invisibility' upon their offspring (Seidler, 2000).

The interpretation of the Holocaust both in cultural analysis and popular understanding has been at the heart of many recent debates about memory (Novick, 1999; Wood, 1999). The Holocaust is central to understanding Sebald's preoccupation with the theme of exile in the context of relations between Germans and Jews. Although his project was a literary one, as I shall next argue, not only does it relate closely to the intellectual

currents identified above, but it also has a carefully considered kinship with ethnography.

Sebald as 'Literary Ethnographer'

Tzvetan Todorov (1990: 10–11) has plausibly argued that 'literary genres . . . are nothing but . . . choices among discursive possibilities, choices that a given society has made conventional'. The consequence of this view is that no single common denominator distinguishes the 'literary' from the 'non-literary'. Todorov goes on to propose that 'each type of discourse usually labelled literary has non-literary "relatives" that are closer to it than are any other type of "literary" discourse'. This observation is highly pertinent for a discussion of Sebald's work, for his fiction quite consciously transgresses a number of conventional understandings.

Sebald's literary form and mode of address permit the author to engage in a game of bluff with the reader. 'How do you read me?' is always an implicit question. Although partly inspired by what happened to real individuals, *Austerlitz* clearly meets any generic test as a novel even though in some respects it takes the form of a quasi-ethnographic travelogue. But other of Sebald's works are much harder to classify. Although, as readers, we are free to interpret his books according to our lights, in interviews he did suggest how they related to his own life and what his intentions were.[6] We are dealing with an 'unreliable author' in the sense that when he casts himself as the narrator he is neither necessarily directly speaking as himself, nor always producing authentic evidence about what purports to be real. Where it is obvious or arguable that there is a direct biographical element, such knowledge does illuminate the text. At the same time it does not prescribe the scope of our interpretation.

As we are left in considerable doubt as to how much of his work is, strictly speaking, autobiographical, we are therefore asked to address the tensions between the 'fictional' and the 'non-fictional' in Sebald's writing, however it actually represents itself. Todorov (1990: 25) suggests that autobiography 'is defined by two identifications: the author's identification with the narrator, and the narrator's identification with the chief protagonist'. It is this 'referential' or 'historical' dimension that conventionally distinguishes various forms of biographical writing from fiction.

The question arises for Sebald's work because much of his work draws on genres such as reportage, ethnography, travel writing, autobiography and the life history. In all of these, the evidence-based representation of observables and the recounting of experiences are inescapably central. Once generic conventions are transgressed, and we are intrigued as to whether or not we are reading 'fact' or 'fiction', we cannot avoid posing questions about it. We are in territory where the reader's experience may be both 'literary' and 'non-literary' at one and the same time.

Sebald is not unique in posing this kind of problem of interpretation. Consider the 'social description' employed in some of his work by the

French writer and novelist, Georges Perec. Howard Becker (2001) has suggested that parts of Perec's *oeuvre* might be seen as a form of sociological writing concerned with the depiction of culture in a way that is 'proto-ethnographic'. While not sociology per se, it shares both common ground and techniques with the fieldworker's reports, not least in its observational qualities and minute descriptions. Perec conveys a sense of what it was like, of having been there, of a self involved in the social process. To say that Perec undertakes 'proto-ethnographic' writing suggests that it is en route to a different form and destination, even if it does not arrive there. The sociologist as participant observer recognizes a kinship with his or her own endeavour on the basis of the family resemblance identified by Todorov.

This ambiguous quality is also shared by Ryszard Kapuszynski's work which is widely recognized as drawing on factuality, but which also foregrounds the writer's first-person sensibility. Like 'proto-ethnography', 'literary journalism' is also a hybrid genre. Are we to evaluate it in terms of the traditional positivistic criteria of objective, factual journalism or is it rather to be judged as a, somehow, self-authenticating work, rooted in the author's individual, moral accountability for what he writes (Aucoin, 2001)? I testify and therefore I make true. And you, the reader, must believe me.

Commentaries on 'literary journalism' and 'proto-ethnography' draw us into confronting the excitement and uncertainty of a borderland – or more strictly, because there is no single, indisputable line to be drawn, of border-*lands*. To impose a generic categorization is to undertake the work of ordering, of making things clear and distinct. But the very act of needing to categorize, and to discuss the appropriateness of one label as against another, suggests that the material is inherently refractory. At the margins, how we plump for this or that description of a literary endeavour is ultimately arbitrary (though we may justify it by appealing to a given criterion). It is the compelling nature of such marginal choices that contributes to the intrigue surrounding a work that is hard to classify. Such creations are disruptive and disturbing. They make us think about how to read them and how to respond to what they are saying.

James Clifford, whose own anthropological writing experiments extensively with different forms of presentation, notes that in its pioneering days fieldwork had to distinguish both its practice, and the kind of knowledge it was producing, from literary and journalistic accounts of travel. The separation of genres – and thereby the creation of an intellectual status and a sacralized frontier – was part of the production of a professional, anthropological identity. However, Clifford (1997: 66) believes that now the old fences are being dismantled. He remarks: 'the current "experimentalism" of ethnographic writing is a . . . renegotiation of the boundary, agonistically defined in the late nineteenth century, with "travel writing"'. Presently, he argues, elements of the travel narrative are returning to anthropology proper. He cites in evidence the descriptions of 'the researchers' routes into and through "the field"; time in the capital city, registering the surrounding national/transnational context; technologies of transport (getting there as

well as being there); interactions with named, idiosyncratic individuals, rather than anonymous, representative informants' (Clifford, 1997: 67). It is, at least in part, a shift from an impersonal, scientistic mode of expression to the rediscovery of the first person. For some practitioners, ethnography is akin to a literary project (Bahloul, 1996).

Clifford's description of the self-aware, travelling anthropologist, characterizes one dimension of W.G. Sebald's work. As an author, Sebald pursues a continuous, anxious and curiosity-driven itinerary in the guise of a reporter-traveller; indeed, sometimes he is quite openly a researcher, and often self-described as a note-taker. Formally, Sebald's story of the exile is modelled on the life history, which involves 'private, one-to-one encounters between interviewer and narrator', carried out over several sessions, and where recollection is 'more of a process than an occasion' (Slim and Thompson, 1998: 116). While this description does not perfectly capture the interaction between narrator and informant at the heart of Sebald's narratives, it is fairly close.

There are strong similarities, too, between the substance of Sebald's stories – although not the literary form – and the taking of testimonies from the victims of the Holocaust (Rosh White, 1998). Sebald's characters struggle to make sense of their lives and face the problem of finding words through which they might speak; they also search for an interlocutor who will respect the integrity of what they have to say. Sebald writes in ways instantly recognizable to the Cliffordian anthropologist and his or her affines in history and sociology. Sebald, I suggest, practises a form of *literary ethnography*. That is not to say that he is some sort of sociologist manqué. Rather, the ethnographic style is deliberately used to produce a kind of referential fiction that disrupts our generic expectations. Arguably, because we are invited to read his stories as though they were true, we are the more moved by the human predicaments that are portrayed, and the more haunted by them.

The Exile's Road to Austerlitz

The theme of exile appears and reappears in *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*, the three volumes that precede *Austerlitz*. In what follows, I shall limit myself to demonstrating briefly how the linked questions of memory, language and identity are developed in these books. Sebald's prosody is highly complex and merits a separate analysis in its own right. So does the uncaptioned use of photographs and other images in his work. The literary influences on which he draws are a further topic for investigation. Constraints of space prevent me from discussing these further here.

In *Vertigo* – a downbeat version of the grand tour perhaps most memorably recorded by Goethe (1970) in his *Italian Journey* – the theme of exile is most directly addressed in one story titled '*Il ritorno in patria*', the return to the fatherland. Crucially, it is not *die Heimat* to which a return is made,

but *das Vaterland*, from which – through the use of Italian – Sebald under-
lines his self-imposed exile.

Visiting his home village of W (Wertau) for the first time since child-
hood, the narrator opens the box of memories, painting a vivid picture of a
place out of time, of a closed society where strangers were never accepted,
and offering a suggestion of his own father's guilty wartime secrets. *La patria*
is observed with the distance of a self-styled 'foreign correspondent' and
directly challenges *Heimatlich* sentimentality. Sebald remarks that 'paths
that I had walked in my childhood at my grandfather's side and which had
meant so much to me in my memory . . . I came to realize, meant nothing
to me now' (2000: 210). For the returning exile, there can be no homecom-
ing, only a distancing.

In *The Emigrants*, two stories concern Jewish victims of Nazism. Both
in form and thematically, these prepared the ground for writing *Austerlitz*.
Suicide is one response to exile. That is the fate of 'Paul Bereyter', the
writer's inspiring primary school teacher. Symbolically, he commits suicide
on a railway line, a photograph of which opens the chapter. Sebald reads of
this death in a German newspaper: 'Almost by way of an aside, the obituary
added, with no further explanation, that during the Third Reich Paul
Bereyter had been prevented from practising his chosen profession' (1997:
27). The tale – constructed as an investigation conducted to remedy the
narrator's ignorance – recounts Bereyter's long-term process of failure to
overcome the psychological and social damage of his persecution as a 'half
Jew' who nonetheless fought in the German army. Piecing together the truth
behind Bereyter's suicide, Sebald ostensibly draws on – and reproduces –
oral testimony, photographs and written memoirs to evoke the circumstances
of a family destroyed and a life blighted by Nazi racial policies.[7] Sebald
believed that there was a conspiracy of silence about the Third Reich in
Germany, not least among those of his own social background (Jaggi, 2001:
2). This is epitomized by the evasive obituary. The town of S – Sonthofen,
where Sebald grew up and which he considered 'a paradigm of fascism'
(Krauthausen, 2001: 2) – is the locus of the story, 'authenticated' as auto-
biographical by school photographs and detailed authorial memories. A
vividly realized individual life history (which may be a fiction) is used to
examine both the impact of Nazi racial policies and popular acquiescence
in these.

In 'Max Ferber', also apparently in an autobiographical mode, Sebald
underlines the view that memory work has no redemptive qualities. Key
elements of this short story are later reworked and developed in *Austerlitz*,
notably the progressive unveiling of the exile's story through a series of
encounters between narrator and informant. The themes of mental break-
down, cultural loss and enduring trauma are also carried into the novel.

Sebald's English self-exile begins with his arrival in Manchester in
the mid-1960s, as a young man. The narrator presents himself as a lonely
and displaced *flâneur* in a decaying and depressed city. Walking the always-
deserted streets, noting his routes in obsessive detail, reading them for

meaning – these are his salvation. On one perambulation, Sebald finds Max Ferber's studio and is repeatedly drawn back to watch the artist at work and to talk to him. [8]

The themes of silence, mental illness, isolation and repression that later occupy so much of *Austerlitz* are addressed here. Ferber is 'loath to answer the questions that I put to him about his story and his early years' (1997: 166). Twenty years later, Sebald learns that the artist had left Germany at the age of 15 in May 1939, and that his parents had been deported and murdered in Riga in 1941. Sebald – again driven by his own compulsion to know more – decides to revisit Ferber. They talk, amongst other things, about '*our exile* in England' (1997: 181, emphasis added). For Sebald, both men occupy the same space of displacement.

Ferber confides his deep alienation from Germany, his loss of the language, the replaying of old pictures of his childhood Munich in his mind's eye, 'ashamed I did not belong'. He tells of his trip to England, his subsequent enrolment in a third-rate boarding school and the irrecoverable loss of his parents. It is a story of a youth deformed that exerts profound effects more than 50 years later. It takes Sebald a quarter of a century to hear the full account, and in a supreme act of trust, Ferber gives him his family photos and his mother, Laura Landsberg's, manuscript autobiography.

This 'memoir' (doubtless Sebald's creation) gives a detailed portrait of southern German village life in which Laura's Germanness is interwoven with the cycle of Jewish festivals. It is a tale of the ultimately unattainable goal of German-Jewish assimilation so brilliantly depicted by Zygmunt Bauman (1991). Sebald is driven to travel to Laura's town of Bad Kissingen where he visits the neglected Jewish cemetery. In accordance with Jewish custom, the narrator places a stone on the grave of Ferber's mother. In that moment of authorial identification with the victims of persecution, he acts exactly as though he were a Jewish mourner.[9]

The failure of exilic memory to work redemptively is also addressed in a key passage in *The Rings of Saturn*. Sebald recounts a meeting with his friend, the poet Michael Hamburger, who left Germany with his parents in November 1933, after Hitler's seizure of power.[10] Sebald (1998: 177) writes about 'the disappearance of his [Hamburger's] Berlin childhood behind the new identity that he assumed little by little over the next decade'. But it is as though this identity were merely provisional. In his own memoirs, quoted in the book, Hamburger writes that 'My hallucinations and dreams . . . often take place in a setting reminiscent partly of the metropolis of Berlin and partly of rural Suffolk.' This encapsulates the tensions of perpetual liminality. Sebald's sense of identification with his fellow – older and Jewish – émigré even extends to feeling that he had once lived, or even actually still lived, in the poet's house and had worked in his studio. The two men are represented as occupying the same exilic and imaginative space.

Austerlitz

Austerlitz has been deservedly hailed as a literary masterpiece. Written almost entirely as one continuous paragraph, it takes the form of an uninterrupted stream of narration. It tells of a man who (as a child) has lost his Jewish identity and Czech natal culture, the havoc wrought by this loss on his psyche and social relations, and his frenetic quest – when already almost elderly – to recover his past before it is too late.

In the analysis that follows, I have sought to show how Sebald positions the narrator as a recorder of testimony. He is also cast as a witness to the protracted suffering that is revealed through the protagonist's recovery of memory. And ultimately, he takes on the responsibility of mourning. The plot is driven by Austerlitz's need to tell the right kind of listener about the course of his life. This recounting takes the form of two sets of revelations, which in sequence progressively uncover the depth of Austerlitz's psychic damage. And then there are two phases in his quest to restore his lost identity: one centred on finding the traces of his mother's memory, the other on an unresolved search for evidence of his father's fate.

The Novel as Memoir

In the original German edition, *Austerlitz* is subtitled *Bericht*, a 'report'. This implies a factual status rather than a fictional one. The story is presented as the narrator's recollections, a memoir partly grounded in verifiable fact and supported with photographic 'evidence'. *Austerlitz* is plainly to be read first and foremost as a novel. However, because it is intended to stand as an 'alternative Holocaust museum', the book is also inescapably connected with current debate about collective memory and the Nazi genocide of Europe's Jews (LaPierre, 1989; Novick, 1999; Richmond, 1995; Seidler, 2000).

Sebald's earlier books concern characters bearing names that obscure, rather than reveal, their true – possibly composite – identities. Here the central protagonist, Jacques Austerlitz, is a similar invention. Sebald once said that a true story did in part inspire the creation of this character.[11] Apart from this connection with exilic realities, the account further derives an aura of documentary authenticity from its evident grounding in the author's own experiences. We do not doubt that he has visited the locations that he describes and so powerfully (and often mysteriously) evokes in the novel. The sole footnote of reflexive personal reminiscence is a further factualizing device (2001: 10–12). Sebald also cites various books either as part of Austerlitz's, or the narrator's, reading.

Much of the narrative drive comes from the reconstruction of a lost past. The eponymous protagonist in *Austerlitz* is an academic whose procedures for seeking the truth derive from his university culture. In his investigative quest, Austerlitz makes use of standard research methods: interviewing, doing fieldwork, finding documentation, delving into archives. The narrator similarly undertakes research in order to be able to memorialize. Sebald's fiction uses the device of the unreliable narrator to raise

doubts about its precise autobiographical status. *Austerlitz* presents the results of its protagonist's researches as though they were true accounts of the recoverable fragments of his life. Of course, we know that the narrator is still unreliable and that this is not an ethnographer's report, though at times it seemingly takes that form. The novel is intended to achieve some of its literary effects by the use of verisimilitude (Todorov, 1977: ch. 6).

For instance, in *Austerlitz*, the search for personal photographs as proofs of identity becomes obsessive. Annette Kuhn (2000: 183) notes that such images seem 'to stand as guarantors of the past actuality of some person or event'. Photographs may also connect memories of the departed with those that live on and are central to how we constitute our family identities (Bourdieu et al., 1965: 54). Visiting cemeteries (one of Austerlitz's pursuits, as it was also one of Sebald's) is analogous to looking at photographs of the dead and thereby communing with them.

Informant and Narrator

The story begins in 1967, when Sebald ostensibly meets Austerlitz by chance in Antwerp's Centraal Station and is attracted by the latter's scholarly interest in the building's architecture. The two men establish a relationship that stretches over 30 or so years. The railway station and trains figure greatly in Sebald's work: communication by rail in Europe transects a common cultural space in which borders can become insurmountable obstacles, with deadly consequences.[12]

Sebald, as narrator, admires Austerlitz's expository discourse, unlike that of his own German university teachers (2001: 46). This is an as yet 'unrecognized' preference for a Jewish émigré intellectual style and an implicit comment on the 'memory void' resulting from the Nazis' destruction of the Jewish contribution to German life.[13] The mutual attraction is built upon a meeting of minds. However, it is an unequal encounter because one talks and the other listens, never interjecting a question. The author of the 'memoir' conscientiously gathers his data with the full cooperation of his informant. The meaning of Austerlitz's memory work is not questioned within the text on the lines practised by 'revisionist autobiography' (Kuhn, 2000). Rather, it is recorded in the spirit of bearing witness.

The narrator is represented as self-effacing and unclear about his own motivations. Of course, we cannot take this at face value. He is the indispensable medium for telling the story of Austerlitz's quest. The narratorial self is already known intertextually to those familiar with Sebald's work. An authorial persona already exists in the public domain, constructed by previous books and through critical attention. Behind the narrator is a German writer-in-exile who chooses to bear witness to Jewish suffering at the hands of a previous generation of Germans. Sometimes – I have already suggested – he virtually assumes the identity of a Jewish writer. The narrator of *Austerlitz*, in short, is there to accept the burden of Jewish remembrance as enacted through the exilic figure of Austerlitz.

At first, Austerlitz is reticent about his origins. He offers his

interlocutor early hints of what is to come: he refers to 'the marks of pain, which, as he said he well knew, trace countless fine lines through history' (2001: 16). However, we are told, at the start of the novel, that Sebald was given Austerlitz's photographs in 1996 (2001: 7). We know, therefore, that the narrator is the repository of a life history.

Only on their fifth chance meeting in Belgium does Sebald discover that Austerlitz actually speaks English and lectures in an art institute in London. So far, the two men have conversed in French, in which Austerlitz is plainly at home and Sebald is not. When they switch to English, Austerlitz becomes the more awkward, demonstrating 'an insecurity' (2001: 42). Why this should be so becomes clear only later. But questions about the intimate connections between language and identity have been raised.

First Revelations

The author does not see Austerlitz between 1975 and 1996. The two meet again by chance in the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel at Liverpool Street Station. Sebald is suddenly struck by Austerlitz's resemblance to Wittgenstein – both have a 'horror stricken' expression, carry a rucksack and seem to share a personal and philosophical style. The narrator has by now intuited Austerlitz's Jewish, Central European origins.

Austerlitz is desperate to unburden himself of his story 'which he had learned only in the last few years and *for which he needed the kind of listener I had once been* in Antwerp, Liège and Zeebrugge' (2001: 60, emphasis added). This may be interpreted as reporting the first attempt at 'working through' his trauma undertaken by Austerlitz (LaCapra, 1994). Sebald is cast once more as a faithful and respectful recorder. Austerlitz tells how he was brought up in the cold and silent home of a fire and brimstone Calvinist minister, Emyr Elias, and his depressed wife, Gwendolyn, in the Welsh village of Bala. Taken in by the Eliases, he experienced the pain of changing his name and losing his past, though what that was is not yet revealed. Because he was then only four and a half, his earlier life quickly became obscure to him. But he had grown up with the sense that something had been hidden from him and that he has 'an invisible twin brother' – in other words, a ghostlike, suppressed identity (2001: 76). Austerlitz cannot independently verify his origins. The only photographs in the house are those of Elias's birthplace. He identifies strongly with the local Welsh-speaking culture and with polyglot facility learns the language, as well as speaking English. In remote Bala, in a house with no newspapers or radio, and evidently no other source of information, Austerlitz grows up knowing nothing of the war in Europe.

Austerlitz, we learn, experiences both a crisis and liberation at boarding school. In just two years, he loses both foster parents, Gwendolyn to death, Emyr to insanity. But he finds his quirky school to be a haven and learns furiously. Only on Emyr's mental collapse does he learn that his real name is not Dafydd Elias but rather Jacques Austerlitz.[14]

Austerlitz finds that he shares a surname with Fred Astaire, a *mohel*

in Kafka's diaries, and the famous Napoleonic battle in Moravia, fought in December 1805. (Other associations come to light only later.) Austerlitz takes possession of his *name* but still not of his real *identity*. He has few personal relationships, becoming ever more isolated when his closest friend dies.

Second Revelations

Some months later, by invitation the narrator visits Austerlitz in his east London home, a spartan place where Austerlitz obsessively rearranges the black and white photograph collection accumulated during his wanderings. Taking early retirement, he had hoped to write up his work, but became increasingly convinced of his own lack of worth and eventually could neither read nor write, destroying all his notes.[15] Austerlitz comments:

> It was as if an illness that had been latent in me for a long time were now threatening to erupt, as if some soul-destroying and inexorable force had fastened upon me and would gradually paralyse my entire system. I already felt in my head the dreadful torpor that heralds disintegration of the personality, *I sensed that in truth I had neither memory nor the power of thought, nor even any existence, that all my life had been a constant process of obliteration*, a turning away from myself and the world. (2001: 175, emphasis added)

In psychoanalytic terms, Austerlitz is suffering from a profound repression. He has never confronted the trauma of separation from his family and the consequent loss of identity. After a mental breakdown, Austerlitz becomes a nocturnal wanderer of the London streets. One night, he ends up at Liverpool Street Station. Mysteriously, he had found himself constantly drawn back there by 'that constant wrenching inside me, a kind of heartache which, as I was beginning to sense, was caused by the vortex of past time' (2001: 182). It is at a ghostly evocation of Liverpool Street that Austerlitz has his epiphany. In a flash of sudden, overwhelming recognition, poignantly described, he sees himself being met there as an immigrant child:

> I not only saw the minister and his wife, said Austerlitz, I also saw the boy they had come to meet. He was sitting by himself on a bench over to one side. His legs, in white knee-length socks, did not reach the floor, and but for the small rucksack he was holding on his lap I don't think I would have known him, said Austerlitz. . . . All I do know is that when I saw the boy sitting on the bench *I became aware, through my dull bemusement, of the destructive effect on me of my desolation through all those past years, and a terrible weariness overcame me at the idea that I had never really been alive, or was only now being born, almost on the eve of my death*. (2001: 193–4, emphasis added)

Austerlitz suddenly knows who he is and how his previous lack of self-knowledge has distorted his entire life.

> *I realized then, he said, how little practice I had in using my memory, and conversely how hard I must always have tried to recollect as little as possible, avoiding anything that related to my unknown past.* Inconceivable as it seems today, I knew nothing about the conquest of Europe by the Germans and the slave state they set up, and nothing about the persecution I had escaped. . . . As far as I was concerned the world ended in the nineteenth century. . . . I did not read newspapers because, as I now know, I feared unwelcome revelations, I turned on the radio only at certain hours of the day, *I was always refining my defensive reactions, creating a kind of quarantine or immune system* . . . (2001: 197–8, emphases added)

These key passages make explicit Sebald's view that the cost of exile may be emotional loss, wilful forgetting and insurmountable cultural disequilibrium. The only possible antidote is to recover your lost memories. But by knowing who you are you still cannot fully redeem what you have lost. The burden of knowing what you have lost may prove to be intolerable.

First Quest for Identity

By chance, Austerlitz hears a radio programme about the *Kindertransporte* and suddenly knows that he came to Britain from Prague as a child refugee (2001: 200). From total inertia, he is propelled into a frenzied investigation. The journey home demonstrates the profound connections between spaces and memories (Bahloul, 1996; Burke, 1988: 101–2). Austerlitz flies to Prague where he discovers his mother's address. Walking the streets to his former home he finds 'memories were revealing themselves to me not by any mental effort but through my senses' (2001: 212). His mother's great friend Vera is still living in the family flat, in an unchanged interior that is a 'typecase of forgotten things' (2001: 214).[16] Vera becomes his key informant in resolving the enigma after almost 60 years. Austerlitz learns that his father, Maximilian Aychenwald, was a Czech social democratic party worker of Russian-Jewish origins and his mother, Agáta Austerlitz, an opera singer of Jewish background.[17] His parents never married so he carried his mother's name. A brilliant, happy and curious child, he was brought up speaking French, as well as Czech. Talking to Vera, he suddenly understands Czech, 'like a deaf man whose hearing has been miraculously restored' (2001: 219). Austerlitz acquires a past, a family and a culture, and is now at home in a mother-tongue. We have a glimpse of how his life might have evolved, in a loving, cultivated household, rather than deformed by childhood exile and the stultifying narrowness of his foster-parents. Vera gives Austerlitz a photograph of himself, dressed as a page-boy, taken in early 1939. This is the iconic image of the book and is reproduced on the front cover, another referential claim. Fruitlessly, Austerlitz pores over it with a magnifying glass, searching for clues as to its location and wider meaning. It is the only surviving image of himself in his previous life. Photography may thus provide evidence and yet frustratingly offer no resolution to a gap in memory.

Austerlitz's father, he learns, escaped to Paris only one day before the German invasion, while his mother stayed behind. Under the Nazi race

decrees, Agáta led a fearful life, helpless and depressed. She sent her son to England, hoping to join him there but was deported to Theresienstadt (Terezín). Austerlitz travels there to search for traces. Depicted in a series of bleak photographs, an eerily deserted and decaying small town is evoked. Austerlitz vividly imagines he has encountered the ghosts of the 60,000 Jews once jammed into a garrison designed for 2000 inhabitants. Visiting the ghetto museum, he faces for the first time 'the history of the persecution', finding that how ghetto life was organized to extract value and to murder 'exceeded my comprehension' (2001: 279).

Lost Love

From Vera, Austerlitz discovers that he had first visited Marienbad in the summer of 1938. He now understands how a repressed memory had haunted, and forever blighted, his second visit there with the beautiful Marie de Verneuil. The French aristocratic historian had been drawn to the melancholic Austerlitz when both were working in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and had become his lover. She had helped him to recover from a mental breakdown. In 1972, as part of her historical work on spas, she took Austerlitz to Czechoslovakia to stay at Marienbad.[18] The love affair offered Austerlitz his moment of hope, a chance to break out of his emotional prison. All goes awry at Marienbad, where he is obscurely haunted by the ghosts of the past and cannot articulate what is wrong. Unaware that he is visiting his one-time homeland, he experiences 'an abysmal sense of distress' and because of his 'resistance to the emergence of memory' can explain nothing, though the wonderfully sensitive Marie knows there is an unspoken trauma (2001: 297, 301, 303). Austerlitz loses her, as she cannot break through his resistance to achieve her desire for intimacy. For Sebald, this fearful psychic closure represents the absolute loss entailed by an extreme exilic condition, which produces not only an alienation from place, but also from love and from self.

   Eager to retrace his lost childhood steps, Austerlitz travels by train from Prague to the Hook of Holland and experiences a further revelation. He finally recognizes that his sense of having a lost twin comes from seeing his own image in the carriage window, which had so affected him as a child.

Germany

Austerlitz leaves the train on impulse at Nuremberg. Vera has told him about his father's astute analysis of German 'enthusiasm for the national resurgence' under Hitler and his unnerving experience of the Nazi crowd (which recalls Elias Canetti's [1973] analysis).[19]

> I had never before set foot on German soil, I had always avoided learning anything at all about German topography, German history or modern German life, and so, said Austerlitz, Germany was probably more unfamiliar to me than any other country in the world . . . (2001: 313)

This truly studied resistance has epitomized his desire to deny and to forget. Austerlitz, however, finds that his new self-knowledge does not, of itself, liberate him from his trials: 'reason was powerless against the sense of rejection and annihilation that I had always suppressed, and which was now breaking through the walls of its confinement' (2001: 322). Collapsing mentally again, he is hospitalized. Recovering once more, Austerlitz reads H.G. Adler's magnum opus on Theresienstadt, painfully learning German along the way. Adler's book, whose plan of the camp is reproduced, and details cited, lays bare a meticulous bureaucratic process for controlling, exploiting and murdering people.

Second Quest for Identity

Austerlitz decides to reconstruct what he can of his mother's fate. He follows up Adler's reference to a Nazi propaganda film on Theresienstadt shot in 1944. From an archive, Austerlitz eventually lays hands on a partial, videotaped version in which he desperately hopes to see the face of his mother. He runs the tape repeatedly and obsessively in slow motion.[20] Thwarted, he goes back to the actors' archive in Prague where he finds a photograph of Agáta which is authenticated by Vera. Austerlitz gives this to the narrator, now the custodian of his story. He tells Sebald that he will next search for his father in Paris:

> . . . to transport himself back to the time when he too had lived there, in one way feeling liberated from the false pretences of his English life, but in another oppressed by the vague sense that *he did not belong in this city either, or indeed anywhere else in the world*. (2001: 354, emphasis added)

This unshakeable sense of dislocation controverts Turner's (2002) notion of a cosmopolitan exilic identity. Sebaldian exile is rather a state of unceasing, distressed motion, a lack of belonging. It is too inner-directed and too private to develop any public virtues.

The narrator visits Austerlitz in Paris. Now that historical knowledge has been restored to him, Austerlitz remarks on the French state's complicity with Nazi policy, citing the infamous *grande rafle* of 1941 that rounded up French Jews for deportation to concentration camps from the holding centre at Drancy (Wood, 1999: ch. 5). Maximilian's failure to escape the Nazi net by fleeing to France parallels Agáta's capture in Prague. However, the trail has gone cold and there is no equivalent of Vera to fill in the gaps in the story. Austerlitz recounts a visit paid to the cemetery at Montparnasse in the late 1950s, when he had been researching in Paris. He was drawn – not at the time realizing the profound significance – to the graves of Jewish families. Many bore German names; some stones were erected to commemorate deaths resulting from the deportations. Austerlitz is struck by how few years had separated his own stay in Paris from those events and how profoundly ignorant he had been.

Austerlitz satirically denounces the inhuman design of the new

Bibliothèque Nationale (BN) erected at the Quai de la Gare. It was inspired by an unnamed President – François Mitterrand – who is pilloried for his self-regard and the antipathetic effects of grandiloquent design on the needs of readers.[21] Inside the BN, he learns from an old librarian acquaintance that it stands on the site of the massive warehousing complex that once stored the looted goods of the French Jewish community. The prisoners employed in cataloguing the booty had called it, ironically, *Les Galéries d'Austerlitz*. High Nazi officials came to select stolen booty for their homes. It is subtly implied that Mitterrand – a notorious protector of his fellow Vichy *fonctionnaire*s – might have chosen the BN's site to obliterate the memory of the collaboration and the complicity of the French state. 'Austerlitz', then, takes on another layer of deeply political meaning through the recovery of this memory.

The Final Search

Austerlitz learns officially that his father had been interned in the Pyrenees in late 1942, and tells the narrator that he imagines that Maximilian left Paris from the *Gare d'Austerlitz*. The name 'Austerlitz' now connotes a departure-point for certain death. An ageing man trying to bring final order to his shattered life, Austerlitz departs to seek traces of his father and to look for Marie de Verneuil. He gives the narrator the key to his London house, enjoining him to continue the work of remembering by studying his photographs and by visiting the Jewish cemetery near his home. Once again, Sebald positions the narrator in the role of a Jewish mourner. We are left wondering. Could Austerlitz weather the disappointment of finding nothing and nobody with whom to share his last days? What traces will he find? The narrator learns that French Jewish deportees were killed in the dungeons of the fortress at Kaunas in Lithuania. Was that the fate of Maximilian Aychenwald?

One Perspective on Exile

Sebald's meditations on exile are rooted in his own cultural distance from his German origins. He chose to be an outsider, achieving an extraordinarily empathic identification with the fate of the Jewish émigré. He sometimes textually represented himself as becoming Jewish. Taking the mourner's role in cemeteries, his complete identification with Michael Hamburger, inheriting the burden of remembrance from Austerlitz – all sustain that interpretation. However, Sebald's work goes beyond this focus to address the long-term consequences of Nazism not only for European Jews but also for Germans.[22]

As may be seen, the Sebaldian condition of exile is harsh, for it brings isolation, cultural insecurity and psychic disorder. The exiles find it hard to love, to lead a life that looks outwards rather than mainly within, to enjoy the everyday pleasures and pains, and to find fulfilment in a career. Their lives are interrupted by breakdowns; they find it hard to form enduring relationships; they are tragic figures. At worst, for some, long-term escape from the condition can come only through suicide.

Those who believe that memory has restorative or redemptive qualities will find cold comfort in Sebald's *oeuvre*. The exile is constantly in negotiation with memory, the source of personal identity – and faces a double bind. If you remember then you may experience a crippling pain for what you have lost. If you will yourself to forget, you pay a different price. Repressed memory produces profound distortions in your conduct and relationships. You do not know who you are. Either way, you lose. It is impossible to escape into a new identity. Living between nations, cultures and languages is therefore less a space of cosmopolitan advantage than one of inherent uncertainty. You are trapped in a state of perpetual liminality, despite – on the surface – often achieving worldly success in your nation of arrival.

No doubt Sebald captures an important dimension of what forced migration may do to those unfortunate enough to experience it. His imaginative construction represents itself as a kind of biography or life history. Therein lie the profound literary power, suggestiveness and emotional pull. Austerlitz, Sebald's most fully formed protagonist, stands as a representative figure; he typifies the condition of exile. He renders extreme what is undoubtedly a widespread condition. Sebald's exiles suffer stoically and rarely unburden themselves. Their fate plays itself out against a tragic and melancholic view of history. The grand backdrops are important: they remind us that our lives as individuals are often deeply conditioned by movements that lie outside our control.

It is an intensely bleak vision. For Sebald, it is only the costs of exile that are acknowledged. But if we are to record and acknowledge the losses, perhaps we should also count the gains. The displaced can, and do, make new lives. They are not invariably damaged goods. The social consequences of exile are by no means limited to long-term suffering. There is quite another story that runs – like an unwilled counter-current – through Sebald's books. All the emigrants whom he brings to life also make a wider contribution to their societies. Of those discussed here, Bereyter is an inspiring schoolteacher; Ferber a celebrated artist; Austerlitz a broadly cultured researcher. Sebald himself – the creative avatar of the exilic condition – was a successful academic and an exceptionally gifted writer. Such achievements are in line with the empirical record. But that is not the story that he wishes to tell us.

Notes

1. The Axis of Holocaust leads to the cold emptiness of the Holocaust Tower. The Axis of Continuity leads to a permanent exhibition on German Jewry. For a discussion of the Museum, see Grodzinski (2002/3: 9–16).

2. Some of these stories are printed in a small booklet for the visitor: *Cases: Axis of Holocaust* and *Axis of Exile/Vitrinen: Achse des Holocaust und Achse des Exils*. These are undated and bear no author's name.

3. *Schwindel* can mean dizziness; giddiness; vertigo. It can also mean swindle or fraud. The title, then, suggests that the feelings of vertigo the author has are themselves *Schwindler* (deceivers). *Auswanderer* is a more common expression for an emigrant than is *Ausgewanderten*, which equates to 'émigré'. *Emigrant* is another German noun much used. The book's subtitle *Vier lange Erzählungen* could translate as 'four long tales'. The verb *erzählen* carries various meanings: 'to narrate', 'to tell a story', 'to relate'. The status of what is told could be true or it could be a fiction. In the German original, *The Rings of Saturn* is subtitled *An English Pilgrimage*. It carries the sense of a journey undertaken either for penitential or obligatory purposes, and encapsulates Sebald's driven attitude to travel rather well. The German edition of *Austerlitz* carries the subtitle *Bericht*, meaning a report, which underlines the supposed ethnographic and journalistic truth-claims of the work.

4. His settings are notably Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, England, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland, Wales.

5. I am grateful to John Hall for pertinent information.

6. Sebald said of his first three 'fictions': 'If you have read them, it's possible to construct a rough image of the persona who is encountered behind the narrator. It's not reliable, but it's close. And for me that's very important, because I feel it's necessary for someone who writes a fictional text to show his cards, that's to say, that he says something about himself and has a self-image' (Krauthausen, 2001: 3–4, my translation).

7. The informant role of Mme Landau foreshadows that of Vera in *Austerlitz*.

8. This account is evidently based on the painter Frank Auerbach.

9. This was written before I came upon an intimation that Sebald was on the trail of his own possible Jewish origins (Krauthausen, 2001: 4). Le Goff (1988: 156) suggests that memory work in cemeteries was accentuated by 19th-century Romanticism.

10. Hamburger translated *After Nature* into English.

11.

> Behind Austerlitz hide two or three, or perhaps three-and-a-half, real persons. One is a colleague of mine and another is a person about whom I happened to see a Channel 4 documentary by sheer chance. I was captivated by the tale of an apparently English woman [Susie Bechhofer] who, as it transpired, had come to this country with her twin sister and been brought up in a Welsh Calvinist household. One of the twins died and the surviving twin never really knew that her origins were in a Munich orphanage. (Jaggi, 2001: 3)

12. The waiting room is a metaphor for liminality. The use of the French term *salle des pas perdus* draws ironic attention to Austerlitz's lost steps.

13. The Berlin Jewish Museum has a room called *Die Leerstelle des Gedenkens* –

the Memory Void. This symbolizes the rupture in German culture due to the exile and extermination of the country's Jews.

14. In German, Elias is pronounced 'alias' (but with a stress on the 'i') – doubtless Sebald's little joke.

15. The author's own tensions and torments are surely referred to here: the difficulties of composing worthwhile work have already been aired in *The Rings of Saturn*.

16. Why Vera is living in that flat as opposed to her own (which was in the same building) is not explained. We are told that the Austerlitz apartment had been totally stripped during the Nazi occupation.

17. Maximilian was one of the author's names and his intimates called him Max. As with his repeated acts of contrition at Jewish cemeteries, Sebald is clearly asserting his authorial identification with the murdered father. The surname Eichenwald – a forest of oak – connotes solidity and, as Peter Meech reminds me, also alludes to Germany's national tree. The name therefore condenses considerable complexity.

18. There are echoes of Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). The eeriness evoked in the narrative suggests an *hommage*. Resnais' documentary short – *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956) – is also mentioned when Austerlitz discusses the Bibliothèque Nationale (2001: 364).

19. Sebald promoted Canetti's reputation when he was neglected. See Homberger (2001: 3).

20. The lost film trope is also in Ian Sellar's 1992 feature *Prague*, in which a Scottish Jew seeks information on his deported family. See Petrie (2000).

21. One could hardly forget this is an academic researcher's novel when reading such a drily comical passage.

22. Lack of space prevents discussion of his critique of German post-war silence about German wartime suffering. We can see the argument initiated in *The Rings of Saturn* and more fully developed in *On the Natural History of Destruction*. The question of German suffering has become a matter of major debate with the publication of Günter Grass's *Crabwalk* (2003). On this, see Buruma (2002), Moeller (2003) and Schütze (2003).

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