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Haunted by the Unlived Past: Destabilized Identity and Postmemory in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

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Abstract: W. G. Sebald's final novel *Austerlitz* serves as a powerful testament to the way historical trauma can haunt a person even when their direct memories of that trauma have been erased. This research focuses on the protagonist Jacques Austerlitz, a man whose identity was dismantled by his childhood escape from Nazi occupied Prague through the Kindertransport. I aim to analyse how Austerlitz embodies the condition of postmemory, a term coined by Marianne Hirsch to describe the deep connection later generations have to the traumatic experiences of those who came before them. By examining the novel as a work of transfiction that blends dense prose with uncaptioned photography, this paper explores the struggle to reclaim a self that has been hidden for decades. My approach involves a close look at the narrative structure, where an unnamed narrator acts as a secondary witness to the story of Austerlitz, effectively transferring the burden of remembrance to the reader. The findings suggest that the life of Austerlitz is defined by a profound inner paralysis and a failure of language, as his focus on massive architecture serves as a screen for his personal loss. I argue that his journey is not a standard search for facts but a process of reassembly similar to tikkun to rebuild a shattered identity from fragments and silence. Ultimately, this research contributes to an academic paper within memory studies by showing how Austerlitz preserves the absence central to the Holocaust. It demonstrates that the unlived past remains an inescapable presence that shapes the modern self, forcing us to confront the ethical demands of inherited grief.

Keywords: *W. G. Sebald, Austerlitz, postmemory, trauma, identity*

Introduction

Jacques Austerlitz is a man who spent his whole life looking at buildings so he wouldn't have to look at himself. In his final novel, *Austerlitz*, W.G. Sebald gives us a story that is not just a book but a deep dive into the human soul after it has been shattered by history. The protagonist, Jacques Austerlitz, is a man whose identity was dismantled very early in his life when he was sent away from his home in Prague on a Kindertransport in the summer of 1939 (Sebald 1). This was a rescue mission, yes, but for a four-year-old boy, it was the start of a total erasure. He was sent to Wales, given a new name, and raised by a cold, silent couple who never told him where he came from. For decades, he lived in a kind of "self-oblivion," a state where he actively avoided knowing anything about his own past (Sebald 197). It is only much later in his life that he begins to piece together the fragments of his history, a process that is less like a standard detective story and more like a spiritual reassembly, something akin to the Kabbalistic concept of *tikkun*.

This paper looks at how Austerlitz embodies the condition of postmemory. This is a term Marianne Hirsch came up with to describe how the generations who come after a trauma still feel its weight, even if they didn't live through it themselves (Hirsch 5). We will see how Sebald uses the unnamed narrator as a "secondary witness" to help Austerlitz tell his story, and how the massive architectural structures Austerlitz studies actually serve as a screen to hide his personal loss. Through a narrative that blends fiction with real-looking photographs, Sebald shows us that the past we haven't lived is often the one that haunts us the most.

The Rupture of the Kindertransport and the Erasure of the Self

The story of Jacques Austerlitz starts with a massive rupture. In the summer of 1939, as the Nazis were moving into Prague, his mother Agáta put him on a train to save his life. He was just a toddler, and that train ride became what critics call the "map of his estrangement" (Sebald 200). When he arrived in London and then went to Wales, his identity was systematically taken apart. His foster parents, the Eliases, were a dour Calvinist minister and his wife who lived in a house full of silence. One of the first things they did was take away his backpack. It seems like a small thing, but that backpack was the only physical link he had to his life in Prague. By taking it away and changing his name to Dafydd Elias, they essentially buried the boy he used to be.

For the next several decades, Austerlitz lived in "complete oblivion" of his true origins. He grew up thinking he was the son of these Welsh people, even though he felt like a stranger in his own home. He describes feeling like he was in "captivity" in the house in Bala (Sebald 2). I find it particularly moving when he mentions how "one of the two windows of my bedroom was walled up on the inside" (Sebald 60). This image of a walled-up window is a perfect metaphor for his mind, his brain was actively preventing him from seeing his own past. It wasn't until his foster parents died and he was

about to go to university that he was told his real name was Jacques Austerlitz. Even then, the name sounded "utterly foreign" to him. He didn't want to investigate. He chose to stay in his "internal mnemonic void," a state where his brain actively prevented him from thinking about where he came from (Long 140).

This erasure is a perfect example of what trauma does. It creates a "gap" or an "absence" that is so central to the person's life that they build their whole self around it without even knowing. In the case of Austerlitz, he substituted his missing personal memory with an incredible accumulation of knowledge about architecture. He became a scholar of the history of buildings, particularly the massive, institutional structures of the nineteenth century. This was what he calls a "substitute or compensatory memory" (Sebald 140). If he couldn't remember his own mother's face, at least he could remember every detail of a star-shaped fortress or a railway station.

Architecture as a Defensive Screen and the Grammar of Loss

One of the most interesting things about Austerlitz is his obsession with architecture. He doesn't just study buildings; he hides behind them. His focus on "outsized buildings" like the Antwerp Central Station or the Bibliothèque Nationale is a way to look at history while avoiding the parts of it that hurt him. He says that "outsized buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them" (Sebald 14). To him, every place is a "presentiment" because the history of violence is already inside him.

Take the Antwerp Central Station, where the narrator first meets him. It is a massive building that mixes different architectural styles from the past. Austerlitz is fascinated by its clock, which is the dominating feature of the buffet. But this clock is also a symbol of how time is an "artificial invention" that doesn't really help us understand our lives. He notes that the clock's hand was "some six feet long traveling round a dial which had once been gilded, but was now blackened by railway soot and tobacco smoke" (Sebald 13). The station itself marks a site of absence, a place where people arrive and leave, just like Austerlitz left his past behind.

Then there is the Fort of Breendonk. It is a "monstrous" building that represents the Enlightenment's idea that you can make everything secure through reason and geometry. But as we know, that same reason was used by the Nazis to organize their camps. For Austerlitz, studying these buildings is a way to look at the "grammar of loss." He sees the marks of pain that "trace countless fine lines through history" (Sebald 14). He treats the history of architecture as if it ended in the late nineteenth century, which is very telling. It means he doesn't have to deal with the twentieth century, the century that destroyed his family.

His work is a "fortification of the mind". By focusing on the structural details of a library or a fortress, he creates a "quarantine" for himself (Sebald 140). But this defensive reaction eventually fails. The buildings themselves start to talk back. He realizes that the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris was built on a site that used to be a warehouse for Jewish property stolen by the Germans, the *Les Galeries d'Austerlitz*. The very place he goes to find knowledge is built on top of a crime. This is the "living wound on the body of Europe" that he finally has to confront.

Postmemory and the Inherited Burden of Trauma

The whole novel is a brilliant study of what Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory (Hirsch 5). This isn't just regular memory where you remember something you lived through. It's the deep connection that the "generation after" has to the traumas of their parents. Austerlitz is a "second-generation" survivor, even though he was actually there. Because his memories were erased, he has to "recall" his past through the stories of others and through material scraps.

Postmemory is a "structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission" (Hirsch 22). It's about how the "shadows of the past" are passed down through silence and indirect emotions. Austerlitz grew up in a "regime of silence" in Wales. His foster parents didn't nourish his life narrative; they created "gaps" and "absences". This is why his identity is so destabilized. He doesn't have a coherent story of himself. He just has "fragments of history" that he eventually realizes are part of his own life (Sebald 200).

One of the most moving parts of the book is when Austerlitz finally starts to break through his own "self-censorship." He overhears a radio program where two ladies talk about their journey on a Kindertransport from Prague. Hearing them name the cities, Vienna, Munich, Danzig, suddenly makes him realize that their story is his story. He says, "only then did I know beyond any doubt that these fragments of history were part of my own life as well" (Sebald 200). This is the "return of the repressed," and it hits him with a "visionary experience" that makes the past feel more real than the present. He realizes that he has been a "nomadic hybrid," caught between cultures and languages, without ever feeling at home anywhere.

Postmemory also brings a lot of guilt. There is the "guilt of not having lived that moment" and the weight of the "unlived past". Austerlitz feels responsible for finding out what happened to his parents, even though it is painful and perhaps impossible to fully know. This is the ethical demand of postmemory: we have to confront the "inherited grief" even if it leaves us feeling "petrified," like looking at the head of the Medusa (Sebald 14). As Sebald himself noted, you carry this head in a sack, and if you look at it directly, you are turned to stone (Jaggi 1).

The Unnamed Narrator as a Secondary Witness

Now, let's talk about the narrator. He's never given a name, but he seems a lot like Sebald himself. He meets Austerlitz by chance in Antwerp and then again in various places over thirty years. The whole story is told to us by this narrator, which makes it a "second-hand story". This structure is very important because it creates a "relational paradigm". The narrator isn't just a recording machine; he's a "secondary witness" who bears the burden of remembrance (Beyersdorf 2).

Austerlitz chooses this narrator as his listener because he needs someone who won't "colonize" his experience. The narrator is "both involved and detached". He listens to Austerlitz's long, rambling stories and records them with "exquisitely courteous syntax". He doesn't try to make the story his own, but he is clearly haunted by it. He mentions having visions of "ghosts, goblins, and dwarves," which shows that he's going through his own mental crisis that mirrors Austerlitz's trauma.

By telling the story through a narrator, Sebald is also talking to us, the readers. He is transferring the "burden of remembrance" to us. When Austerlitz gives the narrator the key to his house and his archive of photographs at the end of the book, he is essentially passing the torch. He's saying, "I've done what I can to find the truth, now you have to keep it alive" (Sebald 400). He tells the narrator to "study the black and white photographs which, one day, would be all that was left of his life" (Sebald 400). This makes the act of reading a "political act" of historical reparation. We become part of the "chain of transmission" that moves from the victim to the witness and finally to the world.

Photography and the Preservation of Absence

You can't talk about *Austerlitz* without talking about the photographs. They are scattered throughout the text, uncaptioned and often quite blurry or "grainy." These aren't just pictures for decoration. They are "points of memory" that act like a "punctum," a term from Roland Barthes that means an image that "pierces" you. Because they don't have captions, they force us to stop and look, to try and figure out what we are seeing.

These photos are a "visual performance of absence". They show us "material scraps of the past", old shoes, a page boy, a clock, but they don't give us the full story. They are "shadows of reality" that emerge out of nothing, much like memories do in the middle of the night (Sebald 212). Austerlitz himself is an amateur photographer, and he says he is "entranced" by the way shadows emerge on the exposed paper in the developing bath. This is a perfect metaphor for how he is trying to bring his own history into the light. He says:

In my 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. (Sebald 212)

One of the most haunting sequences is when Austerlitz watches a Nazi propaganda film about Theresienstadt called *The Führer Gives the Jews a City*. He watches it over and over, slowing it down to see the faces. He is looking for his mother, Agáta. He thinks he sees her, a woman in the background with "peroxide-blond hair," but he can never be sure (Sebald 350). The image is "spectral," and the more he stares at it, the more he realizes he might just be seeing what he wants to see. This shows the "fallibility of sight" and how hard it is to actually "see" the past.

The photographs bridge the gap between those who lived the trauma and those who inherit it. They are "impersonal building blocks" that we have to use to build our own understanding of the past (Hirsch 220). By using real-looking photos in a fictional story, Sebald "distorts the division between fiction and documentary". It makes the story feel "fastidiously historical" and gives it an "emotional immediacy" that a standard history book could never have.

Tikkun: Reassembling the Shattered Vessels of Identity

As Austerlitz gets deeper into his search, it becomes clear that he isn't just looking for facts. He is trying to perform a kind of *tikkun*. This is a concept from Lurianic mysticism about gathering the "sparks" of creation that were scattered when the world was broken. In the novel, Austerlitz has to gather the "disjointed signs" and "broken bits of language" of his life to rebuild his identity.

His search takes him to Prague, where he finds his former nanny, Věra Ryšanová. Věra is like a living archive. She remembers him as a little boy, and she still has the language he used to speak. Meeting her is a moment of "liberation" where his memories begin to be "freed". She tells him about his parents, Agáta, an actress, and Maximilian, who was "caught up in endless trains of thought" (Sebald 235). This is where his "feverish self-archaeology" really begins.

He uses maps, architectural blueprints, and old postcards as "mnemonic tools" to navigate his past. These things act like *ilanot* or Kabbalistic diagrams that show the route to memory. It's a "process-based" way of remembering. He isn't just finding a finished story; he is "re-drawing" his past step by step. But this reassembly is never complete. He finds that his mother was sent to Theresienstadt and then "east," which usually means she was murdered. He finds traces of his father in Paris, but they too lead to the "premises of an unretaliated crime".

The novel suggests that for someone like Austerlitz, a "straightforward excavation of facts" isn't enough. He needs to create a "subjective personal narrative" to help him heal from the trauma of early separation. Even if the vessels remain broken, the act of gathering the sparks gives his life a kind of meaning that it didn't have when he was just hiding behind buildings.

The Failure of Language and the Condition of "Death in Life"

One of the most painful themes in the book is the "failure of language." For a long time, Austerlitz's "self-censorship" led to the "almost total paralysis of my linguistic faculties" (Sebald 140). He describes it as a state where he couldn't even read a newspaper or listen to the radio because he was so afraid of "unwelcome revelations" (Sebald 198). He spent his nights walking around London because he couldn't sleep, a process of "nocturnal peregrinations" that reflected his internal restlessness.

Critics often describe this state as a "form of death in life" (Schwab 3). Because he was "quarantined" from his own history, he was also "immune to being". He felt like a "zombie" or an "automaton," just going through the motions of his academic work without really being present in reality. His loss of words was essentially a form of "self-annihilation".

Even when he starts to find his past, language still feels "insufficient". He struggles with the "long compounds, not listed in my dictionary, which were obviously being spawned the whole time by the pseudo-technical jargon governing every aspect of German life" (Sebald 205). He sees "failures in translation" as a reflection of a "fundamental break within language itself". This is why Sebald's own prose is so dense and winding. It mimics the "texture of traumatic experience," where you have to go in circles and use "circumlocutions" because the direct truth is too hard to handle.

The "darkness does not lift" even when he knows more about his past (Sebald 102). He realizes how little we can actually hold in our minds and how everything is "lapsing into oblivion". He says, "the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power or memory is constantly lapsing into oblivion" (Sebald 102). His journey doesn't lead to a happy ending or "definite closure". He remains a "tragically liminal figure," a hybrid of cultures and languages who is still searching for a place where he can finally feel at home.

The Ethics of Memory in the Modern World

The book is ultimately about the ethical demands of memory. Sebald is very careful not to let the narrator "colonize" Austerlitz's experience. There is a clear "victim-perpetrator distinction" that is maintained (Beyersdorf 2). The narrator, as a German, doesn't claim the Jewish trauma as his own, but he takes on the responsibility of telling it. This is a very Indian way of looking at it too, we often talk about the *dharma* of a storyteller, the moral duty to pass on the truth of our ancestors.

The narrative suggests that "remembrance is a process of reassembly" that requires us to be "objective memory collectors" (Beyersdorf 2). By telling the story through a secondary witness and using uncaptioned photographs, Sebald makes us participate in the "act of historical reparation". We are forced to confront the "absence" that is at the heart of the Holocaust and to recognize the "marks of pain" that continue to shape the modern self.

Austerlitz's life is a testament to the fact that we cannot simply ignore the past. If we do, it will eventually paralyze us. As he tells the narrator, "no one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open" (Sebald 205). The novel shows that while we might never be able to fully "fathom the imponderables" of our history, we have a responsibility to keep looking, to keep gathering the sparks, and to keep telling the stories of those who were lost.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Austerlitz* is a profound meditation on the way historical trauma haunts a person even when their direct memories of that trauma have been erased. Through the character of Jacques Austerlitz, Sebald explores the condition of postmemory and the struggle to reclaim a self that has been hidden for decades behind the "screen" of architecture. The novel's unique structure, the use of an unnamed narrator and uncaptioned photography, transfers the burden of remembrance to the reader, forcing us to confront the ethical demands of inherited grief.

Jacques Austerlitz might never find his way "into the open," but by sharing his journey, he helps us understand the "grammar of identity" in a way that is both thoughtful and deeply human. The un-lived past remains an inescapable presence that shapes the modern self, and only by gathering the shattered sparks of our history can we begin to rebuild a coherent sense of who we are. As Sebald himself once said in an interview, "Memory, even if you repress it, will come back at you and shape your life. Without memories there wouldn't be any writing" (Jaggi 1). In the end, it is the subjective truth, elaborated in a self-organizing and coherent narrative, that makes the critical contribution to easing the nearly unimaginable suffering of a Holocaust victim traumatized by early separation.

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