“In that Gathering Dusk” –Wonder, Horror, and the Transitory Pedestrianism of *Austerlitz*

by

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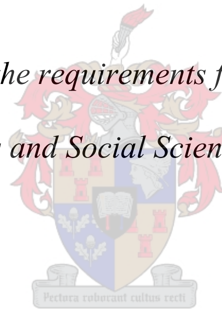

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Abstract

In this study I investigate the critical potential inherent in dusk, a motif that functions as the predominant temporal setting of W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*. My aim is to explore how this pervasive literary device effects a spatialisation of time, and to explore this as a metaphorical entry point into an investigation of the novel's stance towards modernity. I proceed to unpack the role of walking, which functions as a means to subvert the jarring severance from the past that marks the modern experience. By means of the digression and the non-linearity inherent in walking, the characters in *Austerlitz* collect individual stories in ways that affirm the locality and singularity of individual lives while, simultaneously, implicating them, through the blurring of boundaries associated with dusk, in a collective vision of history as calamity.

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Oorsig

In hierdie studie ondersoek ek die skemer motief in W. G. Sebald se Austerlitz. Ek ontleed die manier waarop skemer dien as ’n deurlopende ruimtelike-tydseffek in die roman en die potensiaal daarvan as ’n metaforiese toetrede tot 'n ondersoek van die roman se posisie ten opsigte van moderniteit. Ek gaan voort om die rol van wandeling te ontleed, en wys uit dat beweging op straatvlak dien as ’n manier om die skeiding van die hede van die verlede, wat die moderne wêreld karakteriseer, te ondermyn. Deur middel van die afwyking en nie-lineariteit, wat inherent is aan wandel, versamel die karakters in Austerlitz stories op maniere wat die ligging en enkelvoud van individuele lewens beklemtoon. Terselfdertyd word hierdie stories impliseer, as gevolge die vervaging van grense wat met skemer verband hou, in 'n verenigde visie van die geskiedenis as rampspoed.

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Gathering Dusk and the Problem of Modernity

W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* entered my life in a haphazard way which, as I think about it now, seems entirely fitting. It snuck onto my bookshelf as one of three books given to me by a lecturer to assist me in writing an essay on David Grossman's *See Under: Love*. She had, in her characteristic hurried and nervous way, ripped books from their places on her office shelf and handed them to me without any words of introduction to prepare me for what I would find written on their pages. The terms of the loan weren't stated either; whether the books were intended as a loan or a gift, a gift is what they have become, as I have been unable to re-establish contact with her to return the books. I read two of the three new arrivals to my library soon after: Elie Wiesel's *Night* and *At the Mind's Limits* by Jean Améry. But *Austerlitz*, as it happened, remained unopened for quite some time due to the other reading that occupied me at the time. That book, with its striking cover: the photograph of a boy dressed in a dramatic white outfit against a grey background and a halo-like horizon above his head; staring with such gravity and seriousness down at me from the high shelf to which it had been banished, refused to be forgotten. Eventually I could no longer resist what seemed like *Austerlitz's* insistence on being read. I conceded.

Austerlitz is the final novel written by the German-born Sebald, appearing in 2001, the year of his death in a car accident. He was 57 years old. *Austerlitz* traces the story of a Czech Jew, Jacques Austerlitz, who was separated from his family as a boy. Having escaped the Nazi invasion of Europe on the *Kindertransport,* he arrives at Liverpool Street Station in London and is taken in by a Welsh Calvinist minister and his wife, Emyr and Gwendolyn Elias. The separation from his family, an upbringing in which no mention is made of his origins, the burial of the past under the rubble of

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the war, and the suppression of painful memories caused by the trauma of exile, all contribute to the protagonist having developed a sense of exile and alienation, an uncertain identity. Later in his life, he attempts to excavate the traumatic past which he cannot remember by retracing his childhood journey across Europe and trying to find out what happened to his parents.

Austerlitz's quest for his past is not reported directly, but rather through the mediatory role of the narrator, who is himself a central character in the story. The book begins with the narrator's account of his first meeting with Austerlitz, a sequence of events that I unpack from various angles in the arguments that follow. Much of the novel consists in long dialogues between the anonymous narrator and the eponymous protagonist, Austerlitz. During these exchanges, Austerlitz does most of the talking, meandering from topic to topic that circle various predominant themes: architecture, memory, history, and the details of his quest to gain knowledge of his past and reassemble a shattered identity. Austerlitz's words, although reported directly by the narrator, are not placed in inverted commas. This lack of punctuation causes a blurring of the boundaries that separate the voices of narrator and protagonist. The narrative seamlessly oscillates between the thoughts of the narrator and the words of the protagonist. This sort of blurring of conventional narrative boundaries is certainly one of the most striking aspects of *Austerlitz.* The lack of punctuation causes voices to be conflated and identities to be rendered permeable. The constant stream of narration, unbroken either by punctuation or chapter division, enables Sebald to establish a narrative form that undermines the linearity of conventional prose writing. The resulting fluidity leads to a vertiginous, uninterrupted exploration of different places, ideas and historical moments which all contribute to the power of the novel as an unfolding meditation on modernity and the modern

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experience. As an entry point to unpacking the novel's contribution to a discourse of modernity, I present the motif of dusk in *Austerlitz* as a feature which, although perhaps quite an inconspicuous feature of the novel, permeates its pages and effects the blurring of boundaries on which the peculiar form of *Austerlitz* relies.

In an audio interview with Michael Silverblatt, Sebald describes his fascination with the fog that seems an ever-present phenomenon in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. He explains,

> these kinds of natural phenomena like fog, like mist, which render the environment, and one's ability to see it almost impossible, are phenomena that have always interested me greatly. One of the great strokes of genius in standard nineteenth-century fiction, I always thought was the fog in *Bleak House*; this ability to make of one natural phenomenon a thread that runs through a whole text and kind of upholsters this extended metaphor…[1]

Sebald's reference to the fog in *Bleak House* as a "natural" phenomenon is curious. *Bleak House* is set in the very epicentre of the industrialisation of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Jesse Oak Taylor considers Victorian London "the geohistorical location at which to trace the emergence of anthropogenic climate change" (5). The fog that permeates Dickens' London, then, points distinctly to the way pollution (like chimney smoke from factories) and natural phenomena (like fog) morph to create the hybrid that seems to be neither truly natural nor manufactured. With this in mind, Taylor provides a compelling argument for thinking about *Bleak House* and the emerging human habitat of the metropole depicted in the novel, as a greenhouse. The

[1] Own transcription with slight grammatical changes.

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industrialised city represents an artificial climate where, for the first time in history, humans would see themselves as the engineers of their own climate, albeit for worse. The city is likened to the artificial habitat of the greenhouse; what is natural and what is technological are conflated, rendering nature something that is difficult to define. Taylor writes,

> The greenhouse effect unsettles any easy divide between the "natural" and the "unnatural, replacing it with the apparent oxymoron *artificial nature*. In such context, literature can only name a "Nature" in crisis, morphing and mutating within the hothouse of modernity. (8)

The result of the greenhouse effect is obviously not something that can be considered natural in the sense that it would exist in the environment without human intervention. Nor is it something entirely *unnatural*, as it still contains the natural properties of fog. Taylor therefore proposes a third category, namely, "abnatural", with "ab- meaning 'away from' or 'beneath,' as in 'abnormal' or 'abjection'" (5). The abnatural is a helpful term when faced with the need to describe phenomena in which the violation of the status quo of nature needs to be acknowledged without relying on the stability of the natural. Fog in *Bleak House* is, then, the almost-tangible, pervasive presence of the effects of industrialisation both on nature and civilisation. The abnatural represents the overlap between the negative consequences of technological development and natural disaster. This space is a feature of modern times which, as I indicate later, is represented in a similar way by dusk in *Austerlitz* as it is by fog in *Bleak House*.

In calling the fog of *Bleak House* a "natural" phenomenon, Sebald in effect draws attention to exactly the abnatural, and echoes an idea that pervades much of his

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work: a calamitous vision of history, with a specific focus on modernity. In his own work, Sebald could be said to account for abnatural forms of destruction. His vision of history points towards the conflation of natural disasters and the ruin made possible by new technologies of destruction in the age of modernity. In modernity, technology brought about the possibility of new forces of destruction that defy the categories of natural and unnatural in their all-encompassing magnitude. According to Sebald's ontology, history is the immutable unfolding of calamity in a natural process of accumulative ruin; modernity is its dusk before the consummation of this process in utter ruin and darkness. This is argued poignantly by Karen Remmler:

> Sebald's compendium of disaster is nothing short of a treatise on the conditions that make human beings vulnerable to the destruction that is always part of disaster, whether it is natural (e.g., earthquakes), technical (e.g., toxic substances), or social (e.g., war). Sebald's disaster is more than the Shoah and more than the Second World War. It includes the "disasters" of colonialism, of industrialisation, and nuclear proliferation. Even as his narrators are fascinated by ruin and by the decay of natural environments after storms and after the decline of one industry or another, they are also intrigued by the psychological decline of human beings and its manifestation in their physical beings. The vulnerability of his narrators to the unpredictability of natural occurrences is intermeshed with the impact of man-made atrocity. (51)

Remmler's argument is tangible in Sebald's posthumously published English translation of his essay "*Luftkrieg und Literatur*" – with the English title "On the Natural History of Destruction". Here the Allied bombings are presented by Sebald

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not merely as an isolated event of incomprehensible destruction due to the convergence of human brutality and modern technological power within the context of World War II. The ruin of German cities is implicated in the unfolding of a larger natural pattern in which all things tend towards destruction. The bombings form part of a “natural history”. The destructive nature of reality finds expression in the allied bombings. This unifying vision of destructive forces characterises much of Sebald’s work.

Rob Burns and Wilfried van der Will recognise that Sebald’s literature often deals with specific events, but they maintain that his lament regarding the entropic nature of history remains largely detached from specific events. It is their view that

> The Holocaust, or the aerial destruction of German cities, or the tearing apart of biographies by racist persecution, or the ecological ravaging of nature may all provide food for Sebald’s imagination, but they are, for him, only instantiations of Being that is blighted by evil right from the outset. As such they are only episodes within a progression towards an immutable future that is viewed as certain because it will make plain the rottenness embedded in Being *ab ovo*. (347)

Thus, for all the circling around and deeply affective mourning of the particulars of history that Sebald does in his writing, single events become woven into a tapestry of ontological disaster. Paul Sheehan also points out this feature in Sebald’s texts:

> In presenting history as a space in which collective traumas can be identified, Sebald assumes a free archival licence to conjoin disparate events in anachronistic ways. As a result, the causal logic that

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> underpins narrative history is exploded, even as history is 'fixed' into a web of calamity and adversity. (731)

Beyond the conflation of natural and engineered destruction, what is at work here is a tension between the specific, detailed accounts of individuals located in particular locations – call these "individual histories" – and a somewhat monolithic vision of history as tragedy in which all individual histories are implicated. Rob Burns and Wilfried van der Will present an even more bleak take on Sebald's view of history. They posit that Sebald's texts are all narrated by

> someone who […] gives voice to his mourning, repulsion, disgust and abysmal sadness at a history that endless[ly] reproduces brutality and a nature in which violence is ineradicably inscribed and which opens up new evolutionary vistas only as predications of future destruction. (342)

It is in the abnatural forms of destruction witnessed during modernity that new vistas become visible.

Jonathan Long's influential study, titled *W. G. Sebald – Image, Archive, Modernity* posits that, while the vast amount of Sebald scholarship that has accumulated since the author's death touches on a broad range of thematic and formal aspects of Sebald's work, it is possible to distil these down to a handful of topoi which recur wherever Sebald is studied. He lists these as the "Holocaust, trauma and memory, melancholy, photography, travel and flânerie, intertextuality and *Heimat*" (1). Long regards these, however, as "epiphenomena" of a larger "meta-problem", namely, the problem of modernity. He provides a convincing argument for holding that Sebald traces the era of modernism to as far back as the late eighteenth and

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nineteenth centuries. This view is supported by Burns and Van der Will who write that modernity is "a historical period that begins for Sebald with Napoleon at the latest" (344). The definition of modernity that I borrow from Long is "the seismic social, economic, political and cultural transformation that took place in European societies from the eighteenth century onwards". (1)

That Sebald joins a tradition of melancholy peculiar to modernity is well noted. Peter Fritsche, as cited by Long, points out that "part of the modern experience was a deepening sense of loss, a feeling of disconnection with the past, and a growing dread of the future" (Fritzsche 49). Long locates Sebald within the tradition of melancholy, drawing on Mary Cosgrove who "argue[s] that Sebald's texts are dominated by an understanding of history as melancholy, which maroons the subject in the ruins of the immediate post-war years" (Long 5). As a result, the key to the contemporary, for Sebald, does not lie "in the surface phenomena of the immediate present, but in the structures and the technologies developed a century ago but whose effects continue to be felt" (Long 170). "Wherever one looks", writes Long, "in the literature on Sebald […] one is confronted with the topoi that are ineluctably and inextricably connected to the problems of modernity" (8).

Walking, associated with the historical tradition of the strolling *flâneur*, is a crucial element in the way Sebald's fictive work, and particularly *Austerlitz*, engages with questions of modernity. What I refer to in my title as "transitory pedestrianism" is the role of walking in *Austerlitz.* Walking is the necessary condition for a tension that underpins Sebald's apprehension of modernity: the tension between the specifics of the everyday, which can only be encountered at street level, and the elevated, unified vision of history as tragedy which Sebald's characters both affirm and resist.

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This is a vision into which these street-level stories become enmeshed, becoming inseparable from one another. Sebald's characters mourn the passing away of individual stories and the slippage of modernism into forgetfulness, combating the processes of forgetfulness by gathering stories of individual lives. Yet, as a sort of archive for the forgotten, *Austerlitz*, paradoxically comes to resemble the very monolithic structures of modernity that have led to the acceleration of forgetfulness. Thus, Long views flânerie as "a way of protesting (although vainly) against commodification" (6). It sets up a dichotomy between everyday practices and the processes of industrial production that reaches into and comes to dominate individual lives in multifarious forms of totalitarianism. (To unpack this dichotomy, I later turn to Michel de Certeau, who advocates a rhetoric of pedestrianism that profoundly resonates with the centrality of walking in *Austerlitz*.)

Weaving is partly helpful as a metaphor for this tension or interplay between the specifics of experience in history, explored through streetwalking, and Sebald's greater vision of the pattern that emerges from them all in History (capital H), which reaches a climax in modernity's new incarnations of destruction. The act of weaving follows enmeshed linear logics, and as an image for historiographic writing, resembles the act of recalling individual events, each representing a peculiar occurrence, a single thread. The motion of the thread also recalls the movement of Sebald's pedestrian characters better than most images. Like flexible threads, the flaneur's trajectories navigate through, across and between the streets, transgressing the standards of order imposed on the walker by modernity's urban spaces. From a higher vantage point, the woven threads form part of a repetitive pattern that causes the linear lines of innumerable threads to be subsumed in a form of entangled circularity. In this sense, individual stories, however mysterious, however individual,

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form part of the discernible vision of a calamitous history. This is one way to think of the tension that arises between the specific detailed and unified, even monolithic, visions found in Sebald's *Austerlitz.* The metaphor breaks down when one considers the circularity inherent in the way individual stories are recalled in *Austerlitz* – Sebald's hi-stories are anachronous, resembling memory more than historiographical writing. This is incompatible with the grid-patterns intrinsic to weaving. Sebald's histories are unstable, prone to confusion, inaccuracies and amnesia. Weaving, then, if employed as a metaphor here, is limited to the tension between the singularity of individual experience and the emerging pattern of History that dominates Sebald's ontology. Where weaving falls short, the metaphor of the palimpsest may provide a more robust image. Will Self writes:

> For Sebald, history is a palimpsest, the meaning of which can only be divined by rubbing away a little bit here, adding on some over there, and then – most importantly – stepping back to allow for a synoptic view that remains inherently suspect. (14)

If individual lives are texts, written stories, of unique content and context, then a new, less textual and more visual entity emerges when these stories are superimposed on one another through a blurring of the boundaries that render them separate. In *Austerlitz*, the abnatural phenomenon of dusk creates an association between disparate places, times and stories, gathering them into one new mutual space.

Thinking of dusk as a metaphor and a literary device assists an understanding of the way Sebald achieves the effect of the palimpsest in *Austerlitz.* Dusk is the imaginative glue that Sebald uses to superimpose varied stories, gathered from across generations and geographies, into a single image. It is the atmospheric marker of dusk

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that typifies the characters' situated experience, and, I would argue, locates the narrative in a critical discourse around the experience of the subject in modernity.

On various occasions in *Austerlitz*, the phrase "in the gathering dusk" is repeated verbatim. Ontologically, dusk is a liminal time – between day and night. It is a time of transition, from light to darkness. As a metaphor, then, it stands for the tension between what has been and what will be. Those who dwell "in" dusk are those who are witnessing a passing away of the light that was, into the darkness that will be. The fact that Sebald's characters in *Austerlitz* continually dwell "in" dusk, gestures towards the novel's concern with questions of memory and history in the shadow of great calamity. The narrator voices a sense that "everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life" (*Austerlitz* 24). The preposition "in", used in the phrase "in the gathering dusk", transforms what is a temporal designation – dusk as a time of day – into something spatial and atmospheric. The characters' being "in" dusk causes a spatio-temporal embodiment of the tension between past and present, something into which characters (and readers) do not enter, but into which they are gathered. Dusk, in *Austerlitz*, is an ominous abnatural phenomenon that mutates into a powerful force – like a storm that gathers, a volcano erupting in bellowing smoke, a tornado forming – pulling all of history into itself.

At dusk there is an expectation of movement towards the future state of darkness, and this trajectory depends on the disappearance of what has gone before; it depends on the disappearance of light. A normative understanding of dusk is as an increasing departure towards absence. The sun is setting; light is departing. The darkness that follows thus results not from a gathering but from a disappearance. Again, dusk is an apt setting for a narrative that is constituted by the inadequacy of

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the protagonist to recall anything about a past that is lost to him. He grapples with the sense that the past is constantly slipping into an inaccessible abyss. The onset of absence, not presence, the presence of clouds or smoke, not of anything that "gathers", is what characterises dusk.

But, of course, "gather" is exactly the word used to describe the nature of dusk in *Austerlitz.* In this phrasing, "in the gathering dusk", lies an intimation of an abnatural substance. Paul Sheehan traces the way gaseous matter, most notably smoke, functions as a "conspicuous element in all of Sebald's fictions", linking "past with present, memory with perception" (738). Sheehan cites several examples of smoke appearing in *Austerlitz*. First, he points out that, although the facts about what truly happened to Austerlitz's parents remain inaccessible to him, he nevertheless manages to gain inconclusive clues as to their fate, clues which are associated in an uncanny fashion with dreams and flights of imagination that contain smoke. His childhood caretaker, Vera, tells Austerlitz how his mother, Agáta, was forced to leave her flat, and how a sinister looking pest-control officer was sent to fumigate the flat upon her departure. In a dream associated with these details about his mother's life, Austerlitz sees this figure "surrounded by clouds of poisonous white smoke as he goes about fumigating the rooms" (*Austerlitz* 180). Sheehan also cites the way Austerlitz imagines his father leaving the train station in Paris: with clouds of locomotive smoke I imagined, says Austerlitz, that "I saw him leaning out of the window of his compartment as the train left, and I saw white clouds of smoke rising from the locomotive as it began to move ponderously away" (*Austerlitz* 291). The evanescence of smoke, an abnatural phenomenon, here stands for the intermingling of the naturally elusive nature of memory and the jarring loss that results from human cruelty. Smoke also appears in passages that are less directly related to Austerlitz's search for his

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familial history, but the phenomenon still presented with a sense of the abnatural. Austerlitz recalls coming home as a boy to Stower Grange in Wales, where he found,

> Gwendolyn barely alive. There was a coal fire smouldering on the hearth of her sick room. The yellow smoke that rose from the glowing coals and never entirely dispersed up the chimney mingled with the smell of carbolic pervading the whole house. (*Austerlitz* 58)

In this example, natural smoke mingles with industrially produced chemical vapours to bind themes of diminishing vitality, illness, and decay. These themes emerge from the doubling of his dying foster parent and the fire that has burnt out and is in the process of turning to ash.

In *Austerlitz*, the repetitive allusion to dusk and its association with smoke can be said not only to coincide with the *gathering* smoke of modernity, but also to *gather* otherwise disparate histories (predominantly ravaged. traumatic ones) into a space where, through a kind of blurring, proximity is effected and an integrated vision emerges. A few sentences before the scene where he describes Gwendolyn on her deathbed, smoke creates a link with a vastly different childhood memory related by Austerlitz. By the approximate use of the imagery of smoke, the experience of Gwendolyn's gradual decline and a different history are bound together to create a more general sense of loss and ruin. Austerlitz shows the narrator a full-page illustration from his Welsh children's Bible depicting the people of Israel's encampment in the wilderness after fleeing Egypt. He explains: "I knew that my proper place was among the tiny figures populating the camp" (*Austerlitz* 57). The detail which most captivated the young Austerlitz, was "the fenced square in the middle and the tent-like building at the far end, with a cloud of white smoke above it"

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(*Austerlitz* 58). A distant historic and geographical setting is brought into proximity with the protagonist in three ways. First, the picture of the children of Israel fleeing the wrath of their Egyptian captors acts as an allegory for how Austerlitz, himself a Jew, escapes from the Nazi onslaught in Europe. Second, the smoke that rises from the middle of the camp raises the theme of destruction and desolation, not only in its allusion to the smoke that rose from Nazi concentration camps, but the pervasive destruction that characterises much of modern history. Third, and perhaps most interestingly, via an illusion related to the trope of impaired vision as a consequence of diffusion through smoke and the associated trope of dusk, dusk is characterised by a certain quality of light. It stands at the edge of human perception, on the brink of invisibility. This opens up the possibility of illusion, misidentification, the blurring of different of places, times and identities, as happens when Austerlitz misapprehends the illustration of Israel's encampment in the Sinai Desert. For Austerlitz, the illustration seemed "uncannily familiar. I thought I could make out a stone quarry in a rather lighter patch on the steep slope of the mountain over to the right, and I seemed to see a railway track in the regular curve of the lines below it" (*Austerlitz* 58). The protagonist mistakenly *sees* elements that belong to an industrialised era. By way of illusion – smoke and mirrors – the spatio-temporal chasm between the ancient scene and the character's present vaporises into smoke. Laura García-Moreno points out this function of the dusk motif in *Austerlitz.* She argues:

> A moving force behind his writing is to bring objects and beings stranded on this edge into some kind of visibility, however dim or dusk-like. (Twilight is a recurrent time of day alluded to in Sebald's writing; dusk or darkness always seems to be gathering). (369)

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Dusk and smoke, elements that impair vision, cause temporal fixedness that cause the past to be distant, to be obscured. Recent and distant events are thus gathered into Sebald's unified vision of history. Dusk mingled with the soot and smoke of modernity encapsulates unrelated, bygone events and causes them to be implicated in a unified vision – a palimpsest of events all characterised by an understanding of history as a process of inevitable destruction, loss, and decay.

The narrator compares his first encounter with Austerlitz in the waiting room of Centraal Station in Antwerp to the Nocturama he had visited before entering the train station. He states that "over the years, images of the interior of the Nocturama have become confused in my mind with my memories of [Antwerp Station]" (*Austerlitz* 4). The "electric light" in the Nocturama creates what the narrator describes as an "artificial dusk" (*Austerlitz* 4). As he then moves into the train station, he states that the possible reason for the "curious confusion" according to which "the waiting room . . . struck me as another Nocturama . . . may of course have been the result of the sun's sinking behind the city rooftops just as I entered the room" (*Austerlitz* 6). Dusk, with its waning light, is directly linked here to the confusion of two different spaces. The characters of *Austerlitz*, insofar as dusk is spatialized, remain in one space that gathers other spaces into itself in a sort of conceptual proximity. Here the role of dusk as an adhesive in Sebald's palimpsest is clearly visible.

There is one more aspect of the phrase "in the gathering dusk" that I have not touched on yet, but which illuminates a key part of understanding Sebald's response to questions of modernity. It again involves the word "gathers": the act of archival gathering. Long writes that the "selfunderstanding of modernity itself is based not on

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a pervasive sense of epistemological chaos, but on an unbroken faith in the rationality of the archive" (10). The archive, as a structural figure (even a character) that grieves the passing away of history, whose hope for a reconstituted identity, fractured by the forces of violent deportation, lies in excavating a forgotten past, is central to the story of *Austerlitz.* With an absence of remembered, first-hand experience, *Austerlitz* resorts to the collection of objects, photographs, and stories to mend a fragmented identity. The archival impulse in *Austerlitz* is, however, cast in ambiguous terms. In its theorisation of prosthetic memory – or a deeply mediated form of proxy memory – postmemory is a key concept for understanding this ambivalence.

Postmemory and the Archive

Austerlitz does not begin with "In the beginning…" as does the archetypal origin account found in the book of Genesis. Rather, with a deliberate authorial perversity, the novel 'begins' with "In the second half…": "In the second half of the 1960s, I travelled repeatedly from England to Belgium, partly for study purposes, partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me, staying sometimes for just one or two days, sometimes for several weeks" (*Austerlitz* 1). This is a fluid, disorientating position, riven with uncertainties even for the Sebaldian narrator. It is not merely the protagonist who is portrayed as an exile of history; someone who has no memory of his origins. Readers also meet the narrator as a wanderer. In fact, the text of *Austerlitz* as a whole seems to have been cut off at both ends. There is no departure, or arrival. Only transition. From the first, the reader is informed that this is a story that begins after the beginning and in this way the loss of the beginning is implied. There is much that is disorientating. For example, we are not told who the narrator is, or why exactly he travels to Belgium in the first place – other than the

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vague insertion that it was "partly for study purposes, partly for reasons which were never entirely clear to me" (*Austerlitz* 3). Before he meets the protagonist, whose story unfolds as a loss of (and search for) origins, the narrator appears as a character with an uncertain history himself. Indeed, even the paratextual apparatus of the novel's striking combination of cover image, and title, may seem to point to the imminent arrival of the protagonist but at the same time the opening of the novel leaves this arrival deferred. The cover depicts a young boy in elaborate dress standing in a grey field. Above his head, in contrast with the dark hue of the field, is an overexposed white horizon. With "Austerlitz" printed above the image, the cover seems to imply that this is a photograph of the eponymous protagonist. At first glance, the photograph anchors the story in reality. But, considering the fictitious nature of the account, the image enters the text from the outside, from the world of the real, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, and exacerbating the uncertainty inherent in the text. The image also causes a blurring of the protagonist's past and present selves, muddling the separation of past and present.

Lodged in between the obscure opening and the first meeting with the protagonist is an account that metaphorically foreshadows and contextualises the moment when narrator and protagonist meet. What seems like a superfluous detour before the appearance of the protagonist is in fact a cleverly fashioned account that reflects on and sets up a web of association for understanding the narrator's first encounter with the protagonist in the waiting room of Antwerp Station. The narrator states:

> Over the years, images of the Nocturama have become confused in my mind with my memories of the *Salle des pas perdus* . . . If I try to

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> conjure up a picture of that waiting room today I immediately see the Nocturama, and if I think of the Nocturama the waiting room springs to mind. (5)

In the entangled convolutions of this description, a deliberate authorial disorientation, the Nocturama introduces the theme of exile. Even before the protagonist enters the narrative, the account proceeds to place the protagonist at the centre of the waiting room, and this space of waiting – in effect a suspension, emerges as a site which, due to its association with the Nocturama, is a metaphor for an exile's uneasily unsettled habitat. Further to emphasise this, the narrator watches as a racoon

> sat beside a little stream with a serious expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again, as if it hoped that all this washing, which went beyond any reasonable thoroughness, would help it escape the unreal world in which it had arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own. (*Austerlitz* 4)

The animals in the Nocturama are creatures that have been taken from their native environment to a completely foreign one; they are exiles living in a "topsy-turvy miniature universe" (*Austerlitz* 5). The page on which this description appears is punctuated with two images of nocturnal animals, their wide eyes filling the rectangular frames. This creates a deep sense of horror and even unbelief, after the anthropomorphic terms used to describe the racoon. The creatures are rendered visually as trapped, fundamentally wrenched from their habituated habitats.

Through the network of associations created around the Nocturama, the story of Austerlitz is contextualised. A web of meaning emerges, wherein the protagonist represents the experience of living in a world marked by a loss of *Heimat*, or origins,

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and experiences an effort to "pierce the darkness which surrounds us" (*Austerlitz* 5), so as to regain what has been lost. The association with exile – finding oneself in a strange place due to violent displacement from *Heimat* – is extended further by a statue that appears outside Centraal station, "the verdigris-covered Negro boy who, for a century now, has sat upon his dromedary on an oriel turret to the left of the station façade, a monument to the world of the animals and native peoples of the African continent, alone against the Flemish sky" (*Austerlitz* 6). The narrator alludes to the violence of the Belgian colonial past, but does so by considering a statue, reading into it a very personal sense of loneliness and bewilderment. Here, before having begun what a reader anticipates will be the story of someone called 'Austerlitz', the novel *Austerlitz* already transcends the story of Austerlitz, the individual character. Yes, the novel confronts the darkness that faces *him*, Austerlitz, in his search is for the past, and the endeavour to see through the mist of repression which renders memories and his familial past inaccessible. But Sebald's text also confronts the darkness that characterises the experience of modernity – the violence, past and present, that remains difficult to come to terms with. *Austerlitz* is from the outset a broader grappling with the traumatic nature of human existence and the atrocities that render it so, especially in light of the modern history of destruction. With the Nocturama, along with surrounding areas that seem like random detours, as a foreshadowing of the waiting room, the waiting room in turn can be regarded as a microcosm of the way Sebald depicts the world in *Austerlitz* – a world in which existence consists in coming to terms with exile in various forms.

Much of Sebald's oeuvre represents a grappling with memory in the shadow of trauma. Naomi Stead writes that "the overriding theme in *Austerlitz* is . . . memory: individual and collective, forgotten and retrieved, the fragility of human memory in

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the face of the crushing forces of history" ("Architecture and Memory" 42). Maya Jaggi states that much of Sebald's work is about "memory: its unreliability, its shattering return after being repressed" ("The Last Word"). Simona Mitroiu writes that Sebald's main themes "focus on memory and forgetting, on their permeability, and on the permeability of life and death" (884). Memory here bears upon both collective and personal memory. On a personal level, Austerlitz wrestles with the problem of identity when faced with the destruction of his past. He has no memory of his parents and relies on archives and witnesses to compensate for a lack of personal memory. Furthermore, Austerlitz grapples with the repression and resurfacing of a painful past. But the text also deals with more collective aspects of memory. Modern atrocities and tragedies have led to a loss of more lives – and thus more memories – than can be counted and accounted for. How do later generations deal with the void that is created?

Jacques Austerlitz is not provided with any account of his past in the home of Emyr Elias. Indeed, even his name is unknown to him until his high school headmaster, Penrith-Smith, reveals it in 1949 – his name is not Dafydd Elias, but Jacques Austerlitz (*Austerlitz* 67). As a boy, Austerlitz wonders about the meaning of his name, and tries to inquire about it as a means to relocate his past – the people and places it is associated with. He follows its linguistic traces like a rope tied at one end to himself and the other, he hopes, to his origins, believing that a name is a linguistic connection to that moment in the past when one's parents decided upon it. This connection is supposedly even more concrete and genealogically specific in one's surname, or family name. Although his first name is known, the narrator insists on referring to Austerlitz by his last name. This designation functions as an allusion to an obviously absent familial past, for the surname "Austerlitz" stands as an absent

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presence. While it brings the ancestors into the present through a form of linguistic ritual, in his Welsh environs, the character "could connect no ideas at all with the word Austerlitz" (*Austerlitz* 67). 'Austerlitz' is merely a "word" which initially disappoints in bringing the past into the present – a word unconnected to his own lived identity. His ignorance about his name reflects his alienation from his own past.

For Sebald, however, the intention is to illustrate, through the novel *Austerlitz*, that this naming carries a weight of inheritance, both at the level of text and context. The novel grapples with the shadow of history that threatens to overwhelm the present, but the nature of shadows is that they lack detail and texture. Thus, the text leaves many questions when it comes to identifying the form and nature of the inheritance. What is the substance of the history that troubles Sebald, a contemporary German author born at the close of the Second World War and living in England, and of a character who lacks any direct experience to bear witness to those events which occupy most of his thoughts?

The answer, in *Austerlitz*, lies partly in the archive. Lacking personal memory of his origins, Austerlitz relies on mediated forms of remembrance to fill the void left by separation from his birth family and exile. In *Austerlitz*, writes Sheehan, "memory might be seen … as synchronic, taking the form of external markers" (736). Sebald's characters spend, as Long observes,

> an inordinate amount of time in museums and galleries, libraries and archives, zoos and menageries. They betray a fascination with timetables, inventories, ledgers, albums, ships' logs, atlases, newspapers, diaries, letters and photographs. In short, they are

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> obsessed with processes of archivisation and with the places where the past has deposited traces and fragments that have been preserved. (11)

This does not mean, however, that the archive serves as an adequate substitution for memory. In fact, Richard Crownshaw argues, "the archive, in *Austerlitz*, often militates against the ability to remember … Not only does it work against itself from the beginning, it destroys itself from the beginning, devouring itself without trace". (219).

Austerlitz's grappling with an unremembered past has its analogue in the preoccupations of W. G. Sebald, an author deeply occupied with coming to terms with the paradoxical facts and elusive amnesias associated with forms of inherited history. Sebald was born in Wertach im Allgäu, Bavaria, in 1944. In his interview with Maya Jaggi, he described the social atmosphere in his native country, as he experienced it during his childhood years, as being marked by "the so-called conspiracy of silence" ("The Last Word"). Whether in his family or the wider German community, little was said about the dark events that unfolded across the continent and he subsequently grew up ignorant of the historical details of the war. He told Jaggi that "It was a long drawn-out process to find out, which I've done persistently ever since" ("Recovered Memories"), and writes on a different occasion, "I grew up feeling that something was being kept from me: at home, at school, and by the German writers whose books I read hoping to glean more information about the monstrous events in the background of my own life" (*On the Natural History of Destruction* 66). At the age of 17, however, the veil started lifting, when he was "confronted with a documentary film of the opening of the Belsen camp" (Jaggi, "The

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Last Word"). Even though he did not experience the horrors of the war personally, he expresses a sense of having inherited history. He writes,

> I can hardly have any impressions of that period based on personal experience. Yet to this day, when I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war I feel as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, one from which I shall never entirely emerge. (*On the Natural History of Destruction* 66)

Michael Robinson states that Sebald is "burdened by history" (qtd. in Jaggi, "Recovered Memories"). The preoccupation with the past is so central in Sebald's work, that he posits the "moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory" (Jaggi, "The Last Word"). This statement extends a sense of historical inheritance to a universal plane, which simultaneously raises challenges to the way we engage with history and problems with regards to the ethics surrounding the representation of the trauma of others.

The way in which *Austerlitz* deals with matters of memory and history have brought it into the realm of what Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory. Appearing 50 years after World War II, the novel bears witness to the ongoing effects of a traumatic past in the present. In this novel, the violence of the war is a vague yet powerful presence that the protagonist is simultaneously compelled to face, and yet always unable fully to confront. To the degree that Sebald and his character, Austerlitz, can be viewed as deeply occupied in grappling with a past that is inaccessible yet hauntingly present, the novel enters into conversation with many who feel the past as

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a prominent presence in the present, whether as memory, or cultural inheritance, or ethical claim.

The concept of postmemory is deeply linked to memorialisation, and especially the archive. In the immediate post-war years, Holocaust remembrance was marked by silence. Jaggi reports that Sebald himself made "a concerted attempt in the first years after the war not to remember anything, for the obvious reason that those in office were implicated" ("Recovered Memories"). This silence, however, did not last and was succeeded by decades of almost obsessive documentation – rarely has any event in history been so thoroughly documented for its historical detail. The proliferation of texts dealing with events of such horror and destruction simultaneously led to increased controversy around acceptable modes of representation and identification. Sebald raised this in his interview with Jaggi when he stated,

> In the history of postwar German writing, for the first 15 or 20 years, people avoided mentioning political persecution - the incarceration and systematic extermination of whole peoples and groups in society. Then from 1965 this became a preoccupation of writers - not always in an acceptable form. So I knew that writing about the subject, particularly for people of German origin, is fraught with dangers and difficulties. Tactless lapses, moral and aesthetic, can easily be committed. It was also clear you could not write directly about the horror of persecution in its ultimate forms, because no one could bear to look at these things without losing their sanity. ("The Last Word")

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Recent decades, as the number of people who experienced the Shoah have become fewer, have seen an increased and vastly interdisciplinary interest in how these events affect the generation who grew up in their aftermath and crucially, how literary engagement with these events can retain its felt vitality in the act of remembrance, without losing the crucial connection with the facts of history and remaining within the bounds of ethical engagement with the experiences of others. Precisely in recognition of such difficulties, the term "memory" has been criticized as an inapt label for describing the relationship that the generations after have to the events of the Holocaust. In its stead, Marianne Hirsch coined the concept "postmemory" to refer to memories that have been transmitted to descendants of Holocaust survivors. According to Hirsch, it is the affective link that later generations have to the experiences of their ancestors that prompts the use of the term "memory", while the rift between these generations, caused by the immensity of traumatic experiences, necessitates the prefix "post-". Hirsch writes that "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (103). "Postmemory" contains within it a paradox, in that the prefix seems to imply that transference of "memory" is possible, while also emphasising, in the split quality of "post-ness", the distinct differences between personal experience and contemporary witness. Hirsch further defines postmemory as "a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove" (106). Some scholars have objected even to the notion of postmemory, notably Helen Epstein and Ernst van Alpen, insisting on the significant fissure that the lived experience causes between

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first and second generations with relation to the Holocaust, and the impossibility of receiving memory. Hirsch counters these detractors by affirming that "of course different semiotic principles are at work, of course no degree of monumentality can transform one person's lived memories into another's. Postmemory is not identical to memory: it is 'post,' but at the same time, it approximates memory in its affective force" (109).

The problems faced by this 'post' generation of writers are not ascribed to a lack of information but, as Victoria Aarons points out, "an absence of immediacy, of felt sensation, the sights, the sounds and textures of experience" (142). To those living in the long, persistent wake of the Holocaust, its history represents a far more haunting force than given by facts. Despite the difficulty posed by the inaccessibility of the empirical, historical events, many feel their identities inextricably tied up with the Holocaust even while these long-gone events are hard to account for in their fullness. For this reason, the need for authors to address the haunting legacy of traumatic past events has retained its necessity. Eva Hoffman testifies to a "desire to excavate our generational story from under [the Holocaust's] weight and shadow" (qtd. in Aarons 138), and Aarons responds by pointing out that this excavation goes beyond the immutable facts of history – the events – instead concerning "persistent attitudes, engagements and confrontations . . . that followed in its wake" (Aarons 138). Many people have a sense that their identities have been profoundly shaped by collective tragedies that precede their lifetime. It is thus feasible that the Holocaust has not only had a sustained effect on the lives of those who experienced its systemic violence, but also of those who did not, for "these events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present" (Hirsch 107). How are later generations to grapple with the continued effects of events that precede their historical-personal

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experience? Indeed, countless works have emerged in a myriad of literary forms out of the second-generation, testifying not only about the events of the Holocaust, but to the continued and profound influence these mediated experiences have upon members of later generations. In some regard, contemporary authors bear witness to the plaguing, haunting presence of what could be called unremembered events.

One of the most prominent associations made with memory in terms of its trans-generational aspects, is the notion of haunting. It is rare that one finds any discussion concerning the legacy of a traumatic past which does not implement, to some degree, the metaphor of a troubling, ghost-like presence. Literature and literary criticism, in their persistent use of this metaphor, testify that history is not a simple matter of immutable facts to be documented accurately – but that the claim of the historical exerts a certain affective and elusive persistence. *Austerlitz* expresses an encounter with, as García Moreno puts it, what "has vanished yet retains its power to haunt" (360). Generations who had no personal experience of the Holocaust, nevertheless appear to grapple its persistent spectral presence – and for those whose aim it is to grapple with these spectres in their writing, authoring becomes a matter of creating a medium for ghosts, a textual space where the past and the present, the living and the dead, may converge. Aarons explains that, for writers who were born after 1945 and who tussle with the trauma of the War,

> The "memory" of Holocaust remains a haunting legacy that is as foundational to the composition of felt space and time as it is to the formation of memory. (138)

In my present investigation of Sebald's *Austerlitz*, it is the nature of the "affective force" of memory that I seek to identify. In these novels, history acts as a force that

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crosses generational, cultural and physical bounds in ways that endow it with a spectral aspect, a haunting power. This haunting transcends the boundaries of historical documentation. It is a presence that passes from one generation to the next in a way similar to folklore or mythology, the way that stories are not only told but inherited. In *Austerlitz*, within the fictive space of the book, there is the notion that the memories of the central character, Austerlitz, are transferred to the narrator through storytelling. This transference is a verbal one, occurring through conversations between these two characters on different occasions.

Austerlitz, a fictional character, is given a face and a history through real objects. The first and most significant way in which this fictional account commends itself as truth is through photography. As Hirsch points out, photography derives its power as a medium able to convey unimaginable (or difficult to imagine) events from its promise to offer access to the event itself, and its easy assumption of iconic and symbolic power. A most striking example is the photograph that appears on the cover of *Austerlitz* which I mention on page 30. This photograph is used as a narrative device to ascribe a sense of documented reality to the account of the character Austerlitz. The picture is narrated as being a photo of Austerlitz himself as a boy, taken at a party, which he attended with his parents. Through such photographic truth claims, purporting to place the material fact of empirical person and experience verifiably before a reader, Sebald thus strengthens the notion of reality in the novelised account of Austerlitz. The photograph acts as an assertion of the truth of the story being narrated, a guarantor, if you will. The narrator's allusion to so many real places and the photographs that accompany them seem to draw up a petition against the invented fictions implied by the label ‘story’.

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The character of Austerlitz is legible to us through the experience of authors like Marianne Hirsch and Eva Hoffman, who testify to being plagued by "inherited memory" and "phantom pain". The disposition of the book's protagonist is masterfully summed up by García-Moreno: "Certain questions gnaw at this character . . . : what was it that so darkened his world and how can he confront what he cannot remember?" (362). *Austerlitz* represents a search for a narrative form suitable to convey the ephemeral and dynamic nature of history – and a resistance to forms of historiography which tend to seek a preferred, stabilised version of History, capital H. The archive proves inadequate for bridging the gap between past and present that has fractured Austerlitz's identity. Although the text is itself an archive that is greatly preoccupied with documentation, it nevertheless resists many aspects of the archive. *Austerlitz* records longs lists of animals, objects, buildings and people. The novel is, after all, the supposed product of the narrator's act of documenting his conversations with Austerlitz. And yet, *Austerlitz* resists a fossilised account of history, one that would merely induce apathy, instead investing interest in objects, buildings, fables and legends that might reanimate history and restore the vital connection to a past that simultaneously seems lost and hauntingly present. Here, of course, we are reminded that the exhaustive categorical lists and records associated with the documentary drive are inevitably always markers of the incomplete. That said, it is by focusing on the specifics of small objects, and entering, as it were the minds of other characters, that Sebald's *Austerlitz* strategises to engage with the past in a way that lends itself towards *mittgefühl*, or empathy. *Austerlitz* is in this sense an alternative sort of archive, marked as he is by gaps, lacuna, incompleteness.

There is a traction, here, between the archival impulse that gathers and endures and the preference for the specific, fleeting moments of individual

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experience; an echo of the tension between history and memory. While preferring the small-scale, the everyday stories of individuals, *Austerlitz,* in its very form, at times *resembles* the monolithic, with its long-winded sentences and lack of chapter divisions. Multiple identities become enmeshed, again blurring the specifics that particularise these identities. Walking is a key element in the way this tension between the monolithic and the specific emerges in *Austerlitz.*

Shadows of Destruction

In *Austerlitz*, architectural edifices are a symbol of human enterprise, which, in Sebaldian terms, is not characterised by altruistic progress. Through a network of associations, created by identifying "family likenesses" (*Austerlitz* 33) between the many buildings described by the narrator, buildings from across Europe and from different eras are conflated into one unified vision of overweening, monumental architecture. This, in itself, represents a monolithic view of architecture. Austerlitz ascribes a foreboding aspect to the buildings that he gathers under the aegis of his near lifelong project as an architectural historian. Buildings that represent, for Austerlitz, the violent forces that have dominated the modern – from industrialisation to fascism – are superimposed upon one another to create a single theory of architecture that would encapsulate them all.

The new imagined building that emerges as a palimpsest can be conceived of as a metaphor for the perilous progress of modernity that rises like the tower of Babel in Sebald's conceptual landscape. Babel is the archetypal story of human progress and ruination, and aligns with Sebald's negative ontology described earlier. The architects of Babel build a tower that would reach to the heavens; a tower that would permanently secure for them a distinctive geographical identity. But the tower

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becomes a symbol of rationality that sets itself up against the transcendent, an edifice of technology employed in the hopeless aid of self-preservation. Ultimately, the people are dispersed, and language is confused. The analogies with Austerlitz are clear. Austerlitz is an exile from a past he has inherited but to which he does not have access. He lives in the wake of the Nazi ascension to power and collapse in ruin. The rise and fall of the Nazi regime is but one thread in a repetitive pattern in which everything tends towards obliteration, according to Sebald's view of history, and in the wake of such ruin, he is obligated to wander on foreign soil.

History and memory are at the centre of the novel's meditative concern, for in a vital connection with history and living memory, the present is united with the past, with origins, creating the conditions for a true *Heimat,* and redemption from exile. The narrator of *Austerlitz* first meets the book's eponymous protagonist in what is later described as a sort of Pantheon to the new ruling powers, "the deities of the nineteenth century" (*Austerlitz* 10, 12). In the *Salle de pas perdus*, the Hall of lost causes or the Hall of lost steps, as the phrase literally translates, he meets a man who is lost in a world marked by loss – in effect, an exile in search of origins. Here is a man who, as the reader is later told by the narrator, retraces the lost steps, quite literally, of his childhood across Europe. The waiting room of Centraal Station is not a place of transition for Austerlitz, as it is for the others crowded within. He is an architectural historian, and the room itself is his subject and therefore, paradoxically, his destination. Austerlitz is not like others in the room, "staring apathetically into space", waiting; but is "occupied making notes and sketches, obviously relating to the room" (*Austerlitz* 8). His conspicuous musings concerning the building are what prompt the narrator to approach him and start that initial conversation; the first of the "Antwerp conversations" that "turned primarily on architectural history" (*Austerlitz*

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8). Through his protagonist's fixation on architectural edifices and the contents of his observations concerning these edifices, Sebald establishes the metaphor of a tower that rises at the centre of the space navigated through the narrative of *Austerlitz*. The protagonist's statement that "outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction" (*Austerlitz* 33) indicates a cyclical recurrence of the Babel narrative in the disasters that have resulted from and will result from the modern projects of human ambition.

During his first conversation with the narrator, Austerlitz provides a dramatic account of the construction of Antwerp Station. He casts the building as a structure that venerates the venal, exploitative 'deities' of the modern age. The account begins with the growing colonial power of Belgium during the nineteenth century. Belgium, Austerlitz explains, "spread its sphere of influence to the African continent with its colonial enterprises" (*Austerlitz* 9), King Leopold having commissioned the construction of the station as part of a project to "erect buildings which would bring international renown to his aspiring state" (*Austerlitz* 9). Austerlitz describes the building as the religious seat of new age 'gods'. Austerlitz explains that inspiration for Antwerp Station came from the new railway station at Lucerne – the dome of which dramatically exceeded "the usual modest height of railway buildings, [and] was inspired by the Pantheon in Rome" (*Austerlitz* 10). Its immensity is such that, "even today", says Austerlitz, "we are seized by a sense of being beyond the profane, in a cathedral consecrated to international traffic and trade" (*Austerlitz* 10). Similarly, in Antwerp Station, the "elevated level from which the gods looked down on visitors to the Roman Pantheon" is mirrored by the gaze of "deities of the nineteenth century" (*Austerlitz* 10). Austerlitz lists these deities as "mining, industry, transport, trade, and capital" (*Austerlitz* 10), pointing to the "symbolic sheaves of corn, crossed hammers,

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winged wheels, and so on" that represent them. Above them "Time, said Austerlitz, represented by the hands and dial of the clock, reigns supreme" (*Austerlitz* 12). This is the perverse pantheon of the modern Babel. With this metaphor, Sebald begins a sustained and complex critique of a modern society which revels in flaunting development and modernisation.

Yet inasmuch as Austerlitz's monolithic theory of architecture (as an expression of magisterial History) can be likened to the tower of Babel, it represents critique of a collective, organised effort to reach heaven; the construction of a monument to human endeavour; an attempt to usurp the transcendent – the builders of the tower spoke a common language and employed rationality to conquer mystery:

> Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. (*New King James Version,* Gen. 11:2-3)

Indeed, *Austerlitz* reveals how the ambition that constructs civilisation has always had oppression intermingled with its very mortar. Hayden White writes,

> The meaning of [*Austerlitz*] emerges in the interstices of the successive descriptions of places and edifices that attest to the ways in which "civilisation" has been built on the structures of evil, incarceration, exclusion, destruction and . . . humiliation . . . (11; 12)

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But, even more, *Austerlitz* reveals the modern rendition of this repetitive narrative of construction and destruction. This is implied by White when he alludes to the edifices on which the protagonist fixes his attention, e.g. Centraal Station in Antwerp, Breendonk, and the National Library of France. The ancient city of Babel is referenced allegorically, with civilisation likened to its fateful edifice. But the modern edifice is erected during the post-enlightenment era of which its narrative is a part. Modern society has built a Babel of its own, a project that sets out to order the world in a way which eliminates whatever remains distant and unexplained – all shall be made immanent.

Central to this idea is the way in which modern progress militates against the capacity to remember; indeed, effacing memory itself. Progress in a post-industrial-revolution and increasingly capitalistic world depends on production. Long writes accordingly that "the continual production of the new in capitalism has as its concomitant the continual destruction of the old, and the acceleration of obsolescence itself" (4). With obsolescence comes an increasing alienation from the past. Indeed, Long posits that the modern preoccupation with memory known as the "memory boom" is a direct result of modernity's propensity to create obsolescence through industry. "Modernity", he writes, "was, from quite an early stage, understood as something that generated loss (4). In the geographical sense, Austerlitz embodies the wandering exile, for he represents not only an individual who has been alienated from and goes in search of his own origins, but alienation from tangible connections to the past. The resulting void comes to stand for the modern experience.

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The Urban Philosopher

Aptly now, I turn to Michel de Certeau who, like Austerlitz, employs the act of walking as a means to resist the forces that militate against memory in the modern world. In the opening section of his famous essay “Walking the City”, Michel de Certeau theorises through a recollection of standing at the top of the World Trade Centre. He too thinks about the structures of the modern world in Babylonian terms, causing strong resonances with similar elements found in *Austerlitz*. De Certeau, of course, writes his essay in a different context. He locates his argument in the United States and sets it against the excesses of the radical forms of capitalism manifested in the aggrandising urban legibility asserted by money and power in New York City. The contents of his critique, however, contain notable similarities with what is found in *Austerlitz*: the protagonist, Austerlitz, is concerned with the erasure of memory caused by elevated notions of progress and expressed in a tendency to “forge ahead with our projects far beyond any reasonable bounds” (*Austerlitz* 18). And he too turns to the perspective of the wandering observer to resist the forces that drown out the haunting voices of memory, which provide the conditions for a liveable place. Because, as de Certeau claims, “haunted places are the only ones people can live in” (Certeau 108). Like Sebald’s decision to write *Austerlitz* from the perspective of an unreliable, subjective narrator who is markedly bound by time and space, de Certeau does not opt for an omnipresent mode of understanding. His imagination leaves the lofty, magisterial heights of the World Trade Centre, which has thus far enabled his scopic vantage to map the city from a godlike distance. Instead, he advocates immersing himself among the movable, multiple bodies that comprise the lived city, rubbing shoulders, as it were, with multiple stories and experiences. This more intimate and far less secure view now allows de Certeau’s mind to embody a

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pedestrian perspective, employing the act of walking to attain an alternative mode of seeing and being in the world. Importantly, here, it is a pedestrian affinity and enunciation which enable him to subvert those abstracted official discourses and forces of organisation which suppress the possibility of a living connection with the past. *Austerlitz* marks an exploration of the potential of physical spaces for an encounter with history and the resurfacing of repressed memory – that spaces function as a means to encounter that which eludes and haunts.

Austerlitz's perspective on history represents the contrast between the two that de Certeau maps out. He walks among the disorientating ruins of modern Babel, weaving various strands of various stories under and over, across and beside one another. While this may be unsettling, Sebald leaves his readers to understand the importance of learning to wander amid the ruins, rather than continuing to assert a false historical mastery and colonising state of mind. Notice, for example, that although the narrative of *Austerlitz* (such as it is) focuses on major catastrophes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it traces past events through oblique references within a subjective account: the personal journey of a man in search of his own origins. Architecture acts as a metaphor for the disasters that resulted from the excesses of human projects towards progress of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a metaphor that enters the realm of history – *Austerlitz* sketches the lives of individuals who live in the aftermath of such events, and from it emerges another elevated perspective.

The cruelty that underlies colonial history is ever-present in Belgian monuments and architecture, and the not-yet-settled dust of two World Wars casts dark shadows over Austerlitz's journey across Europe, which he undertakes in the

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hope of locating his origins. Indeed, his own exile is caused by the events that necessitated his escape on the *kindertransport* to the foreign shores of Britain. These are the same events that presumably led to the death of his parents. Austerlitz's is a story of a man who lives and moves among the ruins. As Sebald's characters walk through the ruins of history, they sketch a new vision of history which Sebald presents to his readers as an overarching view of history.

Walking in the city is an alternative mode of philosophical seeing which enters this realm of experience and memory. Walking resists a philosophical approach which would distance itself from the local, the immediate, the proximate. Walking presents a way of seeing that accounts for the obliqueness, the transience, and the unusual inventiveness of everyday practices. In comparison, Austerlitz sees in the ostentatious fixity of the outsize buildings around him an "official manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past" (*Austerlitz* 286). His distinctly localised and subjective narrative is, perhaps, an alternative form of historical endeavour, an antidote for a constant urge to throw the past, and a method of mending the loss of identity this causes – and, perhaps, bridging the gap between history and memory; theory and experience. Grounding the narrative in physical space exposes the inadequacy of any historical endeavour that focuses solely on the accumulation of facts, instead electing to explore spaces where objective fact and subjective experience intersect to form meaning, however fleeting and ineffable. Through its fragmented, interrupted narrative movement, reaching across time and place, and disorientating a reader in respect of filtering consciousness, *Austerlitz* prompts a revivified engagement with the past, both on a cultural and personal level, and represents an attempt to find and excavate from the effacing abstractions of official discourse those forgotten stories

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buried in the assertive concrete of a modern world whose so-called progress heaps rubble on its own history and indeed inculcates historical amnesia.

Again, Michel de Certeau provides relevance, via his theoretical analysis of walking as a vehicle which accommodates the crucial rambles, detours and digressions through which philosophical speculation proceeds. Looking down from a (then) towering symbol of modern development, the World Trade Centre, de Certeau temporarily embodies the philosopher who looks down from an intellectual height, seeing all. The towers that pay homage to the human pursuit of progress reach upwards, until everything below appears orderly, understood under the panoptical scrutiny of the elevated gaze. De Certeau understands this desire for scopic omniscience and contemplates the distinct pleasure in "seeing the whole". The one who reaches this height feels as if freed from the grasp of the city. "His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur" (92), for the voyeur sees without being seen and considers himself free to turn subject into object. "It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world…into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god" (92). But the city seen from the heights is theoretical, illusory, rather than marked by the processual mobility of shift and movement and living change. This city settles into the optical frame of a picture or scene "whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices" (93). In gaining an all-encapsulating theory of 'the city', the viewer loses sight of the practical acts and imaginative labyrinths that constitute a life, multiple lives. The "voyeur god" which is created by this achievement, "like Schreber's God, knows only cadavers" (93), for in loosening oneself from daily life below, one loses the connection with all that lives and, by extension, all that once lived. The vantage of

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the voyeur, as it were, empties out memory and experience and gives pre-eminence instead to the arrangement of *view.*

De Certeau takes readers to the heights of modern day Babel, only to induce in them an “Icarian fall” (92) to the level of the street. It is here, at street level, that he locates a reality which escapes the gaze from above, and finds the “migrational, or metaphorical, city” which “slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (93). Sharon M. Meagher characterises de Certeau’s way of reading the life of the city as “the process of urbanising philosophy” (Meagher 7). This urban philosophy marks a departure from a totalising approach to philosophical inquiry (and in a sense returns us to philosophies peripatetic origins).

M. M. Bakhtin’s criticism of Emmanuel Kant’s ethical imperative contains a similar thought. In his foreword to Bakhtin’s essay “Toward a philosophy of the act”, Michael Holquist writes,

> Kant’s ethic leaves something important out, according to Bakhtin. The system is highly abstract: it gains in authority by marking a distance from the specific, the local — anything, in other words, that has an odor of the subjective about it. Bakhtin . . . is seeking to get back to the naked immediacy of experience as it is felt from within the utmost particularity of a specific life, the molten lava of events as they happen. He seeks the sheer quality of happening in life before the magma of such experience cools, hardening into igneous theories, or accounts of what has happened. (10)

Bakhtin warns of the danger of a philosophy that distances itself from the immediate, a philosophy that would replace the truths that lie in transience of experience. He

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argues that it remains imperative to take subjective experience into account when constructing theories that attempt to describe reality. Subjectivity and truth are not mutually exclusive and must be allowed to coexist. This is a rejection of theoretical frameworks that banish the texture of experience, especially with regards to historiography. Unlike Bakhtin, however, de Certeau's quarrel is less with the philosopher than with the city planner, who has "usurped that totalizing role" (Meagher 15). He takes up the plight of the individual who dwells in a city built on policies that disregard his own subjective being in the world. In "Walking in the City", the spirit of such disembodied philosophical perspectives is concretely manifest, so to speak, rising from the earth in the form of concrete structures. For in realising the dream of medieval painters, of becoming the "celestial eye" (De Certeau 92), the modern-day city planner loses the ability to dream; and instead of recognising the view from above as being but a convenient theoretical abstraction imagined into being for instrumental purposes, 'the city planner' mistakenly supposes him or herself to have grasped the city in its entirety, to have fashioned into a surveillant microcosm the heterodox macrocosm of varied urban life.

Wary of such all-encompassing visions of the city (perhaps sensing the dark side of even utopian urban development), de Certeau advocates for a philosophy of the streets. Meagher understands de Certeau's position as one which resists "idealistic views of the city, as such views fail to account for the everyday life and experience of it. And so . . . [aims] to correct this problem" (7). She further argues that walking in the city is a means of subverting a philosophy that occupies the heights. "We must let go of totalizing views of philosophy that overlook the city", she writes, "and instead engage in grounded philosophical discussions of them" (19). Walking with de Certeau at street level, the everyday yet singular moments of human life become eligible.

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Here, practice and theory intersect, leading to an encounter with the untidy reality of urban life. De Certeau sees everyday life, not from the perspective of a god standing on an elevated plane above, but as a pedestrian down in the city streets – a subjective spectator and participant. He not only reads the city as text, but becomes part of the complex materiality of citiness that eludes easy interpretation. De Certeau's pedestrianism subverts a totalising view of the city, but does not exclude the objective entirely. Instead it marks an intersection between the two. It is an acknowledgement of being in the world that is being scrutinised. This is relevant for an investigation of how *Austerlitz* engages with history. The narrator's observations are grounded in subjective, local experience, drawing attention to his own subjectivity.

The panoptic view of the city is, as de Certeau points out, a theoretical one that stands at a remove from the practice of space; the movement of bodies through space. This imagined conception of the city, the view of the city planner, is what Henri Lefebvre calls "abstract space". Jennifer Robinson elucidates Lefebvre's concept of abstract space as,

> a geometric and homogeneous space of separation and power built upon a dominance of the visual, of formal relations amongst objects organized on the basis of technical knowledge. Abstract space has come to dominate the form of the modern city. It is exemplified by the homogenization and division involved in the capitalist commodification of land and the construction of alienating environments in which the possibilities for alternative spatialities are repressed. (167)

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The resonances of Lefebvre's abstract space with de Certeau's description of the city planner as a "celestial eye" are apparent. Both identify a conception of the city space that does not see the constitution of space as dependent on the practices of space; the interaction between human and architecture. Notice that Robinson's elucidation of abstract space does not mention the human inhabitant of the city, thus revealing it as a completely commodified space. "Abstract space" is a conception of space which imposes a demarcated definition of the city on the pedestrian, while "abstract space", for Lefebvre, functions to repress the emergence of alternative spaces; to limit the possibilities of geographical navigation, and thus the possible stories that can unfold within the city, "representational space" is a means by which alternative spaces can be imagined and the repression caused by abstract space can be counteracted. Representational space is "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users' (Lefebvre qtd. in Robinson 167) and serves to undermine the imposed order of the abstract city. Robinson clarifies the argument as follows:

> In representational space we find a spatiality which draws on cultural and historical resources the possibility of memory of ways of living in spaces other than those dictated by the dominant order, designated as representations of space. (167)

Lefebvre's representational space is where the prescribed movement of abstract space is transgressed by human movement; by how people use and constitute space. Central to representational space, therefore, is the practice of pedestrianism.

For de Certeau, pedestrianism, in emphasising the enunciations of mutable lived experience (simultaneously ephemeral and yet ongoing), is an excellently

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embodied perspective from which to assess the more remote, distanciated overviews of philosophies with totalitarian inclinations. De Certeau's first objection is directed at the exultation of gigantism, manifesting itself in the city. De Certeau sees modern history as having been marked by an obsession with order and progress which have led to insurmountable heaps of waste – and have produced the Babylonian edifices that in "the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production" (De Certeau 91). The second is directed at chronic forgetfulness, imposed on the city through economic drives towards constant reinvention that outstrip and surpass. In attaining new heights of development, the city loses its ability to remember. Indeed, new buildings are erected on the sites of older, demolished structures, creating a hidden palimpsest that hints at amnesia. The city's present "invents itself from hour to hour" (91), never learning "the art of growing old" (91). Constant development and an obsession with progress leads to a city where the only visible remnants of the past are to be found in monuments that present a concretised, curated version of history – in effect an official version (sometimes even a totalitarian decree) of what is to be remembered and how. In the architectures of the monumental that memorialise preferred versions of History (often the dominant, master narratives), the portals that might allow travel through the barriers that separate city dwellers from the past, at the level of the street, are closed, built over with impermeable concrete, or otherwise effaced in being rendered invisible.

Bakhtin's critique of Kantian ethics and de Certeau's objection to the philosophies that underlie modern city planning are made in a similar vein to Sebald's comments regarding literature that employs an omniscient narrator. In his interview with Jaggi, Sebald observes

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> I try to let people talk for themselves, so the narrator is only the one who brings the tale but doesn't install himself in it. There's still fiction with an anonymous narrator who knows everything, which seems to me preposterous. I content myself with the role of the messenger. ("Recovered Memories").

Austerlitz is a story that is mostly overheard and conspicuously interpreted by the narrator. All that is known about Austerlitz is through what is related by the narrator, who retells stories which he heard at specified times, in specified places. In doing so, Sebald presumably seeks to avoid voyeuristic narration that assumes knowledge of unknowable aspects of others. And yet, by including multiple voices within one sentence, blurring their voices, something like a single, morphing voice emerges. The narration of *Austerlitz* is both multiplicity and singular, and therefore represents a tension. Sebald's narrator is not located at an elevated vantage, in a correlative of superior, vainglorious modern architectural structures. Instead, he dwells in the shifting shadows of Babel. His narrative, similar to the perspective found in de Certeau's "Walking the City", seeks the subjective texture of memory, aware that seeing all, objectively, is an impossibility, an illusion, and undesirable. Austerlitz's search for the past locates itself in specific spaces – it is distinctly local – demonstrating the necessity of subjective experience when seeking truth. Meagher quotes Mendieta in saying that

> the fundamental philosophy that orients most, if not all, philosophy [is that] … philosophy is about thinking the absolute, the universal, in a way that transcends, effaces and erases the traces of the origin and site from which or out of which such thinking is thought. Philosophy, to

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> use an expression of Merleau-Ponty, does not project a shadow, because it is no where. (8)

And although, perhaps, certain forms of philosophy don't cast a shadow, rendered "nowhere" by their being everywhere, the vast edifices that are erected under the gaze of such philosophies do cast a shadow – that of their own destruction. Austerlitz is a character who wanders in the shadow and indeed among the ruins of destruction.

Austerlitz enters into the tradition of pedestrianism on which de Certeau speculates in "Walking the City", harnessing the potential of grounded movement to encounter the past. De Certeau describes the totalitarian gaze as "an Icarus flying over these waters"; someone who can "ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths" (92) below. But Sebald's characters foresee the imminent Icarian fall and prefer to remain as wanderers in a labyrinth. This labyrinth is, however, not a Daedalian labyrinth, with one specific path to the centre; but rather, as Clive Scott remarks in a documentary film directed by Richard West, a multicursal labyrinth which has "many paths", which "don't take you anywhere at all".

Walking in the city acts as a means of uncovering the hidden tyranny of an overly ordered world. Travelling through architectural spaces, Sebald's Austerlitz, and the narrator of *Austerlitz*, for that matter, comment on buildings constructed in different eras and in different styles, but that carry certain "family likenesses" (*Austerlitz* 33). Stead writes that *Austerlitz* "joins a tradition of literary works that treat architecture as a metaphor for human endeavour and artifice, social structures, and attempts to order and construct the world" ("Architecture and Memory" 41). The architectural trope in *Austerlitz* is dominated by a sense that the enormity of architectural structures and the horror they represent forebodes destruction, and

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therein the Babel narrative strongly emerges. *Austerlitz* carries a strong polemical element. The architectural historian at the centre of the novel responds with criticism to the sight of architectural structures that, in the book, act as the symbols of modern-day Babel. But he does not scrutinise buildings from a rooftop, being rather in the streets. Austerlitz holds "tentative ideas… about the architectural style of the capitalist era" (*Austerlitz* 33). His "investigations are based upon . . . his own views, of the family likenesses" between various architectural emblems of tyrannical power (*Austerlitz* 33). He lives in the shadow of the horrific destruction witnessed in Europe during the modern era. Indeed, what sets the horrors of the twentieth century apart, is the way that they were carried out by means of totalitarian control which effected systematic brutality by means of order. Fred Dallmayr makes this point, stating that

> past history had always been punctuated by grim episodes of persecution and oppression; however, what rendered contemporary politics distinctive was the totalising or "totalitarian" reach of political control—a reach indebted in no small measure to the triumphant sway of modern rationality wedded to the Baconian motto of knowledge/power. (103)

For the purposes of my argument in relation to Sebald's *Austerlitz*, the unremitting emphasis on the accumulation of facts experienced its appalling outcome in the erection of structures of power and oppression, unprecedented in their ability to enforce the inhumane logics of order and bring people into subjection. The epitome of the impulse towards accumulation is found in *Austerlitz's* visit to the archives of Theresienstadt. Here, Jewish lives were documented, the record of them preserved, only in order to extinguish these very lives most efficiently. As a family likeness that

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speaks of the logic underlying these structures, *Austerlitz* repeatedly points to grid patterns, recognising them in European architecture. The most significant of these is shown as it spreads the parallel and perpendicular lines throughout Europe. The mark of the preeminent deity of modern civilisation: Time. Indeed, the clock in Antwerp Station, while obviously serving a utilitarian function, is described in a distinctly violent register, an emphatic symbolism pointing to the tyrannical rule of the modern deity over the routines and processes of everyday life, especially in cities, which are governed by the demands of labour and travel to and from work. Referring to the giant clock, the narrator remarks that both he and the protagonist noticed:

> how alarming seemed the movement of that hand, which resembled a sword of justice, even though we were expecting it every time it jerked forward, slicing off the next one-sixtieth of an hour from the future and coming to a halt with such a menacing quiver that one's heart almost stopped. (*Austerlitz* 9)

Later, the clock comes to represent a tyrannical sort of totalitarianism, enforced through surveillance:

> Placed some twenty metres above the only baroque element in the entire ensemble, the cruciform stairway which leads from the foyer to the platforms . . . The movements of all travellers could be surveyed from the central position occupied by the clock in Antwerp Station, and conversely all travellers had to look up at the clock and were obliged to adjust their activities to its demands. (*Austerlitz* 12)

Not only are the people in the waiting room obliged to look up at the clock in a sort of worshipful reverence (or enslaved bidding); the high position of the clock appears to

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enable it to take in everything with a single masterful gaze, like the voyeur god described by de Certeau.

It is notable, too, that railroads are central to what Amir Eshel calls "Austerlitz's polemic against time" (81). Eshel points, for instance, to Austerlitz's monologue at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park, London, as the most lucid articulation of this contention. It is here that Austerlitz states: "Time… was by far the most artificial of all our inventions" and that "it is not so long ago, after all, that it began spreading out over everything" (*Austerlitz* 100, 101). Once again, in a discussion which brings to mind de Certeau's challenges to the mistaken omniscience of the all-seeing 'Solar' eye, Austerlitz resists a conception of time as a linear progression which separates the past from the present. He states:

> A clock has always struck me as something ridiculous, a thoroughly mendacious object, perhaps because I have always resisted the power of time out of some internal compulsion which I myself have never understood, keeping myself apart from so-called current events in the hope, as I now think… that time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously. (*Austerlitz* 101)

Eshel argues that Austerlitz's resistance of the progression of time, his "hope… that time will not pass away, has not passed away", directly relates to the trauma of his childhood, and an adult life haunted by the disconcerting sense that everything lapses into oblivion, rather than resolves into clarity. But, Eshel suggests, the monologue at Greenwich also carries a strong allegorical dimension, for the very locale and

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topography of Greenwich denote "the rapid pace of technological and industrial progress in Europe as of the mid-nineteenth century" (81). In addition, of course, Greenwich is significant in being, so to speak, the 'birthplace' of Greenwich Mean Time. The process of Time's ascent to dominion, according to Eshel, was "epitomized by the transportation revolution and the spread of railway tracks throughout the continent. It was the need to regulate railway transportation that in the 1840s brought about the standardisation of all local times in England" (81) organising day and night according to regularised schedules. The advent of railroads, in order words, brought about the demise of space as a pre-eminent, even localised frame of reference. Distance would no longer be a significant obstacle to human endeavour, given the reach of the tracks and the timetabled, technological efficiency of movement and delivery. Time would reign supreme, compressing vast reaches of space in the service of developing capitalist economies and productivities of labour and outputs. This, in a sense, is clearly another version of the orderly processing of the systematising Solar eye that oversees all.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti wrote, "We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed" (49). This omnipresence, according to Eshel, would usher in an age of preoccupation with the present, driven by "the desire to unload the weight of the preceding epochs, to curb all traditions, query metaphysical constraints, and delve into the now and its promise of unprecedented movement through space" (82). Railroads are uniquely symbolic of technological advancement, and its overseer, Time[2]. They can be seen as the birthplace of the modern consciousness of time,

[2] Walter Benjamin regards the use of iron in railroads as the entry point of artificial material in architecture. He writes, "with iron, an artificial building material appeared for the first time in the

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conceptualised on a linear plane, which enables an ordering of the world in a system that regards the past as something to be left behind. This is clearly an issue of consequence for Sebald's project in *Austerlitz*, for it is exactly such amnesia that the text aims to counteract.

Austerlitz describes his short sojourn at the station in Prague. His description is a powerful illustration of the sense that modern progress leads to the burial of the past, quite literally, under concrete. For one, he points out how the station's "Jugendstil architecture, once famous far beyond Prague, had been surrounded, obviously in the 1960s, by ugly glass façades and concrete blocks" (*Austerlitz* 217). Jugendstil architecture, as part of the broader art nouveau movement, is itself often regarded as embodying the tension between the past and the future, the old and the new. Klaus-Jürgen Sembach, for example, writes that art nouveau "could be interpreted as a kind of reflex response to the encroachment of technology on the traditional territory of art" (18). Walter Benjamin frames it as violent clash between the art of the past and the technology of the future, when he writes that the style "represented the last attempt at a sortie on the part of Art imprisoned by technical advance within her ivory tower" (83). Mixing symbols of nature, primarily floral shapes, with new girder forms, embodies the confrontation between the interiority of the individual in Art, and the oncoming force of technological advancement. Benjamin evokes Ibsen's *Masterbuilder* to describe the outcome of the clash inherent in art nouveau: "the attempt of the individual to vie with technical progress leads to his downfall" (84). When Austerlitz visits the station during the 1970s the glass, steel and concrete of modern architecture had come to overwhelm the Jugenstil it once displayed – half of its old dome had, for example, violently been "sliced away" by

history of architecture… The rail was the first iron unit of construction, the forerunner of the girder." (78).

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"the new construction towering up into it" (*Austerlitz* 218). The architecture of the station represents the rapidity and devastation of modern progress; the character Austerlitz himself seems to be a revenant from the past, an intruder on the platform of the station in its modern state. A railway official leads him "carefully by the sleeve, like a lost child" (*Austerlitz* 218) to a memorial plaque. Here, Austerlitz's being described as a child implies that he is an individual oddly out of step with contemporary time; the adult can be seen as inhabiting a past time, in a mutual space with the present. He tarries in the place of transition, the train station. Here, he goes against the status quo of trains stations – that of departure towards a destination – and, in being depicted as a child, embodies the past in a present that rapidly moves towards the future. The text thus undermines the linear momentum of progress associated both with the physical movement of trains, as well as the technological progress that trains represent.

The parallel lines of railroads and the architecture of railway stations can be regarded as the archetype of an architectural trope to which Austerlitz makes repeated reference: grid patterns. A striking example comes in the form of the Prague main railway station. The "ugly glass facades" (*Austerlitz* 217) and the "pattern of the glass and steel roof above the platforms… made up as it was of triangles, round arches, horizontal and vertical lines and diagonals" (*Austerlitz* 219) are defining features of Austerlitz's description of the station's architecture, and have a significant family resemblance with other architectonic features highlighted in *Austerlitz*. Grid patterns symbolise the immoderate linearity of modern logic and the order it imposes on the world – a brutalist order epitomised during (indeed *by*) the Nazi regime.

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Under Nazi rule, order acted as a façade, a perverse utopian front, Hitler's ideals of Aryan perfection attempting to mask the worst forms of genocidal brutality. Austerlitz's "tentative ideas" about architecture revolve around

> the compulsive sense of order and the tendency towards monumentalism evident in law courts and penal institutions, railway stations and stock exchanges, opera houses and lunatic asylums, and the dwellings built to rectangular grid patterns for the labour force. (*Austerlitz* 33)

When reflecting on his journey by train across Germany, which he undergoes in order to retrace his steps and uncover the details of his past, he is struck by the prevalence of neatness. He tells the narrator:

> wherever I looked I saw trim towns and villages, neat yards around factories and industrial buildings, lovingly tended gardens, piles of firewood tidily stacked under cover, level asphalted cart tracks running through the meadows . . . well-managed woodland, [and] regulated watercourses. (*Austerlitz* 223)

Reaching Nuremburg, he is confronted by a similarly regularising feature in the city's architecture:

> Looking up at the façades on both sides of the street, even those of the older buildings . . . I was troubled to realize that I could not see a crooked line anywhere, not at the corners of the houses or on the gables, the window frames or the sills, nor was there any other trace of past history. (*Austerlitz* 223)

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In Austerlitz's analysis of the city's architecture, order acts to conceal the past, where a curve, or a supposed irregularity, in comparison, might signal the complex forms of philosophical and moral compass crucial to acknowledging and understanding the ethical questions associated with relentless, linear drives towards dangerous perfection and social-aesthetic systemacity that refuse to countenance difference. The buildings he sees are remarkable for their geometric precision and, further, for not showing any signs of decay, implying a continued commitment to forms of social order that are inimical to human variety. He encounters the epitome of such order in Theresienstadt, a military fortress which was used as a ghetto by the Nazis and where his mother, Agáta, had been detained. The fortress was "laid out like Campanella's City of the Sun to a strictly geometrical grid" (*Austerlitz* 189), a "model of a world made by reason and regulated in all conceivable respects" (*Austerlitz* 199). Visiting the Ghetto museum in the city, Austerlitz describes having felt

> blinded by the documentation recording the population… the evidence of their mania for order and purity… partly devised with obsessive organizational zeal… I saw balance sheets, registers of the dead, lists of every imaginable kind, and endless rows of numbers and figures, which must have served to reassure the administrators that nothing ever escaped their notice. (*Austerlitz* 198, 199)

In Theresienstadt, the "mania for order and purity", instead of being a means of ensuring human thriving, is revealed to be a means of tyrannical control. Austerlitz marks the "crazed administrative zeal" with which the Nazis governed Theresienstadt, regarding "numerical accuracy as one of their highest principles" (241). They had "a census taken several times, on one occasion, if I remember correctly, said Austerlitz"

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(241). Here, the statement demands re-reading, in order to arrive at sense; even the punctuating comma blurs the sense of time (several/once). The statement amounts to a sardonically parodic humour on the author's part, since the vague and unreliable memory of the protagonist stands in defiant contrast to the dehumanising "accuracy" of the Nazi's official administrative methods of governing the ghetto, in their endeavour to make sure that all was subject to encompassing surveillance. But in Sebald's narration of this undertaking, the human imperfection of memory, or the inevitability of forgetting, here becomes a means of imaginative resistance.

Beneath the order of Theresienstadt, disturbing realities lay hidden. In the "straight, deserted streets of Terezín"[3], Austerlitz is met by the "forbidding aspect of the silent façades. Not a single curtain moved behind their blank windows, however often I glanced up at them" (189). The dual meanings of the words "façade" and "forbidding" used in this sentence unveil the way in which the fortress town symbolises a masked terror. The denotative façades of the buildings come to connotate the way in which order functions as a perverse masquerade of peace and prosperity. These fronts forbid the observer to see the forbidding realities that dwell behind them – and their curtains remain unmoved.

Austerlitz subsequently discovers a Nazi propaganda film about Theresienstadt which presents an idyllic picture of the town, a supposedly generous gift to the Jewish people from the Führer himself. The film's title is *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt*. In the hope of seeing an image of his mother, Austerlitz slows the film down to the point where it breaks into individual frames. Laura García-Moreno points out that it is thus "de-narrativized . . . The change of speed disarticulates the suturing of images organized in a specific sequence" (361). Having

[3] Terezín is the Czech name for Theresienstadt.

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slowed down the pace at which the frames ought conventionally to succeed each other, bringing them to standstill, and rewinding them rather than allowing them the speed which gives the illusion of life-like movement, "the sinister aspect of the camps concealed beneath the appearance of order, efficiency, and well-being that the Nazis sought to convey is exposed" (361). Slowing down the film also causes the male voice that in "high pitched, strenuous tones" narrates the film, to be turned into a "menacing growl" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 250), while the "merry polka by some Austrian operetta composer on the sound track had become a funeral march dragging along at a grotesquely sluggish pace" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 247). Such deliberate de-formations and canny re-mediations in the novel text, among them the change in the sonic features of the film, further expose the contradiction that exists between the trim outer appearance of Theresienstadt and the dark reality it conceals.

During his monologue at Greenwich Point Park, Austerlitz asks,

> is not human life in many parts of the earth governed to this day less by time than by the weather, and thus by an unquantifiable dimension which disregards linear regularity, does not progress constantly forward but moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption, recurs in ever-changing form, and evolves in no one knows what direction? (*Austerlitz* 100, 101)

Austerlitz's manipulation of the Theresienstadt film reprises this question. The progression of the film is suspended by employing circularity through repeated rewinding, in an attempt to come into contact with the past. Time's linear march is interrupted by the deployment of the loop, and the past is shown to be less separable from the present than the film in its initial form would indicate. The suspension of the

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linear progression of the film is an act symbolic of "Austerlitz's polemic against the ontology of a separable past, present, and future [that] reverberates throughout the book" (Eshel 74).

I have earlier highlighted the way that railroads come to stand for the modern conception of time. The railroad is an image of time as a linear construct, with the present always leaving the past behind, and speeding towards the future. Trains move, rapidly, in one direction only – there is no simple going back, and there is no veering off from the parallel lines laid out for its journey. Austerlitz's means of subverting the linear progression of the Theresienstadt film was to slow it down. It is significant that, during his journey by train through Europe, the tempo of movement seems to increase as he enters Germany across the Czech border. In Germany, there were "roads with brightly coloured cars purring along them at great speeds", and the train, "which had often seemed to be having difficulty in making any progress on the Czech side of the border, was now suddenly racing along with almost improbable ease" (*Austerlitz* 222). While the neatness of the German towns, the strict order with which Austerlitz is confronted, acts as a façade which masks pasts events, time in its linear trajectory moves away from these events with blinding speed. In resistance to the power of time, the narrative of *Austerlitz* moves in ways that pose a challenge to the linear movement of trains and the conception of time represented by the nature of rail movement. Austerlitz finds his movement constantly oscillating between the tracked linearity of train journeys across Europe, and his circular meanderings through gridded city spaces.

Ultimately, against tracks, grids and straight lines, there is an overarching circularity or perhaps a gyre-ing in *Austerlitz* as a whole, with a repetition of turning

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and returning, and the absence of a specific origin and conclusion. Austerlitz's movement is unscripted and nonlinear. He moves through city streets as erratically as through elusive recollection, in search of a way to subvert the forces which cause memory and all traces of the past to lapse into oblivion, to fall away in the wake of the speeding progressive of the locomotive of modern life. In his unique handling of space and time in *Austerlitz*, Sebald practices what Laura Garcia Moreno calls "'an aesthetics of delay' based on the suspension or interruption of linear time and the unpacking of historical layers within particular spaces and architectural sites. One could say that he spatializes time and temporalizes space" (360).

While *Austerlitz* is an account of the protagonist's quest to reconcile with a lost past and regain repressed memories, the text also unveils the powers that war against memory on a broader, societal level. Mark McCulloh explains with particular clarity how the book

> explores the power of erasure, focusing on the example of one man's extinguished memory of childhood. But [Sebald] is also concerned with a broader subject. There are certain forces, Sebald constantly reminds us, that are bent on neutralizing all historical consciousness; they are continually wiping the slate clean, as if the experience of living – of having lived – means nothing. Sebald refers not just to the effects of the passing of time, or the physical forces that eventually bury all civilisations, but to blind force at work in contemporary culture. It erases all evidence regardless of its historical significance, its moral content, or the absence of either. Contemporary Europe, as the site of collaborative atrocities through the twentieth century,

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> provides countless examples of this antihistorical force at work smothering the truth about the past. (109)

Here McCulloh reiterates the point that the narrative of *Austerlitz* is concerned with the particulars of history, with individualised, localised accounts, setting up and contrasting these accounts with a larger vision of modernity – a vision in which modern powers separate the modern subject from the past. In *Austerlitz*, the individual and local narrative stands at odds with the powers of totalitarianism that dissolve individuals into a mass under its control. According to Laura Garcia-Morena, it is the "organized and hierarchical arrangement of things in 'proper order' with the concealment of the horror and the erasure of traces of past history against which Sebald mobilizes his prose" (168). The way in which horror is concealed by order is clearly demonstrated in the Theresienstadt film – created as a form of Nazi propaganda to falsify the conditions of the Theresienstadt ghetto, where Austerlitz's mother had supposedly been. The truth behind the film requires excavation from under a veneer of order – it is a proverbial white-washed-grave. Austerlitz discerns this particular implementation of order, as Garcia-Morena points out, being "not exclusive to Germany or the past; the contemporary tower office blocks in Paris have a parallel to the neat gardens Austerlitz finds in Germany" (168) – and thus his apprehension at the giant buildings of the modern era is associated with the concealment of horror. The burial of memory under the city's concrete built infrastructure obscures portals to the past. Yet such access points, as de Certeau posits, would offer possible access to accounts that are vital to human existence – legends, myths and fables. Such obscure, uncertain narrative forms remind us that history is not one official, concretised event; not a monument, but a lived process that is ever-occurring. The reminder, indeed, is that "history" is but a series of founding

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legends, and these legends bring us into contact with a living, haunting past. Memory is a present history. Cities, as sites of memory, thus become contested spaces: while the totalitarian tendencies of urban planning and human management close the portals of memory, the unpredictable natures of human life, the embodied and imaginative movements of pedestrians, are always generating stories that re-forge the threads that tie present existence to the past. De Certeau writes that it

> is through the opportunity they offer to store up rich silences and wordless stories, or rather through their capacity to create cellars and garrets everywhere, that local legends . . . permit exits, ways of going out and coming back in, and thus habitable spaces. (106)

As Sebald's fiction implies, memories, myths and legends open up a route for people to explore other times and places. The city, constantly modernised and reinvented through a process of urban regeneration, directed signage, and official discourse, closes these portals. The "exits" that had formerly been made "available by a body of legends" are substituted for by the diverse and unpredictable movements of "walking about and travelling" (106). For de Certeau, it is movement through the local, the city streets down below the skyscraper towers, that fulfils the role that myths, legends and memories once did. Pierre Nora states that "we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left". In the same vein, he describes the "brutal realization of the difference between real memory… [and] history" (7). The former is "exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies", the latter is "how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past" (7). If "[h]aunted places are the only ones people can live in" (De Certeau 108), and "stories and legends haunt urban space, like superfluous or additional inhabitants"

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(De Certeau 106), then one impulse behind Sebald's narrative meandering is the search for the stories that render the past present. This is a process both of gathering and of generative making. The act of walking is associated with the act of storytelling in a way that generatively conflates the two, and the "act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered" (De Certeau 97). At a most basic level, it is movement that generates *Austerlitz* as a narrative. John Wylie states that "the narrator's wanderings serve to 'move the story', as it were, forward, and movements between and through places (past and present) act so as to spark the encounters, life histories, intertextual ramifications, dream sequences and quasi-autobiographical narratives that make up the majority of any work by Sebald" (174). While movement generates the narrative of Austerlitz, the impulse to locate the past drives it. Sebald implements slippage and movement as a narrative technique to allow memory to slip through the emphatic fixity of modern life, the insistence on orderly, amnesiac containment.

In *Austerlitz,* narrative movement as a means of encountering the past draws on two characteristics of pedestrianism: scale and pace. Silke Arnold-de Simine writes that "by walking through space, [Sebald's] travellers also roam through time, through the historical layers of the city and landscapes they explore" (26). The pedestrian narrator is intent on discovering the cracks in the official structural fixity of the city, interstices which might allow elements that have been expelled from urban order tactically to pass through into the everyday. Stories, personal accounts, old wives' tales, and ghost tales are what offer the protagonist doorways to the past. To encounter these doorways, he needs to see at the scale of the pedestrian those things that would be rendered illegible (indeed invisible) from a higher, more remote vantage point. At human scale his eye is intimately observant, not projected in a logic

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of masterful surveillance. He can thus see (and imaginatively create) the little places where stories grow like plants in the eroding buildings of the city. Additionally, his pedestrianism, by virtue of its openness to detours and drifts, can be imagined as allowing a suspension of time by resisting the industrialised speed of modern transport. The narrator thus explores the potential of movement through architectural spaces as a means of resisting and reconfiguring the received, totalising views of the city, uncovering historical layers in an attempt to re-establish a vital connection with the past. In effect, his walking, which prompts thinking, enables him to excavate that which is supposedly the absent past from under the concrete and the levelling rubble of progress.

Austerlitz weaves a narrative into, and of, city streets. It is a narrative that enters *into* the streets, in that it is characterised by – indeed, depends on – both physical and thoughtful movement through architectural spaces.[4] The primary characteristic of each conversation, and each conversation within a conversation, is the location, the pedestrian's view of his surroundings. Conversations between the narrator and the protagonist, which comprise the majority of the text, are mapped out according to where they are initiated – Centraal Sation in Antwerp, the saloon bar of The Great Eastern Hotel in London, Alderney Street where Austerlitz lived – and propelled by a myriad stories that revolve around remembered places.

For example, as Austerlitz recalls his trip to Marienbad with Marie de Vernuil, he remembers how he "kept thinking, like a madman, that there were mysterious signs and portents all around me here; how it even seemed to me as if the silent facades of

[4] "Architectural spaces" is used as a designation both for buildings and cities, as these structures of human design both provide the condition for a plain of observation which I call pedestrianism. Pedestrianism, in turn, is used as an umbrella term to describe the particular form of moving through and experiencing built spaces, peculiar to an individual on foot.

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the buildings knew something ominous about me" (*Austerlitz* 216). His being in the site of memory peels back at "the resistance [he] had put up for so many years against the emergence of memory" (*Austerlitz* 214). Once he is in the spaces of memory, memories begin to emerge. Spaces that are imbued with traces of his familial history connect him to that history in ways which his own failed memory cannot, locale and built environment functioning as a mnemonic. Sebald implies, here, the deep possible imbrications of personal and historical experience, memories and history both being forms of embodied palimpsest, with neither being either abstraction or self-sufficient.

As Austerlitz (sometimes unknowingly) finds himself in such sites of historical memory, the emergence of memory is mirrored by the appearance of mysterious people, seemingly out of nowhere, indicating the way that history inhabits and haunts physical spaces. Austerlitz recalls one such event during his visit to the archive in Prague, where he finds the address where he had lived with his mother. One of the officials, he explains, "materialized" beside him "as if she had, as they say, sprung out of the ground" (*Austerlitz* 146). Similarly, in Theresienstadt, where his mother had been interned by the Nazis, the bus which he was to take back to Prague "had appeared out of nowhere" (*Austerlitz* 200), and while in Marienbad with Marie de Vernuil, "people emerged from the dark as if out of nowhere" (*Austerlitz* 217). It is only later, in his conversation with Vera Rysanová, that Austerlitz learns that he had been to Marienbad with his family in the summer of 1938, bringing to light why he had felt the uncanny connection to this particular place. Austerlitz encounters memories in mysterious ways as he enters the places of his past – memories emerge like ghosts. Memories are not portrayed as being lodged in his mind, reanimated by familiar scenes, but rather as spectres that approach him and unsettle the boundaries between self and site, past and present. The memories as less 'remembered' than

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manifesting with a life of their own – one which he is unable to reconcile with his own experience. There is, therefore, a lingering distance between himself and his past, even in the emergence of memory.

It is in the fashion of ghosts, appearing but in an immaterial form, that memories in *Austerlitz* emerge. They retain a degree of permeability – and soon disappear as mysteriously and unexpectedly as they had appeared – like the figure in Theresienstadt, who, after Austerlitz had taken his "eye off him it for a moment . . . had suddenly gone"; or the "mentally disturbed man" who seemed to be swallowed up by the earth" (*Austerlitz* 189). His father, Max Aychenvald, is also described as having "disappeared irrevocably and without a trace" (*Austerlitz* 255), and thus becomes part of the throng of memories that eludes Austerlitz in his endeavour to relocate the past. When he goes to *Hlvaní Nádráží*, the very station where Agáta and Vera had greeted him for the last time, memories of those moments return to him, but aren't quite clear, and Austerlitz does not gain the encounter with the past which he seeks. "Sometimes it seemed as if the veil would part", he says, "I thought, for one fleeting instant, that I could feel the touch of Agáta's shoulder", and he somehow knows about details as small as Vera having bought him a Charlie Chaplin comic, but he could not "see the picture on the front", for, "as soon I tried to hold one of these fragments fast, or get it into better focus, as it were, it disappeared into the emptiness revolving over my head" (*Austerlitz* 219). He remembers, but not fully; it is as if *he* rather than the memory per se, is 'recalled', for an inconclusive, haunting instant, and he finds himself grasping in vain at the immateriality of the past. When he eventually returns to Paris to gain insight into his father's life, he keeps thinking, "against all reason", that he might see him "appear out of nowhere, coming towards me or

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stepping out of an entrance" (*Austerlitz* 257), just like the ghostly figures described above.

It is hard to say whether Austerlitz is haunted, or if it is the melancholic exilic figure doing the haunting – going in search of those who are no longer evidently present but yet clearly also exert a disruptive pull upon current experience. Through such liminality, Austerlitz unsettles the assumption that our chronologically governed society, with its linear logic, is indeed as isolated from the past as the emphatic categoricals of reason and logic maintain. In Sebald's narrative, the spaces we occupy prove to be thin veils between past and present, made of material far more permeable than concrete, raising the suspicion that our 'fortresses' (of built structure, of guarded lives and emotions) are far less impenetrable to the past than we might envisage – and that history is more elusive than our aggrandising monuments and history books tell us. It is *Austerlitz's* dusk, where smoke and soot mingle with the last, dim, fading daylight, that the past emerges in haunting apparitions. It remains uncertain whether the past truly enters the present, or whether it is merely a trick of the light.

Austerlitz contains both conversations with the protagonist and the personal, internal meditations of the narrator, and each of these is inextricably entwined with the place of their occurrence. In this way, in comparison with the gridlike structures of urban planning (or of overarching point of view), the narrative is woven *into* city streets. *Austerlitz* also weaves a narrative *of* city streets, in that the text itself becomes, on a metaphorical level, an architectural space. The meandering style of the narrative is characterised by disorienting detours, a constant turning into side streets and alleyways as they are happened upon – resulting in a labyrinthine journey with a non-linear trajectory. It is often the "family likeness" between buildings that triggers

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memories, or surprising 'trains' of thought. These are like side-streets that diverge from the current subject of conversation yet are connected by spatial relation – they become proximate due to association. The text, in its meditation on remembrance, becomes an anti-museum; it resists various forms of memorialisation which present totalitarian versions of history. The novel is itself a digressive structure which the narrative moves through, becoming an alternative sort of memorial to the national edifices which mark the official histories of the sites which feature in the peregrinations.

Moving in, among, and through, architectural spaces is the generating force behind the conversations that constitute the pages of the novel. Spaces initiate and encapsulate the narrative of *Austerlitz*. Austerlitz's life is marked by a grappling with history and memory – a quest for his personal past. But the novel goes beyond one character's search for the past. *Austerlitz* is a profound meditation on history and its abiding presence in the present. When reading the novel one walks a range of defamiliarised city spaces with Austerlitz. There is an inherent call in the text, to undergo a descent into life at pedestrian scale, and to dissent from totalising views of history that separate spheres of official historical narratives and the ongoing experiences of the everyday. In *Austerlitz*, a reader is coaxed to look at the city space through the eyes of a Sebaldian wanderer; to learn not to "stare apathetically into space" (*Austerlitz* 7), but to ask, what dwells here? Meandering through the city provides a means of exploring the potential of places to act as portals through time. Stories, myths, legends, and the like once allowed people to live in proximity with mystery, and thus with the co-existence of the ordinary and the transcendent, the present lived in co-relation with the past. Austerlitz mourns the burial of such portals under the rubble and waste of modern existence – the products of a rationalism which

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insists on accumulated facts as the only material for understanding the world. Modern society has built its perimeter walls at the edge of understanding. The vast constructions of modern civilisations come to symbolise not only the exile from a personal past, but the forces which war against memory on a societal level. Walking the city with Austerlitz, forgotten portals are uncovered in momentary revenant visitations, ushering in a co-occupation with past presences.

Thus, architecture, in *Austerlitz*, assists a deep meditation on memory in various ways. For one, spaces provide a geographical mapping of linguistic and historical events – they represent an intersection of space, time and language. "The memories of his childhood journey to England are physically transposed to his journey in the opposite direction, to Prague" (Mitroiu 886). Mitroiu observes that, "for Austerlitz, reclaiming physical space means trying to reclaim memories of his family and details of his past, before the moment of separation. It thus means recovering personal sites of memory and bringing to life repressed memories" (886). Everything recalled about the conversations between the narrator and the protagonist, and about their respective interior worlds, is associated with specific locations, and Austerlitz's personal journey towards recovering the past is inseparably exterior and interior. He embodies a tension between the act of "wandering" and "wondering".

In *Austerlitz*, the narrator's spatial awareness causes memories to be mapped according to *where* they occurred. This is what Mitroiu calls "Sebald's topographical method of searching the past" (884). The narrator's (and Austerlitz's) interior worlds – their thoughts and emotions – are associated with exterior places. Note how the narrator's emotional disposition is recalled in relation to his physical position; note the specificity with which he recalls physical spaces: "I still remember the

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uncertainty of my footsteps as I walked all round the inner city, down Jeruzalemstraat, Nachtegaalstraat, Paradijsstraat, Immerseelstraat" (*Austerlitz* 3). His thoughts and his steps are retraced with an effect of simultaneity, with thoughts being re/collected in terms of physical locations, like teasing, yet ephemeral breadcrumbs dropped throughout the city streets. Besides the narrator's emotions and thoughts, each of his conversations with Austerlitz is converted into narrative through memory, since conversations that had occurred in the past need to be remembered in order to be retold in the present.

As I have been emphasising, memory is a central aspect of Sebald work, with memory always an unpredictable element, a narrative tenor as evanescent as smoke or dusk, yet just as persistent in its haunting traces. Sebald addresses the centrality of memory in an interview with Jaggi, explaining that, "without memories there wouldn't be any writing: the specific weight an image or phrase needs to get across to the reader can only come from things remembered – not from yesterday but from a long time ago" ("The Last Word"). The main aspect that inflects the memory of each conversation in *Austerlitz*, is *where* the conversation occurred. The interior life – emotions, thoughts, memories – is loosely mapped out in relation to the exterior, physical world. Disconnection from the past is bridged by the tangible materiality of the city space. This use of space in locating memories resembles the ancient Greek and Roman memory technique known as the *method of loci*. The technique entails creating a memory palace – imagining a space of familiarity, such as one's childhood home or school building. Memories are then assigned to rooms and objects within the memory palace. As one then imaginatively walks through the palace, the memories are encountered and recalled. *Austerlitz* in this sense can be viewed as a narrative experiment, which investigates the potential of spatial exploration as an aid to

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memory. The result is a narrative form which facilitates spatial encounters with the past.

When Austerlitz revisits the sites of his childhood in Prague, his memories re-emerge. If this first function of architecture (in its broader sense) in the novel is to provide material spaces according to which past thoughts, feelings and conversations might be associatively mapped out and recalled, the second function is that architecture provides a means through which characters come into contact with the past, for certain buildings may provide physical connections to the past. Stead argues that it is the "solid materiality" of the buildings in the novel that ties the fictitious in the novel to the material world ("Architecture and Memory in W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz" 41) and that "buildings become both the site for and witness to past and imagined historical events" ("Architecture and Memory in W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz" 41, 42) they are a "carrier of memory and [a] site of mourning", as well as "a setting for fictional and quasi-fictional narrative" (41). Certain buildings represent the continuing presence of history, and it would appear that Sebald had indeed had the potential of physical spaces for the preservation of memory in mind. In a 2001 interview with Maya Jaggi, Sebald affirms that

> Places seem to me to have some kind of memory, in that they activate memory in those who look at them . . . It's an old notion – this isn't a good house because bad things happened in it. Where I grew up, in a remote village at the back of a valley, the old still thought the dead needed attending to – a notion so universal it's inscribed in all religions. If you didn't, they might exact revenge upon the living. Such notions were not alien to me as a child. ("Recovered Memories")

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Accordingly, it is when Austerlitz finds himself, often unknowingly, in sites where he had been with his family, that memories that had been lost to him his entire life start re-emerging. His journey in search of his familial past at one point takes him to Prague:

> As I walked through the labyrinth of alleyways, thoroughfares, and courtyards between the Vlašská and Nerudova, and still more so when I felt the uneven paving of the Šporkova underfoot as step by step I climbed uphill, it was as if I had already been this way before and memories were revealing themselves to me not by means of any mental effort but through my senses, so long numbed and now coming back to life. (*Austerlitz* 150)

The past inhabits our physical spaces – and the characters' conversations about and within physical spaces bring them into contact with the past. The role of architecture in the novel here serves to bring into question the presumed boundaries between past and present, living and dead – presenting the narrator with a chance to encounter the past.

The Literary Countermonument

Architectural spaces in *Austerlitz* on the one hand serve to assist memory by orientating the rememberer, not on a linear timeline, but in a space-time landscape which collapses linearity in order to effect proximity with the past. In this sense the novel is a literary embodiment of *method loci* where space and memory coexist. On the other hand, architecture is in many ways a metaphor for history as a juxtaposed counterpart to memory, with the protagonist occupying a space between the two, and the novel itself becoming a metaphorical architectural space. But, while it is

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constructed with a primary concern for memory, the nature of Sebald's "structure" in the text does not fit with the traditional concept of a monument – a space designated for a memorial function.

To think about the novel as a metaphorical structure, or architectural space, then, I draw on the concept of the countermonument – a form of innovative memorial art that emerged in the 1980s in Germany as a reaction to what has been termed the "memory boom", a period which saw the proliferation of discourse centred on the Holocaust (Lupu 130). *Austerlitz* has been metaphorically likened to a countermonument. This is a productive comparison, which I expand on further by drawing on what Gabrielle M. Spiegel regards as the "the current tendency in academic historiography to collapse history into memory" (149). This conflation is perhaps a danger associated with the countermonument, but which *Austerlitz*, I argue, avoids. To make this argument I turn to Pierre Nora's concepts of *lieux de Mémoire* and *milieu de mémoire*.

As already indicated in the previous section, *Austerlitz,* to some extent, functions as an imaginative space which serves memory and can be understood as what would be called a "memory palace" in the practice of the method of loci. And yet in this phrasing lies a tension, for it is glaringly obvious that "palace" is not an appropriate term with which to describe *Austerlitz*, whose protagonist is greatly suspicious of great edifices in a narrative which, in its obsessive interest in the missing past, resists totalising formations in favour of an inexact multiplicity of remembered accounts which elude the comprehensive. Nonetheless, the metaphor of an architectural space is apt when considering *Austerlitz*, for Sebald's undertaking represents a literary endeavour to construct, through a unique combination of prose

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and photography, a space that facilitates a different sort of engagement with the past than the architectural structures on which the protagonist constantly comments. The same train of thought leads García-Moreno to describe *Austerlitz* as "a fiction in search of a type of structure or literary architecture" (367). As my study has thus far been implying, *Austerlitz* sets up an alternative architectural space that invites a sort of pedestrian exploration in the reader, a space that, like a memorial, exists in order to revivify and accommodate memory.

During the 1970s and 1980s in Germany, memorial activity became increasingly popular. The period witnessed a proliferation of traditional monuments harkening back to those typical of the nineteenth century, which, as Arnold-de Simine posits, were "instruments for defining national identity by interpreting the past in a coherent and often heroic narrative which encouraged pride or at least unequivocal identification with the nation" (18). The popular historicism of the time initially focused on working through the German experience of fascism and creating a collective identity for the German people, emphasising diversity and celebrating the prospect of a democratic future. By the late 1970s, the focus of popular historical interest shifted towards the Holocaust, giving rise to "an array of novels, plays, and avant-garde films, leading some critics to speak of the 'Shoah business'" (Lupu 131). These cultural productions, along with the many traditional memorials erected during the memory boom, were not unequivocally received, and elicited accusations of "aestheticizing the history of Nazism and the Holocaust". This then caused memorial activity to become "associated with the redemptive 'normalization' of the German past" (Lupu 131). The public and political response to the tension that existed between this "overconsumption of memory" and a "resentment against collective blame" (Lupu 131) came to the fore in the countermonumental project.

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"Countermonument" is term coined by James Young in his influential study of German monuments. It is a translation of *Gegen-Denkmal*, the term that the artists Jochen and Esther Gerz used to refer to their *Monument Against Fascism* in Hamburg. The concept of the countermonument presents a helpful metaphor for thinking about *Austerlitz* as an expression of Sebald's search for alternative methods of inquiry into and wrestling with the past. Young translates and appropriates the phrase to refer to monuments that share a distinctly anti-monumental underpinning, first appearing during the 1980s and gaining popularity over the decade that followed. Countermonuments embody a conundrum which erodes the very aggrandising concept of the monument. How does one go about facilitating the remembrance of events that render traditional mediums unfit for purpose? If remembrance is central to the formation of a collective identity, how does one go about remembering a past that confounds traditional memorial categories? Claire Feehily lays out the problem of forming a new German identity in a post-World War II context, stating, "Traditionally, state sponsored memorial work celebrates a nation's righteousness and the heroic martyrdom of those who died in state formation" (178). For Germans, commemorating their own recovery from a totalitarian past transgressed the categories that have come to define the limits of memorials. They encountered the limits of traditional memorial work when facing the task of reciting the history of their own nation's defeat, the exposure of atrocious war crimes, immense civilian losses, and international condemnation. "The year 1945 . . . stands as a confused anniversary of shame and guilt, with the Federal Republic's identity founded in the commemoration both of the nation's victimhood, and of its victims", writes Feehily (178). Such histories are what Stead describes as "unsavoury histories", understood as "historical acts, attitudes, and policies which the shifting tide of moral and political

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opinion has either always found, or has come to find, unacceptable, criminally culpable, even simply embarrassing" ("Architecture and Memory in W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz" 6). For these very reasons, such events (although few if any can compare to the enormity and unfathomable moral horror of those which transpired under Nazi rule) have traditionally been suppressed or glancingly excluded (as far as this is possible) from national historical narratives. In the German context, countermonuments are born out of the "inescapable responsibility of the descendants of the perpetrators of the Holocaust in the second and subsequent generations to engage in memory work" (Feehily 177), to confront inhumane histories in a way that resists attempts to justify or redeem the past for the sake of the present and future.

Young's study of different Holocaust memorials in *The Texture of Memory* provides a meaningful perspective from which to think about public memory at large. If the memorial symbolises public memory, what sort of structure should it be? One understanding of monuments could conceive of them as structures reflecting a monolithic view of the past crystallised into a singular, immutable history. This is equivalent to the Solar eye, insisting on a single iteration of what had gone before. But Young subverts this reading of monuments, reminding his reader that even the most emphatically concrete, assertive of monuments comes about through a process and has a variety of incarnations at different points in time. The concept of the countermonument thus embodies a different method of reading history, necessitating a reading within a mobile conceptual context[5]. This reminds us that memory, as in the way monuments are interpreted, is living and unstable by nature. Young points out that even monuments, seemingly concrete and stable carriers of memory, themselves

[5] Niven points out how this particular aspect of countermonuments has been criticised by Crownshaw, who states, "countermonuments need to be seen in terms of their theoretical conceptualization, which engender an ironic slippage from 'the representation of fascism' to the 'fascism of representation'" (Crownshaw qtd. in Niven 77)

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have histories that need to be *critically* remembered, histories that are not always apparent in their established, built states which seem so assertively to claim mastery over physical and imaginative space, consolidating History into a vested interest. Young's investigation of memorials focuses on "the activity that brought them into being, the constant give and take between memorials and viewers", calling these studies "biographies" of Holocaust memorial sites (ix). He imbues them with life and brings into view the "process, the many complicated historical, political, and aesthetic axes, on which memory is being constructed" (x). His aim in thus considering the "lives" of memorials is to "reinvigorate otherwise amnesiac stone settings with a record of their own lives in the public mind, with our memory of their past, present, and future" (ix). Young's conception of public (and especially memorial) art emphasises the process by which these works come into being. Re-investing memorials with "the memory of their origins" functions to "highlight the process of public art over its often-static result, the ever-changing life of the monument over its seemingly frozen face in the landscape" (x). Young argues that to read the memorial text in a way that "reinvigorates" memory, one needs critically to interpret the processes that have constituted it (and continue to constitute it) as a site of public memory. He therefore proposes an alternative way of reading monuments – which, in one sense is to construct a different monument altogether, for memorials are, in part, constituted by their reading.

Young's research effectively motivates that the countermonument be seen as the result of all its temporalities coexisting in the present, physical space it constitutes. Thus one could say that the role of the countermonument is to tear down a monolithic conception of memory, in favour of what Young calls "a more textured" form. Symbolically speaking, these two conceptions of memory – or to be more precise, of

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how history is publicly remembered – intersect with the Babel theme which is an important element of my own study in respect of Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*. Memory as a set, unified structure is problematised in *Austerlitz*, which enters into the disturbing intimacy of individual lives in the ruins of history, so as to provide a more nuanced, necessarily fractured, means of engagement with the past. As a result, it resembles a structure which reflects the "becoming", the living nature of memory itself. Sebald's text does not only engage and convey one individual's account – told in a way that aims accurately to convey the fleeting, changing nature of memory; instead, *Austerlitz* functions as a refracted reflection and indeed a critique of other texts that work in the realm of memory – whether literary or architectural.

Erected in 1986, the Gerzes' *Monument Against Fascism* in Hamburg is an archetype of the countermonument. The aluminium column rose twelve metres high, and invited passers-by to write their names on the pillar – a symbolic declaration of vigilance against fascism. As the bottom sections of the structure were filled with names, these would gradually be lowered into the ground, until the entire artwork completely disappeared, absorbed into the site, which would then be recognisable only by virtue of being marked by a burial stone on the 'monument's' former location.

Jochen Gerz's *Memorial Against Racism*, erected in 1991, similarly marks absence, instead of asserting its own presence. Unlike the gradual disappearance of the *Monument Against Fascism*, this memorial was completely invisible from the start. On the undersides of paving-stones outside Saarbrücken's castle were inscribed the names of more than 2000 Jewish cemeteries that existed prior to Nazi rule (Niven 76). This tactic at once subverts authority and reconfigures as valid the relevance of

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the marginalised, even the erased, for as Niven points out, "Where countermonuments retain materiality or visibility, they do so with an emphasis on interstices and voids" (76). Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, although not a memorial in the strict sense, is another example of the countermonumental tendency to centre on absences and voids. Visitors enter the museum through either of three tunnel-like corridors. If one chooses the underground tunnel, which cuts through the centre of the building, it leads through a series of empty spaces, described by Stead as "bounded voids accessible only from the ground floor, and overlooked by a series of bridges", "charged with the presentation of absolute absence" ("The Ruins of History" 5). In Stead's estimation, these void spaces (conventionally avoided and voided in traditional historical accounting) are "the most extravagant, but at the same time the most ambiguous, affective and expressive device employed by the museum" ("The Ruins of History" 5). Similarly, a testament to lives brutally extinguished, Christian Boltanski's *Missing House* in Berlin (1990) is a literal gap between houses, recalling the Jews who used to live in the neighbourhood, among others (Niven 76).

The emphasis on absence by countermonumental artists represents an effort simultaneously to commemorate loss and to acknowledge the irreversible and irredeemable nature of such loss. Such art affirms that what has been lost is indeed lost, and yet evokes a haunting presence. This is achieved by presenting a void, which transfers the onus to remember and reflect onto the reader of the memorial text. Niven contrasts the classical monuments favoured by the Nazis with countermonuments to make a similar point:

> the pompous 'thereness' of monuments appears to give way to representations of the gaps that fascism left behind. Most importantly,

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> perhaps, while the monument aims to impress and even oppress, and certainly to dictate response, the countermonument aims to invite and stimulate critical reflection. (Niven 77)

Clearly, countermonuments were conceived “to challenge the very premise of the monument – to be ephemeral rather than permanent, to deconstruct rather than displace memory, to be anti-redemptive”. Artists of the countermonumental seek to place “memorial agency and active involvement on the German public” (Lupu 131). In doing so, they expose the problematics surrounding the often-crystallised representation of the past in traditional memorial spaces, where history materialises as sedimented doxa.

Various characteristic of such countermonumental thinking and practice allow for the extension of the concept to *Austerlitz*. The simultaneous obligation and difficulty faced by German artists in prompting remembrance of the Holocaust is one such element. Sebald tells Jaggi, "If you know in the generation before you that your parents, your uncles and aunts were tacit accomplices, it's difficult to say you haven't anything to do with it" (“Recovered Memories”). He similarly discusses, in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, the inescapable compulsion to engage with past atrocities in which he was not directly involved, but in which he is nonetheless implicated: “You can’t simply abdicate and say, well, it’s nothing to do with me. I have inherited that backpack and I have to carry it whether I like it or not”. Here is an echo of the motif of the backpack, which evokes the wandering impulse of Sebald’s protagonist. Austerlitz carries around a backpack, which can be regarded as a metaphor for the impulse to collect history; history which he carries close to himself, as a personal possession and a burden. Given Sebald’s observations, we should

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anticipate that the way in which absence and voids function as referents in countermonuments is central in *Austerlitz*. In his interview with Silverblatt, Sebald explains the oblique manner in which the novel draws the reader into an engagement with the horrors of the German concentration camps:

> I have always felt that it was necessary above all to write about the history of persecution, of the vilification of minorities and the attempt, well-nigh achieved, to eradicate a whole people. I was, in pursuing these ideas, at the same time conscious that it was practically impossible to write about concentration camps. So you need to find ways of convincing the reader that this is something on your mind, but that you do not necessarily roll out on every other page. But the reader needs to be prompted that the narrator has a conscience and that he is and has been perhaps a long time engaged in such questions. This is why the main scenes of horror are never directly addressed. I think it is sufficient to remind people. Because we've all seen images, but these images militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things, and also paralyse our moral capacity. So the only way in which one can approach these things is obliquely, tangentially, by reference, rather than by direct confrontation.

As with the ethical movement informing countermonuments, *Austerlitz* aims to engage the viewer in the difficult, even contested, act of remembrance, instead of remembering on the reader's behalf. This entails process, rather than an emphasis on achieved product. For example, the narration circles around concentration camps, gesturing towards them, while avoiding direct reference – the author, through the

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mobile relationship between narrator and character, thus creates a void. The unspeakable remains unspoken but is, paradoxically and for this very reason, not forgotten. The novel creates necessary spaces of reader engagement, instead of presenting a reader with pre-determined received views – a form of monumentalising – that precisely preclude the horror and complicity of affect by seeming so simply to affirm inherited views.

In the opening pages of *Austerlitz,* as explained earlier, the reader is moved from the space of the Nocturama to the train station, the one functioning as a double for the other. As Austerlitz talks about his study of railway architecture, another association is created, this time between the railway station and the fortress. This is worth unpacking to illustrate the mechanism Sebald employs to create spatial-conceptual links or, to use Silverblatt's term, "interpositions". Austerlitz explains to the narrator that, "In his studies of railway architecture . . . he could never quite shake off thoughts of the agony of leave-taking and the fear of foreign places" (14), a remark in which we may sense the latency of his own losses of history and memory due to the circumstances of the *kindertransport*. The flow of the conversation then takes a leap into what might seem to be an unrelated topic. He asserts that "such ideas were not part of architectural history proper", but he nonetheless voices a sense that his thoughts about railway stations do carry some sort of significance:

> Yet, it is often our mightiest projects that most obviously betray the degree of our insecurity, the construction of fortifications, for instance . . . clearly shows how we feel obliged to keep surrounding ourselves with defences, built in successive phases as a precaution against any incursion by enemy powers. (*Austerlitz* 14)

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Austerlitz suggests that the same insecurity that terrorises the human spirit at the prospect of leave-taking and travelling to foreign places, and which haunts him in his study of railway architecture, is the cause behind the impulse to construct fortifications. As Austerlitz says, these thoughts do not bear upon architectural history proper. Instead, they relate most pointedly to his own story and the repression of a painful past. It is obvious how the emotions associated with railway architecture relate to the anguish he experienced when he was separated from his family. And yet, his study of architectural history seems to be an attempt to distance himself from these associations, to make them the subject of objective scrutiny and thereby avoid the pain of confronting them. His studies function as a means of repressing his own past, almost as fortifications which are a metaphor for his attempt to build up a defence against the return of painful memories. That Austerlitz's analysis of fortifications relates to him on a personal level is indicated by the use of the pronoun "our", which implicates him in the act of building fortifications ("we feel obliged to keep surrounding ourselves"). Later, when he recounts his visit to Marienbad with Marie de Verneuil, it becomes clear that the "enemy powers" that have threatened Austerlitz are indeed painful memories, and psychological resistance is the fortification he has constructed to protect himself from being overrun by these psychic assaults:

> I tried to explain that something or other unknown wrenched at my heart here in Marienbad, something very obvious like an ordinary name or a term which one cannot remember for the sake of anyone or anything in the world. I do not now recall in detail how we spent those few days in Marienbad, said Austerlitz. I know that I often lay for hours in the bubbling mineral baths and the retiring rooms, which did me good in one way but in another may have weakened the resistance I

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> had put up for so many years against the emergence of memory. (*Austerlitz* 213)

Austerlitz's analysis of fortifications, however, indicates that he does not place any trust in the idea of such devices – "a fundamentally wrong-headed idea" (*Austerlitz* 14). Instead of offering safety, fortifications, so argues Austerlitz, have the adverse effect:

> the largest fortifications will naturally attract the largest enemy forces . . . The frequent result 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. (*Austerlitz* 16)

Austerlitz explains the counterproductive nature of the practise of constructing fortresses. The fortress informs the enemy that there is something valuable, warranting the architectural guarding. This, in effect, invites attack. The more overt this invitation became with the construction of greater fortresses, the more advanced the technology of destruction became – which necessitated more extravagance on the part of the architects of fortifications. The result is a structure that reaches out ever wider. His point in case is the Fortress of Saarlouis as seen in Figure 1.

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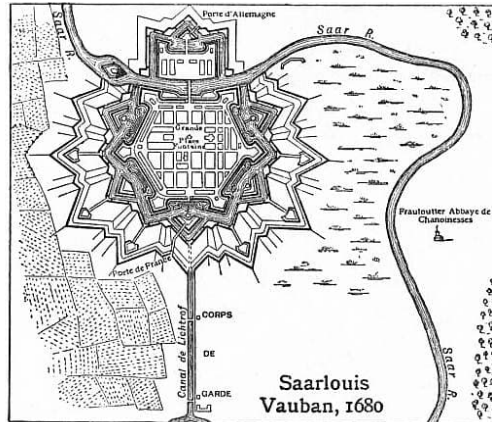

Figure 1 The image of the Fortress of Saarlouis which appears on page 15 of *Austerlitz.*

Fortresses are described by Austerlitz in terms which provide a sort of horizontal version of a tower of Babel. Our defences, he states, are "built in successive phases as a precaution . . . until the idea of concentric rings making their way steadily outwards comes up against its natural limits" (*Austerlitz* 14). Whereas the rings of the ancient tower rose upwards in depictions such as those by Peter Bruegel, these modern fortifications grow "outwards".

Figure 2 The Tower of Babel by Peter Bruegel

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And like the builders of the tower of Babel, who laboured out of insecurity ("lest we be scattered"), the architects who designed fortifications in recent decades discovered the "natural limits" of their fortifications, paradoxically acknowledging the very threat of conquest they sought to avoid. Likewise, Austerlitz seems, whether consciously or subconsciously, to anticipate the ruination of the psychological fortifications that shield him from the past.

The train station is a place of departure and a gateway to "foreign places", which for Austerlitz means exile. In psychological terms, for Austerlitz, actual fortifications evoke metaphoric fortifications of the mind and emotions, becoming an expression of a deep insecurity. In a perverse, convoluted sense, then, fortifications are in effect 'caused' by fortifications, such bulwarks being an architectural reaction to exile, an impossible wish to avoid the very displacement which has already occurred. Through the emotional connection that the protagonist of *Austerlitz* experiences with these architectural spaces – revealed during his conversations with the narrator – a spatial link is created that resonates throughout the novel and has implications for the personal story of the protagonist, as well as the larger questions of history and memory that the novel addresses. I pointed out earlier that the narrator conflated mental pictures of the Nocturama and the waiting room of Antwerp Station. Similarly, Sebald creates an interposition which causes the train station and the fortifications to be closely associated, to attain an ontological proximity which serves to implicate these spaces in a single understanding of history's progression towards ruination.

Throughout *Austerlitz*, numerous similar interpositions are created. The reader moves from the Nocturama to the waiting room of Centraal Station, from the station

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to the fortress, from the fortress to the jail, and on to the insane asylum, and to the Jewish ghetto. But a reader is gradually led to understand that at the unstable centre of all these interpositions is an invisible referent, a missing location: the concentration camp. Oblique allusions to the camps are widespread in *Austerlitz*. When talking about the mirrors in the railway station in Antwerp, for example, Austerlitz says, "*Combien des ouvriers périent, lors de la manufacture de tels miroirs, de malignes et funestes affectations à la suite de l'inhalation de vapeurs de mercure et de cyanide*"[6] (*Austerlitz* 13). One of the toxic chemicals which, as Austerlitz explains, led to the death of many who worked at manufacturing the mirrors for the station, is cyanide. This is a key ingredient of Zyklon B, the deadly gas used by the Nazis in Auschwitz and other camps. Through a single word, 'cyanide', unelaborated yet malignantly resonant, a reader is prompted on a thought journey which circles a silent presence, without direct confrontation. This enables the author to avoid aestheticising unspeakable events – a chief concern of countermonuments. And like the visual artists who designed countermonuments in Germany, Sebald as a writer encourages imaginative recollection on the part of the reader – we are to approach the terrifying spectre of brutally erased lives which haunt the emptied signifier of the official discourse of History.

In Austerlitz's account of his trip to Marienbad, the reader encounters a dense sequence of interposition and lexical approximation that swirls around "the missing referent". Marie, clearly concerned with the protagonist's mental condition, "almost as a warning, so it seemed to me, said Austerlitz…" (*Austerlitz* 214), relates the story of the composer Schumann's mental breakdown. The conversation then wanders into the space of the asylum where Schumann spent the remainder of his life. Via this

[6] "How many workers perished during the manufacture of such mirrors, malignant and fatal assignments, following the inhalation of mercury and cyanide vapors" (own translation).

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tactic, at once a digression and a link, an association is created between Austerlitz and Schumann. This occurs partially through the cautionary way in which Marie addresses Austerlitz with this story, but also in the way Austerlitz empathetically identifies with the composer in his exiled state in the asylum: " I listened to Marie and tried to imagine poor Schumann in his Bad Godesberg cell" (*Austerlitz* 214). As the fragile chain of cathexis continues, the space of the asylum is then abruptly connected to another space, namely the dovecote. Austerlitz continues, saying: "I had another picture constantly before my eyes, that of the pigeon loft we had passed" (*Austerlitz* 214), and he goes on to describe the dovecote in terms that recall concentration camp images in an allegorical fashion – similar to the figurative function of the animals of the Nocturama at the beginning of the novel:

> The floor inside the brick walls was covered with pigeon droppings compressed under their own weight, yet already over two feet high, a hard, desiccated mass on which lay the bodies of some of the birds who had fallen from their niches, mortally sick, while their companions, surviving in a kind of senile dementia, cooed at one another in tones of quiet complaint in the darkness under the roof, and a few downy feathers, spinning round in a little whirlwind, slowly sank through the air. (*Austerlitz* 214)

Having been placed in such a mess of interposition, Schumann's asylum and the dilapidated dovecote both attain a distinctly menacing aspect. Austerlitz experiences a "torment inherent in both these images that came into my mind in Marienbad, the mad Schumann and the pigeons immured in that place of horror" (*Austerlitz* 215). The interposition of the various spaces, located in relation to the protagonist's initial

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identification with the victim of mental illness, points to a sense that, between these referents, connecting them and causing a discordant resonance, lies another, even more unspeakable horror. Again, the dusk of *Austerlitz*, along with the pedestrian movement that explores the new spaces this dusk creates, enables Sebald to circle atrocity without direct confrontation. In this dim light, identities are blurred, ghost and body are equally obscure. And while there the intimation of horror in the abnatural scent that hangs in the air, there is also a safety in not seeing it all. Sebald's pedestrian narrator presents readers with fleeting glimpses of horrors that would disable their capacity to engage with the past at all.

The invisible referent remains unnamed, but it is encircled once more in the sentence that follows with a chilling lexical approximation: "On the final day of our visit, Austerlitz continued at last, in the evening and as if to say goodbye, we walked down to the *Auschowitz* Springs" (emphasis added). "Marie claimed", explains Austerlitz, that "the mineral waters and particularly the so-called Auschowitz Springs had gained a great reputation for curing the obesity then so common among the middle classes" (*Austerlitz* 210), but the account Austerlitz provides of the springs hints at ominous undertones of starvation. Initially, their visit to the holiday resort is recalled as a dream-like experience, depicted through a mixture of pleasantness and melancholy. For a while, Austerlitz even holds the notion that "I myself … was now beginning to be cured … Indeed I never in my life passed over the threshold into sleep more securely than on that first night" (*Austerlitz* 211). But the halcyon dream soon turns disturbing. His sleep is interrupted by a nightmare from which "I woke before the dawn with such an abysmal sense of distress that … I sat up, like a man seasick" (*Austerlitz* 211). In this nightmare, Austerlitz reads a newspaper article that reports on "the sad lot of the hotel employees", while the rest of the news "consists

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entirely of death announcements" (*Austerlitz* 211). This dream-sequence causes the spa to be phantasmagorically recast with an ominous ambience. The curing of obesity now seems more like starvation, and the visitors to the spa are reconfigured as evocative of a host of people suffering from "practically every other medical disorder known to the human race" (*Austerlitz* 210). Visitors are recast as inmates.

In the characteristic thoughtful digressions that mark Sebald's text, "Auschowitz Springs" is not the only occurrence of a lexical approximation to the invisible referent. The first is of course the very first word one reads when picking up the novel, since *Austerlitz* is a less well-known name than the one it so strongly resembles, namely Auschwitz. Again, above the coat of arms in Centraal Station stands another example of the same device. The three-word Belgian motto, *Endracht maakt macht*, resonates ominously with the infamous motto *Arbeit macht frei* that is suspended on an elevated arch above the entrance of the Auschwitz concentration camp complex (*Austerlitz* 12). Homologues such as these seek to draw out in the reader a personal engagement of conceptual mapping which would likely have been incapacitated, had direct references been presented as givens. This implies Sebald's authorial preference for intimation over confrontation, a feature that his writing shares with countermonuments.

Austerlitz also effects engagement in the reader by drawing attention to its own representational unreliability. This is a self-reflexivity akin to that of countermonuments – which provocatively draw attention to their own inability to convey history with complete accuracy, and indeed favour self-effacement over historical assertion, thus refusing to be fixed in time and space. Niven posits that, "while the monument aims to impress and even oppress, and certainly to dictate

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response, the countermonument aims to invite and stimulate critical reflection" (77). Countermonuments are dialogical not monological; they do not prescribe a reaction, or provide a specific reading of the past, as do traditional monuments, but invite provocatively open engagement with the past. In doing so, they generate and indeed represent a multiplicity of accounts that attests to the past. This feature of countermonuments can be understood by distinguishing between Young's related concepts of "collective memory" and "collected memories" (xi). Collective memory entails a conception of history as one account of history prescribed to the public. Collected memories represent "the many discrete memories that are gathered into common memorial spaces and assigned common meaning" (xi) – a proliferation of accounts held in uneasy relation.

Austerlitz invites many accounts of the past into each sentence, thereby subverting the idea of history as a concrete unity. The towers of Babel that claim to monumentalise the past collapse in *Austerlitz*. Here we walk among ruins, and with us dwells another, spectral being, namely memory. The multiplicity of voices enabled by the dispersed, digressive narrative style which Sebald crafts in *Austerlitz* is not the only means by which the novel's anti-monumental engagement with the past is achieved. Indeed, it gains multiplicity even from outside the fictitious world it presents – stories enter the text from the world of the real. One example is the account of Susi Bechhofer which prompted Sebald to write *Austerlitz*. By mere association Bechhofer's story enters the narrative. Sebald tells Jaggi, "The details of Susi Bechhofer's life, with child abuse in a Calvinist Welsh home, are far more horrific than anything in *Austerlitz*. But I didn't want to make use of it because I haven't the right. I try to keep at a distance and never invade". Another example is the cover of the novel. It is hard to imagine anyone reading *Austerlitz* without becoming deeply

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curious about who the subject of the penetrating photograph on the front cover might be. It is in fact a picture of an architectural historian – a friend of Sebald (Poynor). Duttlinger views the photograph as an association with "the conjunction of two temporal structures: first, the irredeemably past character of the photograph which radically separates it from the viewer and his present context; and secondly, the arrested moment preceding the catastrophe which will be forever preserved in its anticipation" (Duttlinger 165).

Austerlitz invites reflection on history by including factual elements, but in a way that is unreliable and invites questioning. Again, this may be read as a purposeful undermining of an elevated, omniscient consciousness that purports to unambiguous truth telling and documenting, in favour of a proliferation of multiple views and pedestrian enunciations that engage with the multiples of many vagaries and experiences. Indeed, as Sebald points out to Jaggi, all novels are a mixture of fact and fiction, but *Austerlitz* intentionally draws attention to the unreliability of the facts it includes. Richard Sheppard views this phenomenon as a way in which to subvert the authoritative voice of traditional historical accounts. Moreover, he reminds us, "as though to subvert the *ex cathedra* voice [Sebald] inserts deliberate factual errors into his narrative with a completely straight face" (428). James Cowan cites examples where fact is erroneously transcribed into the fictive world of *Austerlitz.* The concerns an address. While the text contains real addresses, Austerlitz rents a room in "Number 6, rue Emile Zola" (255). Cowan points out that there is no "rue" Emile Zola in Paris, only an "avenue" (55). He argues that facts transcribed into the fictional account not only serve as a subversion of the authoritative voice, but also place a certain responsibility on the reader. For him, an investigation of the unreliable facts in Sebald's prose is one of "the demands that Sebald's text makes upon us" (51). During

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his interview with Jaggi, Sebald confirms that factual inaccuracies in his texts are a purposeful device employed to encourage the reader to engage with history:

> It's the opposite of suspending disbelief and being swept along by the action, which […] is perhaps not the highest form of mental activity; it's to constantly ask, 'What happened to these people, what might they have felt like?' You can generate a similar state of mind in the reader by making them uncertain." ("Recovered Memories")

For this reason, *Austerlitz* can be viewed as a sort of self-effacing monument. Yes, it is a text set on remembrance, both on a narrative and metanarrative level: not only is the protagonist in search of a lost past, but permeating the text are profound meditations on memory, and it wrestles with how to relate to and reconcile past events in the present. Yet, Sebald's text calls into questions its own reliability, its own ability to accomplish any such relation of resolution and reconciliation, thereby admitting to an inescapable failure to achieve its purpose as a literary monument. This is paradoxical because, in part, it being a structure which seeks to oppose the forces of forgetfulness makes the text a bastion of memory, in which sense it embodies the fortress that, because of its attempt to veer off attack, ironically invites it. Even the monument thus intrinsically embodies a degree of countermonumentality. It recognises the prophecy of ruin spoken over it by its own shadow and proclaims its own demise. In doing so, readers (or viewers) are tasked with laying aside the complacency of relying on the monument to fulfil the memorial obligation on their behalf, and to engage with history themselves, however fraught this may be.

Along with such labyrinthine affinities with countermonuments, in *Austerlitz* we can also find more overt, direct rejection of monumental structures and modes.

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Young writes that countermonuments emerged out of "a deep distrust of monumental forms in light of their systematic exploitation by the Nazis" (27) in the service of fascist nationalism. Sebald openly voiced his distaste for the monumental: "I don't like large-scale things, not in architecture or evolutionary leaps. I think it's an aberration. This notion of something that is small and self-contained is for me both an aesthetic and moral ideal" (qtd. in Lubow 168). He viewed monumental excesses (of architecture and policy) as representative of the Nazis' "megalomaniac fantasies which Speer, the court architect, was going to realise" (Jaggi, "Recovered Memories"). In Sonthofen Ordensburg, close to where Sebald grew up, for example, there were Nazi-orchestrated " concerts, and you were dwarfed by the architecture of power-crazed minds" (Jaggi, "Recovered Memories"). It is clear that Sebald regarded monumentalism as a manifestation of the rampant desire to intimidate and oppress. *Austerlitz* functions as a counterpoint to such forms. This is what leads García-Moreno to describe the novel as:

> "…an anti-monumental, non-spectacular narrative form of memory and mourning that contrasts with the monumental architecture on which Austerlitz . . . is constantly commenting and which he sees as emblematic of a capitalist logic that saw one of its darkest manifestations in history in the concentration camps. (360)

García-Moreno here identifies characteristics on two levels of the novel that contribute to its avoidance of monumentalism. On a stylistic level, it is a "non-spectacular form of memory and mourning" (360). Eschewing the dominance of grids, towers and the directed narrative vector of plot, *Austerlitz* gathers loosely together a multiplicity of accounts, delivered by a variety of speakers, into a largely

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unresolved and unstable generic space, all contributing to its amorphous structure. Where chapter divisions normally function as levels that create a sort of ascension – a build-up of tension similar to the narrowing rings of the tower of Babel in Bruegel's depiction that spiral upwards creating platforms at different levels, Austerlitz offers no such rational masonry upon which the plot may ascend and peak. Instead it is recursive, ever-returning on a horizontal, plane. There is no linear gradient towards climax and ultimate resolve. The only arrival offered is a paradoxical return to exile. The effect is less that of a fortress built to shield memory from forgetfulness, and more like ruins strewn abroad, creating disorientating labyrinthine paths, fragments of a fallen city that point to that which once was.

On a semantic level, the protagonist voices stark criticisms of monumental structures – none more scathing than the disquisition on the National Library in Paris – while the text then very deliberately pays close, affectionate attention to describing more diminutive forms. For example, Austerlitz discusses the human tendency to "forge ahead with our projects far beyond all reasonable bounds", contrasting this with birds who "keep building the same nest over thousands of years". He then posits that small spaces offer better living conditions for human beings than vast edifices:

> Someone, he added, ought to draw up a catalogue of types of buildings, listed in order of size, and it would be immediately obvious that domestic buildings of less than normal size – the little cottage in the fields, the hermitage, the lock-keeper's lodge, the pavilion for viewing the landscape, the children's bothy in the garden – are those that offer us at least a semblance of peace, whereas no one in his right

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> mind could truthfully say that he liked a vast edifice such as the Palace of Justice on the old Gallows Hill in Brussels. (*Austerlitz* 18)

A preference for smaller forms does not only manifest in the protagonist's architectural criticism. Indeed, the narrator pays intimate, almost loving attention to miniature and seemingly unimportant objects, often listing them and describing them in great detail. The effect of this tactic, again, is to subvert hubristic official systems of assertion and categorisation.

The inquiry into the past that one finds in Sebald's *Austerlitz* does not follow established routes of historical inquiry. Instead, it is prone to distraction and wandering into details encountered in narrative detours. One example is when the protagonist reaches the *Antikos Bazar* in Terézin. Here the protagonist seems to have invested the hope of some revelation, "an unequivocal answer to the many questions" (*Austerlitz* 195), in small abandoned objects. These artefacts "exerted such a power of attraction on me that it was a long time before I could tear myself away from staring at the hundreds of different objects, my forehead pressed against the cold window", said Austerlitz. The objects displayed behind the shop window are ascribed an almost hypnotic power. He proceeds to list the items in unexpected detail:

> What was the meaning of the festive white lace tablecloth . . . What secret lay behind the three brass mortars of different sizes . . . or the cut-glass bowls, ceramic vases and earthenware jugs, the tin advertising sign bearing the words Theresienstädter Wasser, the little box of seashells, the miniature barrel organ, the globe-shaped linen, the stag-horn buttons, the outsize Russian officer's cap and the olive-green

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> uniform tunic with gilt epaulettes that went with it, the fishing rod, the hunter's bag, the Japanese fan . . . (*Austerlitz* 195)

This care for the small-scale represents an alternative route that diverges from the beaten path of historical inquiry. García-Moreno points out that this approach to historical research has an affinity with that of Benjamin, who writes in *The Arcades Project*, "[w]hat for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course" (qtd. in García-Moreno 365). "For Benjamin, objects such as draperies and wall-hangings, for instance, acquire a vital importance, aesthetically and politically, for they can enhance our understanding…" (García-Moreno 365). If Austerlitz regards monumental structures as unwelcoming to human beings (and their memories), miniature objects and small-scale architecture function as their counterparts. Their size makes them not only seem more lifelike but offers a more living connection with past lives.

As García-Moreno makes clear, one aspect of these seemingly insignificant objects that so captivates Austerlitz is that they have survived their one-time owners and continue to bear witness to their lives. The protagonist recognises in these objects a mysterious transcendence. He begins his sketch of the shop windows as "four still lifes" (*Austerlitz* 195). The metaphor he thus employs to frame the objects imbues them with a sense of permanence, of having been captured in a timeless state like that of a painting. The "endless landscape painted round a lampshade in fine brushstrokes, showing a river running", the stuffed squirrel and the porcelain figure of a rider on horseback, are, for Austerlitz, all "as timeless as that moment of rescue" when the porcelain rider saves the woman in distress. Austerlitz is unable to find any sense behind the timelessness of objects like the squirrel "forever perched in the same

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position" (*Austerlitz* 196, 197). Like the missing referent of the camps discussed earlier, these objects gesture towards a void – the absence of their owners. Austerlitz could see his "own faint shadow image barely perceptible among them" (*Austerlitz* 197) and recognises himself sharing their fate as one who "survived the process of destruction", "stranded" like they are in a waiting room where return is impossible. *Austerlitz* has a tendency to gather and list unrelated objects and present photographs whose subjects are unknown. As a manner of speaking, it also "contains" the protagonist in its windows that, through its inclusion of many factual details, reflect the real world outside. The novel thus resembles the Bazaar, or junk shop. *Austerlitz*, like the junk shop, calls up missing referents – people whose faces we do not recognise and yet who seem to demand from us a sort of reckoning. Like the river painted around a lampshape in the Terézin Bazaar, *Austerlitz* is like water "never rising from any source, never flowing into any sea" – he does not find the origin from which he has sprung and does not reach the sea of closure. Their gesturing towards absences causes the Bazaar and *Austerlitz* to function as counterpoints to spaces and texts that offer direct references to the Holocaust by means of precise documentary detail. This juxtaposition is reflected by the proximity of the Bazaar and the Terézin Ghetto museum in the text. The protagonist moves directly from the space of the Bazar to the museum where *Austerlitz*, for the first time, confronts the historical details of Nazi atrocities – without relaying it to the reader in much detail. Even in the museum, atrocities themselves are not described. Instead, he lists such objects as those that were manufactured by internees, and the produce taken from local agricultural communities during their exploitation by the Nazis.

Countermonuments, as the term suggests, can readily be defined by what they are not, by what they stand in defiance of. Central to the countermonument is a

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negation – what the countermonument does not do – it does not prescribe, it does not impose, it does not aestheticise, and it does not offer any stable access to the past. But it is more difficult to describe what countermonuments are. What do they do? Indeed countermonuments, as posited earlier, do seek a renewed engagement with the past. But is their presence *merely* absence? And is their goal affect without understanding? When it comes to the horrors of the Holocaust, some would indeed declare *understanding* impotent. And yet *Austerlitz* is a work of prose fiction imbued with a unique sense of meaning. Does *Austerlitz* merely collapse history into memory? Presenting knowledge of the past as fleeting, unstable, and ultimately unknowable?

Gabrielle M. Spiegel insists on the importance of retaining a distinction between history and memory. Investigating the recent interest in memory within the field of historiography, she argues that "the current tendency to theorize a reciprocal conversion of memory into history and history into memory – whether of a traumatic or normative kind – simply will not work, and this because, at the very least, their differing temporal structures prohibit such a conflation" (160). To stress the distinction, she pronounces a conflict between history and memory:

> "If memory is not the very antithesis of history, it nonetheless cannot be severed from its sacral and liturgical–its "commemorative"– contexts and made to do the "work" of history. To the extent that memory "reincarnates", "resurrects", "recycles", and makes the past "reappear" and live again in the present, it cannot perform historically, since it refuses to keep the past in the past, to draw the line, as it were, that is constitutive of the modern enterprise of historiography. History re-presents the dead; memory re-members the corpse in order to

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> revivify it. To be sure, memory as a social phenomenon forms part of the vast apparatus that civilizations construct to preserve the fragments of the past, but unlike the backward-gazing history, it faces forward from the living present to an imagined future. The one is oral, liturgical, and essentially prophetic; the other is written, archival, and essentially analytical." (Spiegel 162)

Spiegel argues that "Holocaust testimony, monumentalized *lieux de mémoire*, museums, festivals, and the like are traces of the past that negate the sacred but seek to retain its aura" (162). This may be an even more accurate statement when applied to countermonuments, which seek to evoke public participation, a sort of ritual immersion in the disappearance of the monument in order to facilitate the reappearance of memory, the desire to see the phoenix of memory rise from the ashes of history – while seemingly functioning in the realm of historiography. For Spiegel, countermonuments represent an inferior, secular replacement of liturgical memorial practices which enabled a ritual entering into the past, and an interpretation of present tragedy in a cyclical framework.

Yet what one finds in *Austerlitz,* I would argue, is not history collapsed into memory, as is ostensibly true of the countermonument. *Austerlitz* instead represents a ritual practice that depends on symbolic associations in order to allow the past to inform the present. Sebald does not so much construct a surrogate space of *remembrance* as an alternative space of *being*, one which invites a multiplicity of histories to coexist. This entails not merely assisting or mandating memory, but uncertainly hosting memory in the spaces of living – pointing to and giving form to processes of ritualised remembrance. In *Austerlitz*, memory inhabits the sphere of

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everyday life, and is part of its very materiality. Memory is not a faculty or an activity, but a co-inhabitant of the Sebaldian landscape. Sebald's text as a metaphorical structure goes beyond an alternative monument – the idea of the countermonument. It reconfigures the societal processes that underly the very concept of the designated spaces of remembrance – the exile of memory and the unburdening of the weight of the past through the designation of sites of memory. In Sebald's Babel, it is not only people who are in exile, but the past.

In preceding chapters I have explored the ways in which *Austerlitz* subverts the linear progression of Time, and the categorisation of past, present, and future in modern times. Austerlitz opposes the forces that cause the past to lapse into oblivion. Consider the following quotation: "An increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear". What could well have been a description of the anxiety that reverberates throughout *Austerlitz*[7] is how Pierre Nora elucidates the phrase "the acceleration of history" in his essay "Between Memory and History". In this essay written in 1989, Nora laments the increasing chasm between past and present, as "the remnants of experience which still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral, have been displaced under the pressure of a fundamentally historical sensibility" (7). Before the onset of "the acceleration of history", the past had been woven into the very fabric of human society through the integrated routine of ongoing customs and traditions listed above. The experience of the present was a participation in the past and vice versa – the experience of the present, was how the past participated in it. Human habitations were themselves *milieu de mémoire*, meaning, environments of memory. This co-habitation, Nora

[7] Recall the narrator's words, "the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life" (24)

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argues, has now been replaced by the spatial segregation of past and present as a necessary consequence of the historical sensibility which categorically orders, segments and constructs the past into a discourse determined as 'History'. The proliferation of monuments and an almost obsessive concern for designated sites of remembrance an, in Nora's estimation, be attributed to this rationalised process of distinction and displacement. Young outlines just how extensive this increase in memorials has been:

> The number of monuments and memorial spaces in Europe, Israel, and America dedicated specifically to the mass murder and resistance of Jews during World War II now reaches into the thousands, with dozens more being proposed and erected every year. Over one hundred museums and other memorial institutions devoted to this period have also been built, with many more planned. (ix)

Later he reports that the "estimated number of visitors per year at some of the best-known memorial sites include: 750,000 at Auschwitz; 900,000 at Dachau; 600,000 at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam; 300,000 at Majdanek; 1250,000 at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem; 200,000 at Lohamei Hageta'otin northern Israel" (x). These numbers are a reflection of what I refer to as the proliferation and almost obsessive preoccupation with such sites. I would like to clarify that this is not a critique of the public drive to remember such sites, and the lives and deaths associated with them, but rather of the displacement of memory by a specific form of historiography which, according to Nora, necessitates their existence, and which is to be found in many structures dedicated to remembrance. The necessity of memorials is not disputed but upheld. To expose the process by which they have become such a necessity, is, I

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argue, the object of the character Austerlitz's assault on the architectural edifices he critiques. Nora writes,

> Our interest in *lieux de mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn–but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. (7)

These *lieux de mémoire* indicate not an increased attention to memory, but rather the forced removal of what White calls "past presences" (15) and de Certeau calls "superfluous inhabitants" (106) from the places of living. "Under such categorical imperatives, memory is delimited", writes Nora, "forced to reside only in designated spaces of remembrance. In other words, there are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, precisely because there are no longer *milieu de mémoire*, real environments of memory" (7).

In terms of my argument, then, Sebald's *Austerlitz* juxtaposes the monolithic *lieux de mémoire* which form the subject of the protagonist's academic interests as an architectural historian, with the *milieu de mémoire* that constitute the text itself, and which increasingly comprise the protagonist's digressive concern with the margins and byways of history. The text as *literary* structure is not a memorial but an anti-memorial, for in the imaginative spaces of character, voicing and point of view, the empirical boundaries imposed by the organisation of modern society, between places for remembering and places for living, are obscured. As García-Moreno argues, *Austerlitz* needs to be regarded as a metaphorical structure; another site that enables a

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different interaction with the past. She points to the fact that the narrator in *Austerlitz* regards the railway station in Antwerp as "a logical stylistic approach to the new epoch" (*Austerlitz* 12), and wonders "whether Sebald considers any one particular stylistic approach as 'appropriate' to the late twentieth century and the degree to which the peculiar narrative structure that he constructs responds critically to what he sees as the malaise of our late capitalist present (*Austerlitz* 366). Here she regards Sebald's narrative as an architectural structure. Later on, she elaborates on the tension between the text as a structure and the structures in the text, stating:

> *Austerlitz* . . . is invested in imagining an architecture alternative to the one that Austerlitz comments on throughout its pages and sees as emblematic of capitalism past and present. By this, I mean a narrative organization that thinks of time and space together, follows a principle of relatedness and interdependence. (362)

By thinking about time and space together, a new landscape emerges which enables the past to be released from its sequestered captivity in designated spaces and, in so doing, to be released from the airlessly constrained frameworks of master ideologies. In *Austerlitz*, although the past does emerge in specific places, as seen earlier in the case of the women's waiting room at Liverpool Street Station, these sites are not designated, or even dedicated, as *lieux de mémoire*. On the contrary, the past permeates these ordinary spaces with an almost involuntary ambience. This becomes even clearer when one considers that those locales which are officially considered *lieux de mémoire* fail to offer the sort of connection to the past that Austerlitz not only seeks, but desperately needs. Consider for example when Austerlitz visits the National Library in Paris to acquire information about his father. The library, "according to one

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of the loathsome phrases now current is supposed to serve as the treasure-house of our entire literary heritage," but "it proved useless in my search for any traces of my father who had disappeared from Paris more than fifty years ago" (*Austerlitz* 282). The library acts as an *impediment* to the protagonist's desire to access an elusive past, having an effect contrary to the very purpose for which it is designed.

Remember, too, that the impulse which leads the narrator to Breendonk fortress in Belgium goes beyond a tourist's interest. He does not visit the fortress as a memorial; he approaches the citadel as that which it is – a material scene of historical atrocity. The narrator resists the linear chronology of institutionalised memory, which creates a separation between past and present – a linear-chronological conception of history which functions as reassurance that the past has indeed passed. But Sebald does not provide or desire this sort of solace. Upon seeing the wheelbarrows at Breendonk's labour site, the narrator reanimates the suffering of Breendonk's inmates, while simultaneously expressing his incapacity to do so. "I could not imagine", he says, and paradoxically begins imagining:

> how the prisoners, very few of whom had probably ever done hard physical labor before their arrest and internment, could have pushed these barrows full of heavy detritus over the sun-baked clay of the ground, furrowed by ruts as hard as stone, or through the mire that was churned up after a single day's rain. (*Austerlitz* 22)

Subsequently, his confession that "it was impossible to picture" is followed precisely by a vivid picture of the prisoners "bracing themselves against the weight until their hearts nearly burst" (*Austerlitz* 22). He thinks the unthinkable, and sees the unseeable.

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A curious parallel occurs in the Antwerp Nocturama with reference to the narrator's own memory:

> I cannot now recall exactly what creatures I saw on that visit to Antwerp Nocturama, but there were probably bats and jerboas from Egypt and the Gobi Desert, native European hedgehogs and owls, Australian opossums, pine martens, dormice, and lemurs, leaping from branch to branch, darting back and forth over the grayish-yellow sandy ground, or disappearing into a bamboo thicket. The only animal which has remained in my memory is the raccoon", and later "the creatures of the Nocturama […] had included a strikingly large number of dwarf species – tiny fennec foxes, spring-hares, hamsters. (*Austerlitz* 4)

After asserting that he cannot remember, he goes on to provide a fairly comprehensive list of animals which he had probably seen. This may be considered a way to illustrate the central importance of imaginative reconstruction in historiography. He asserts the impossibility of remembering and the necessity of imaginative recollection.

Instead of a history governed by linear chronology, Sebald creates proximity with the past through space, thus eliminating the distance "zwischen dem Zeitzeugen und dem Zeugen der nachfolgenden Generation" ("between the contemporary witness and the witness of the next generation") (Öhlschläger 109). He approaches the fortress as a space in which history is to be encountered in the present, not abstractly recalled, a space where history is brought near even while it remains forever out of reach. Significantly, too, the narrator's movement through architectural spaces is not merely an exercise of individual reconciliation with an inaccessible past but, as Markus

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Zisselberger points out, "its extended reflections on architectural history, present individual suffering as inseparably intertwined with the network of violence inscribed in architectural structures like the fortress at Breendonk or the Palace of Justice in Brussels" (92). The traces of historical trauma and structural oppression become legible in the architecture that has endured what human memory couldn't, thus becoming the medium through which deceased memories are revived. According to Urszula Terentowitcz-Fotyga, "Austerlitz's fascination with urban architecture is a way of mapping out the volatile typography of the human condition" (320). Take for example two spaces introduced in the opening passages of the book: the Nocturama and Centraal Station in Brussels.

In the Nocturama and Centraal Station, the narrator, before having met Austerlitz, introduces a sense of being taken from one's home and finding oneself in a place completely foreign, setting the stage for a theme that will recur throughout the book, that of displacement and exile. He expresses an affinity with a racoon, which he watches as it washes "the same piece of apple over and over again, as if it hoped that all this washing, which went far beyond any reasonable thoroughness, would help it escape the unreal world in which it had arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own" (*Austerlitz* 4). The racoon becomes an image of the displaced, who through an irrational sort of thoroughness seeks escape from exile. Upon leaving the Nocturama he goes to the Centraal Station, and encounters a statue erected during the colonial era. He states that he "marvelled at the verdigris-covered Negro boy who, for a century now, has sat upon his dromedary on an oriel turret to the left of the station façade, a monument to the world of the animals and native peoples of the African continent, alone against the Flemish sky" (*Austerlitz* 6). Walking the city becomes a way of uncovering the traces of human oppression, while simultaneously expressing a

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deeply personal sense of displacement and lostness. The forms of historical oppression revealed in these spaces all have to do with violent displacement, which echoes Austerlitz's personal story.

One of Austerlitz's critiques of monumental structures such as museums and memorials, is that, while built in order to assist memory, many of them actually have the converse effect, in that they relieve the individual of the burden of memory. The act of remembering is outsourced to inanimate structures. In his discussion about the history of fortification, Austerlitz states that "The frequent result … of resorting to measures of fortification … was that you drew attention to your weakest point, practically inviting the enemy to attack it" (*Austerlitz* 16). Outsize buildings do not, for Austerlitz, evoke positive associations. "At most we gaze at it in wonder, a kind of wonder which in itself is a form of dawning horror, for somehow, we know [they]… are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 33). In a curious sense, then, the fortress becomes a powerful metaphor for literature that aims to preserve memory, and even for his own work. Sebald states that the "moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory" (Jaggi, "The Last Word"), implying that the highest end of literature is to assist memory. An alternative metaphor to illustrate the point would be to say that literature is the fortress of history. It is where, to use de Certeau's term, the "superfluous inhabitants" (106) of our societies are preserved in the face of the offensive launched by obsessive progress and its resulting forgetfulness.

This particular point would emphasise the significance of Austerlitz's visit to the Bibliothéque Nationale in Paris, which he describes as a "hideous, outsize building" with "monumental dimensions" (*Austerlitz* 275, 276). The new library is

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juxtaposed with the old library in the rue Richelieu in Paris. The latter he recalls affectionately, describing its "green porcelain lampshades which cast such a soothing pleasant light" and remembering the readers who "sat at the desks…in close contact with their neighbors and silent harmony with those who had gone before them" (*Austerlitz* 275). The old library, in its smaller scale and intimate human proximities, facilitated memory, and allowed the possibility of a connection with those who went before. The new library, however, in Austerlitz's view, refuses and opposes the reader. The new building is "both in its outer appearance and inner constitution unwelcoming if not inimical to human beings, and runs counter, on principal, one might say, to the requirements of any true reader" (*Austerlitz* 276). Built to preserve memory, the building has the adverse effect, making its contents seem remote and inaccessible to the visitor. A library, being the "vast edifice" of literature, and therefore, memory. History, in this modern city, does not appear where everyone looks for it, but rather is buried by the very institution that purportedly exists for its preservation. As *Austerlitz* illustrates, however, history cannot be 'preserved' without becoming an inanimate monolith that excludes the more ephemeral and elusive little histories of ordinary lives and memories. The library casts the shadow of its own destruction – it is a fortress of memory that collapses under the ambition of those who built it to serve national master narratives of economic triumph and progressive modernity.

The hybrid form of *Austerlitz* makes it particularly welcoming to the presence of "superfluous inhabitants", de Certeau's metaphor for the stories, myths and legends which are the vital connections to the past. Indeed, the narrative defies the traditional boundaries of the novel as ghosts defy the impediment imposed by walls. Remember that *Austerlitz*, though purportedly a novel, does not adhere to any received

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conventions of novelistic structure, in that it avoids the driven logics of plot and resolution. Instead, Sebald opts for a constant stream of entangled telling in which speaking and listening are co-relational, and in which voices and points of view constantly shift. The novel contains no chapter divisions and little punctuation to indicate who the speaker is, at any particular point. In the formlessness of this stream, sometimes a conflation of voices occurs, even in a single sentence: “I believe, Vera told me, said Austerlitz” (*Austerlitz* 176). Such phrasing works less as statement than as perplexing indirection, asking thoughtfully engaged re-orientations of a reader, and a slowing of easy-readings rushed pace. The very form of *Austerlitz,* then, may be understood as representing an indirect, overheard engagement with the past, which dwells in moments and margins, and stands as a counterpoint authorial historiography. Through oblique references to the past the narrative builds not an edifice to History or even a conclusive document to one man’s search for his sense of his missing personal history. Rather, the novel represents, as García-Moreno argues, an anti-monumental approach to remembrance. Characters encounter history through narrative (myth, story and memory), objects (often seemingly trivial) and architecture (or space). The erratic, tentative, searching architecture of the text is a clear departure from the grid-like patterns of institutionalised memory erected under the oppressive governance of Time.

Indeed, Austerlitz repeatedly expresses a sense that history is forever occurring. As he relates the story of the Thames frozen over and the painting of the scene by Lucas van Valckenborch, he points out that it is as if the girl skating on the ice is always falling”. To him, history (and by association historiography) is to be regarded as a river, always flowing, instead of a linear point on a line. Austerlitz’s school history teacher, Mr Hilary, voices a similar philosophy of history, resisting a

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single ordered account, and pointing out that "All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us" (*Austerlitz* 72). He identifies the effect of the modern city's tendency to "invent itself from hour to hour" (91), an obsession with newness and the now that entails doing away with a city's past, which turns the city into a space that is hostile to human thriving. Inhabited spaces are storehouses not only of objects in the present but of actions from the past – and they act as access points, or portals through which the past speaks. In this sense, memories take on a haunting aspect – they are ever-present in the spaces that people spend their day-to-day.

Conclusion

In studying *Austerlitz*, trying to decipher the many riddles he presents, following the bread crumbs he leaves for the curious mind, as I have done, one must not forget the experience of reading Austerlitz – that feeling of being lost, of needing to turn back a few pages and retrace the steps, the frequent question, "how did we get here?". Conversations travel one way while the characters travel another, the stories told and retold enter alleyways while characters board trains. It all creates a maze-like feeling, which, although it may frustrate the desire for a linear trajectory, causes a new picture to be brought forth. One keeps reading with the expectation that the picture will become clear, complete, resolved, only to realise that the kaleidoscope had been turned and the picture changed. It is disorientation that marks the experience of walking in the city with Austerlitz. The city he walks in is a city that consists of many cities, one is not sure exactly which in the dim light of dusk. He prompts you to

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remember things. Each event you are to remember is many events. Each alleyway is an intersection.

Indeed, reading *Austerlitz* is the experience of seeing Sebald's vision of modernity, walking the streets of a ruined Babel. The ancient tower of Babel, a symbol and vehicle of human enterprise, had ever carried in itself the seed of destruction, and the tower did not achieve the purpose for which it was designed: prosperity and the avoidance of exile. Its end is a tragic collapse into chaos. This paradox – what is planned as human progress instead has a tendency to produce the inverse effect – is an important element in the story of Babel. This same trope is explored by Sebald in *Austerlitz*. Again, one has only to look at Theresienstadt and Breendonk, fortresses which become cases in point for Austerlitz's observations regarding defensive structures. Built to protect people from violence, they invite attack and become the site of trauma for their inmates.

De Certeau writes that progress "repeatedly produces effects contrary to those at which it aims: the profit system generates a loss which, in the multiple forms of wretchedness and poverty outside the system and of waste inside it, constantly turns production into expenditure" (De Certeau 95). De Certeau's critique of capitalism reveals that, when production and progress are prioritised, they paradoxically produce indigence and wasteful excess. In Austerlitz's account of King Leopold's architectural ambitions, the same paradox emerges. Austerlitz relates that it was the wish of the Belgian monarch, under whose auspices "such apparently inexorable *progress* was being made, that the money suddenly and abundantly available should be used to erect public buildings which would bring international renown to his aspiring state" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 9; emphasis added), and that one of the buildings resulting from

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this wish was the central station of the Flemish metropolis, where the narrator meets Austerlitz for the first time. It is of the same era that G. K. Chesterton writes that the "new men of the new century . . . sought among other things to clear away the old visionary kindliness on the subject of vagrants. Hence those reformers enacted not only a new reform bill but also a new poor law. In creating many other modern things they created the modern workhouse" (855). In the same vein Austerlitz,

> launche[s] into a discourse of over two hours on the way in which, during the nineteenth century, the vision of model towns for workers entertained by philanthropic entrepreneurs had inadvertently changed into the practice of accommodating them in barracks – just as our best laid plans, said Austerlitz, as I still remember, always turn into the exact opposite when they are put into practice. (*Austerlitz* 28)

Sebald's protagonist echoes his own negative ontology of history – that any progress brings humanity closer to ruin. It is a story with clear resonances in the story of Babel. The architects of that city said,

> Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth. (Gen. 11:4)

What they attempted to avoid by building this structure was being "scattered abroad", and the result was that "the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth…" (Gen. 11:8). What they sought to avoid is exactly what befell them. It is Cowan's thesis that the "positively Babylonian impression" made on "anyone who looks at the facades of [its] towers suggests that the [National] Library [in Paris] harkens back to another age, that of oriental despotism, showing that the hypermodern

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is really a regression to earlier stages of human history, where semi-divine rulers exercised absolute domination and power" (61), again presenting an argument that the advances made in the machinery of society during the past two centuries, in many respects entailed a returning to an order which resembled those of pagan times; and complicating the idea of absolute progress which has become so engrained in the modern mind.

In Austerlitz's declaration that "outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them" (*Austerlitz* 33), we learn that he looks with nervous expectation at temples of capital accumulation. Austerlitz points to how the railway station in Lucerne, the dome of which acted as the model for King Leopold's Centraal Station and which was inspired by the Roman Pantheon, had in fact burnt to the ground in February 1971. Thirteen years after de Certeau published his rooftop analysis from the vantage point of the World Trade Centre, "the most monumental figure of Western Civilisation" (93) also followed the path of its colossal shadow into a tragic destruction.

Sebald employs dusk as an atmospheric marker that casts a specific mood throughout *Austerlitz*. This mood is informed by a negative ontology of history, a phrase used by Rob Burns and Wilfried van der Will to describe Sebald's view that all history naturally tends towards destruction and ruin. In Sebald's dusk, multiple identities and geographies are gathered into a palimpsest-like picture of history – even as the ruin of modernity gathers. The blurring that marks by the pervasive conceptual-textual dusk of *Austerlitz* enables Sebald to trace specific, individual stories, while also implicating them in a grander, overarching vision of calamity. This tension is echoed in the prevalence of the archive in the text. On the one hand, the text resists

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concretised versions of history. On the other he erects an archive which becomes a storehouse for different people's and objects. Walking plays a key role in how the text gathers these individual stories and is employed as in resistance of the amnesia that characterises the modern experience. As a sort of alternative structure for remembrance, I have demonstrated how the countermonument serves as a useful architectural counterpart for *Austerlitz* as a text that seeks to revivify the modern engagement with the past.

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