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## Remembering and Forgetting as a Narrative Mode in W. G. Sebald's "Austerlitz"

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## REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING AS A NARRATIVE MODE IN W.G. SEBALD'S *AUSTERLITZ*<sup>1</sup>

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John Zilcosky, in his article *Lost and Found: Disorientation, Nostalgia and Holocaust Melodrama in Sebald's Austerlitz*<sup>2</sup> tells about a certain impression that W.G. Sebald's works impart, which is that those who read Sebald get the feeling of "never having read anything quite like him"<sup>3</sup>. This experience of having encountered something authentic is closely related to Sebald's peculiar narrative technique which blends narrative form and thematic content. In this paper, I intend to specify the sources of this impression of authenticity regarding Sebald's works, which, I suggest, is, to a great extent, due to his narratives' capacity to evoke and animate basic mental and psychic processes during reading, such as remembering (and forgetting), meditating and the mind's

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<sup>1</sup> Sebald, W.G. 2001. *Austerlitz*. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>2</sup> Zilcosky, John. 2006. "Lost and Found: Disorientation, Nostalgia and Holocaust Melodrama in Sebald's *Austerlitz*". *MLN* 121 (3), German Issue: 679-698.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 679.

continuous drift from one thought to the other along a chain of associations, interrelations and to see how these interrelated processes are represented in his last work, *Austerlitz* (2001).

*Austerlitz* recounts the story of a series of chance encounters between two travelers in a time span of thirty years. One of these two travelers is the narrator and the other is Jacques Austerlitz, the protagonist of the novel. As they travel across Europe, their paths converge several times and it is in their lengthy talks that Austerlitz's traumatic past gradually emerges. Transported from Prague to England before the beginning of the Second World War with thousands of other Jewish children and raised in Wales by foster parents, Austerlitz pursues a life unaware of his real identity till the age of 15. Renamed as Daffyd Elias and cut off from any connection with his past, he could finally learn his real name just before the entrance exam for college; he is informed by the principal of the school that he should sign the exam papers with his real name, that is, Jacques Austerlitz, otherwise, the principal says, his paper will be considered as invalid. A few years later his foster parents die one after the other and he goes to college to study European architectural history and becomes an academic. He takes an early retirement in 1991 when he is fifty seven and sets out to organize all he has written over the years, but the task soon appears to him insurmountable because he realizes that he cannot write, he cannot understand what he reads and finally, in a moment of despair, he destroys all his notes, sketches and files. This period of total alienation from language culminates in a nervous breakdown the following year. The memories of the past, in fragments, start to surface. And at one point, Austerlitz makes a decision and goes to search for the truth about himself. The rest of the novel relates his journey to Prague, finding his childhood home and former neighbour Vera from whom he learns that after his transport, his mother is sent to a concentration camp and his father is just able to escape to France before the Germans invade the city. During his stay in Prague, the protagonist searches, in the state archives, for an image or a sign of previous presence of his mother. Finally, he believes to have found one. The novel ends with Austerlitz's setting off for France, this time in search of a trace of his father.

Sebald's prose evokes, as it tells the story of a rambling travel, a possibility of traveling, also between thoughts, ideas and images<sup>4</sup>. As the narrator moves from one place to the other and one thought to the other, he builds a mental universe in which the night animals in the Nocturama section of the zoo gaze through the melancholy eyes of certain philosophers and painters,<sup>5</sup> and the passengers in the waiting-room of Antwerp Train Station are reminiscent of

<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag, in her essay "A Mind in Mourning" published in Times Literary Supplement (February 25, 2000) identifies "travel" as the generative principle of mental activity in Sebald's works.

<sup>5</sup> Austerlitz, p. 3.

the last members of a perished race<sup>6</sup> and immediately become linked to the animals in the zoo while, at the same time, foreshadowing the focal engagement of the novel, that is, the Holocaust. In this movement of the mind along a chain of associations, past and present, natural and historical, fact and fiction fuse into each other to evoke an almost cosmic interrelatedness, whereby all phenomena stay in expectation of being remembered and attached to some pattern against the fundamental threat of having been lost in oblivion.

Divesting itself of the certainties of realist fiction, Sebald's prose follows a discursive course, traversing Europe, which is conceived in the text as a landscape in which cultural, natural and personal history intermingle and reflect each other. This reflective mode of storytelling takes effect through what Sebald calls as "periscopic narration"<sup>7</sup>. As the analogy with the periscope suggests, Sebald has a deep concern in constructing his prose, for the risks inherent in the presumed directness of vision that the realist discourse proposes. The sort of focalization that his prose practices is, therefore, rather different from the straightforward and all-encompassing one of the realist discourse. Periscope is a device in the form of a vertical tube which enables the observer to see objects and situations out of her/his field of vision by the help of prisms and mirrors located inside it. Thus, the observer apprehends the image of the object through a series of processes of reflection, refraction and modification. Drawing on an analogy with a technical instrument, Sebald not only intimates his intense engagement with the techniques and strategies employed in telling a story and its implications for the ethics of writing fiction, but also insinuates a parallelism with the way memory works in its digressions and inexactitude due to the fact that a memory is never itself but comes out always as processed and already implicated in a continuous interaction with other impressions and memories. The passage in which Austerlitz recounts the death of his foster mother, Gwendolyn illustrates how remembering precludes self-containedness:

I sat beside her all night, together with the minister. At dawn the stertorous breathing stopped. Gwendolyn's body arched slightly and then sank back again. It was a kind of tensing movement; I had felt it once before, when I picked up an injured rabbit from the headland of a field, and its heart stopped in my hand for fear. But directly after she arched herself in death Gwendolyn's body seemed to shrink a little, reminding me of what Evan had told me.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Sebald originally used this phrase to describe Thomas Bernhard's narrative style which depends on indirect and mediated speech.

<sup>8</sup> Austerlitz, p. 90.

With the evocated images of the injured rabbit and the dead in Evan's stories, Gwendolyn's dying body is now transformed into the surface of a mirror reflecting death in its various manifestations, creating an echoic space whereby the human, the creaturely and the ghostly intersect in a "tensing movement". What is signified in this movement from life towards death is not only a piece of novelistic detail--the description of a character's last moments--but also a sort of gesture which can be identified both with Austerlitz's mode of being in life and Sebald's narrative style in general, which Amir Eshel calls as a "poetics of suspension"<sup>9</sup>. The image of time stretched and brought to a standstill is a recurrent motif throughout the narrative to evoke the ever-presence of past and future in the present--to name a few, the image of a lady in a painting, who has just fallen onto the ice while skating and Austerlitz says as if this moment of fall "depicted by Lucas van Valckenborch had never come to an end, as if the canary-yellow lady had only just fallen over or swooned"<sup>10</sup>; Elias' village Llanwddyn flooded after the construction of a dam in 1888 and Austerlitz imagines the people of Llanwddyn are "still down in the depths, sitting in their houses and walking along the road, but unable to speak and with their eyes opened far too wide"<sup>11</sup>.

Austerlitz's own life is emblematic of this movement, tensed and suspended at the moment of his separation from his family and home at the age of five. His childhood feeling of having an invisible twin brother walking beside him since then symbolizes the fate he has missed by his transport to England, a fate missed but nevertheless present as the bleak alternative that accompanies him throughout his life. The child who would eventually die in a concentration camp is incorporated in his psyche, pursuing its work of destruction. Various images of paralysis in the text can be considered as the extended metaphors of this traumatic moment of separation and the psychic split brought on by the trauma.

Sebald's narrative style, in its attentiveness to the traumatic pattern of remembering and forgetting, brings together disparate elements which link to each other in a suggestive but inconclusive manner. Taken up by the evocative force of the juxtaposed images and situations, what the reader experiences is less the originality of the connections themselves than to bear witness to the very event of the mind's and memory's working. This activity of the mind to link things endlessly and each time with the promise of new possibilities of connection, realized or unrealized, creates a resonating space in which every story and situation becomes an echo of another.

<sup>9</sup> Eshel, Amir. 2003. "Against the Power of Time: The Poetics of Suspension in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*". *New German Critique* 88: 71-96.

<sup>10</sup> Austerlitz, p.16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p.72.

Austerlitz's past reaches the reader through the filter of the narrator's voice. The inclusion of a mediator makes Austerlitz's already distant past even more so. This distance, effected primarily by what we previously mentioned as "periscopic narration", opens up a space for meditation on whether it is possible to comprehend or remember the past other than by way of reconstruction. Sebald seems to imply that if it is ever possible to retrieve the past, it is only so through mediation. The digressive narration, the miniature stories that continuously suspend the main line of the narrative are all indicative of the paradox inherent in the dynamics of remembering. In order to remember, one has to be in a quest and digress but digression, in turn, is also a leave-taking, leaving things behind and forgetting.

Another aspect of the relation between remembering and forgetting is conceived in the notion of "substitute or compensatory memory". I would like to quote the passage where it is mentioned, a passage where Austerlitz makes a self-analysis on how the effects of repression have revealed themselves in his being:

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 everything which related in anyway to my unknown past. . . . 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 quarantine or immune system which, as I maintained my existence in a smaller and smaller space, protected me from anything that could be connected in any way, however distant, with my own early history. Moreover, I had constantly been preoccupied by that accumulation of knowledge which I had pursued for decades, and which served as a substitute or compensatory memory.<sup>12</sup>

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The period between his discovery of his real name and his nervous breakdown lasts about forty years. Forty years of inaction during which, as an architectural historian, he is absorbed in a focused study of European architectural history before the 20th century. Curiously enough, the part of architectural history of which he possesses abundant knowledge emerges as the history and structure of constructions built for purposes of defence such as fortresses, castles. His fixation with military and defence structures is expressive of how intensely his mind is occupied with finding strategies to protect himself from the truth and trauma regarding his origins.

In his reflections on the logic and motivation for building such structures is echoed Austerlitz's own individual history which can be considered as a process of his conceiving himself in the image of a fortress and his subsequent realization of the futility of this endeavour, dreadful and absurd in itself.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp.197-198.

The frequent result, said Austerlitz, of resorting to measures of fortification marked in general by a tendency towards paranoid elaboration was that you drew attention to your weakest point, practically inviting the enemy to attack it, not to mention the fact that as architectural plans for fortifications became increasingly complex, the time it took to build them increased as well, and with it the probability that as soon as they were finished, if not before, they would have been overtaken by further developments, both in artillery and strategic planning, which took account of the growing realization that everything was decided in movement, not in a state of rest.<sup>13</sup>

In his words, “the growing realization that everything was decided in movement, not in a state of rest” is implied the presence of a concurrent realization process, that is, his disillusionment from the idea that it is, after all, possible to preserve oneself in a homeostatic state, a state of death in life, so to speak. His substitution of the repressed content with what he calls as “an accumulation of knowledge” helps him carry on for a good while, but eventually proves to be unsustainable. His unwitting efforts toward forgetting through a substitute memory come to bring out, in the end, only the presence of a continual activity within his psychic system toward remembering since, after all, forgetting and remembering are mutually inclusive processes.

Sebald, building his narrative around the interplay of the forces of these processes, creates a poetics out of the tensions resulting from this interplay into which the reading process itself merges as yet another form of remembering and forgetting.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, pp.19-20.

## SUMMARY

### Remembering and Forgetting as a Narrative Mode in W.G. Sebald's "Austerlitz"

The relationship between memory and literature is a complex and curious one. While memory implies a relation with the past, with the factual, literature's realm is the fictional. They, nevertheless, implicate each other: while re-membering the past which is what is gone and not there anymore always entails mediation and a degree of fictionality, we can consider literary language as acting out psychic processes through metaphor, concealment and temporal dislocation.

The novel that I deal with in this paper is *Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald which recounts the story of a series of chance encounters between two travelers – the narrator and Austerlitz – in a time span of thirty years. As they traverse Europe, conceived in the text as a landscape in which cultural, natural and personal history intermingle, their paths converge several times and it is in their lengthy talks that Austerlitz's traumatic past gradually emerges. Sent to England by his parents on a *kindertransport* just before the beginning of the Second World War and raised in Wales by foster parents, Austerlitz pursues a life unaware of his real identity. In this paper, focusing on the relationship of forgetting and remembering with storytelling, I explore how the mnemonic processes are represented in the text with an emphasis on the effect of the mechanisms of repression on the way the narrative is told.

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## KEYWORDS

Memory, narrative, W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, repression, narrative technique



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