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Anachronism and Anotopism in the Prose-Fiction of W.G. Sebald

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Abstract

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Each of three W.G. Sebald texts, *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, and *Austerlitz*, comprises journeys, which travel backwards into the past and across time and place. *Vertigo* is a pilgrimage for the narrators, which begins with Beyle and Napoleon and their transalpine expedition, and ends with a dream of the end of time, a realm of “darkened skies” and a “jagged wall of fire,” through which the narrator continues his eternal wandering. In *The Emigrants*, the four characters journey into exile and displacement. *Austerlitz*, lastly, is an iterative and circular journey, perhaps two parallel journeys, which lead to inaccessible memories and irresolvable dilemmas. I argue that in Sebald’s works of prose fiction is a sort of underlying structure and narrative generator that can be said to determine and control otherwise absurd coincidences of time and place. The evidence that such a structure of relations exists is generated by images produced in the interaction of the text with photographs and other visual documents. In *Vertigo*, the text-image interaction produces a sense of time, or the loss of time. In *The Emigrants*, place, or loss of place. Finally, in *Austerlitz*, Sebald collapses time and place to construct a thesis on the failure of writing and the trauma of writing.

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INTRODUCTION

This will be and this has been ... every photograph is this catastrophe.
—Roland Barthes

I began with the idea of this thesis as an application of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* to the text-image relations presented in a number W.G. Sebald's works. A short way into writing myself through the thesis, I realized that Sebald's writing so deliberately destabilizes the reader and blocks realist desires for identification with the subject matter, that even a method of such sophistication as Barthes's was inadequate for my mission to fully grasp the significance of Sebald. Even in abandonment of that initial plan of theorization, this thesis by no means encompasses the entirety of Sebald's authorship, nor does it attempt to. Rather, I provide examples from and analysis of three of Sebald's texts in order to isolate just two themes— time and place—and navigate their development through the complex interactions of text and image in the overarching trajectory of his prose-fiction writing.

Winfried Georg Sebald was born in 1944 in the small German town of Wertach, Bavaria. Growing up during the aftermath of World War II, Sebald and his family were directly affected by the violence. Sebald's father was a prisoner of war until 1947, and therefore missed the earliest years of his son's life. Young Sebald was exposed to references and images of the Holocaust before he developed an ability to understand their depth and severity. Consequently, themes of destruction and ruptured history pervade Sebald's contemporary work. In addition to his

writing fiction texts, Sebald was an academic, critic, and translator. Having studied in both Germany and the United Kingdom, Sebald commanded mastery of both German and English, allowing him to translate many of his own works. In his essays, Sebald expressed frustration with the inability to write about World War II and its unthinkable trauma, “the mutation in mankind that makes the author an anachronistic figure.¹ He found his colleagues’ attempts to quantify or express the horrors of war shallow and inadequate. Such frustration, we may deduce, derives from Sebald’s personal struggle to understand German identity post-WWII, to discover subjectivity in its very effacement. But to label Sebald’s writing as Holocaust writing, trauma writing, or German writing, would be an oversimplification. Sebald’s themes of memory and its absence, erasure, and untraceable identity constitute the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic dilemma of modernity and its trauma, of which the Holocaust is a paradigm.

Long committed to academic scholarship and teaching, Sebald was eventually drawn to write in an unprecedented genre which he called “prose fiction,” liberated by the intertextual space that new form would afford. In this thesis I will treat three texts: *Vertigo* (1990), *The Emigrants* (1992), and *Austerlitz* (2001). For clarity, throughout my analysis I will cite passages and images from *Vertigo* with a (V), from *The Emigrants* with an (E), and from *Austerlitz* an (A). It is suggested that *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, his first prose-fiction texts, were written during the same timeframe, originally as story fragments that were later categorized,

¹ W. G. Sebald, “Between History and Natural History,” *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003 [German 1982]), p. 77

assembled, and published separately. I analyze Sebald's last prose-fiction text in conjunction with his firsts not to circumvent the intricacies of those in between (primarily *Rings of Saturn*), but rather to sharpen the focus of my confrontation with Sebald. I argue that in each work of prose fiction is an underlying structure that can be said to determine absurd coincidences of time and place. The evidence that such a structure of relations exists is generated by images produced in the interaction of the text with photographs and other visual documents. Memory, for many of Sebald's characters, is a shared, transindividual conscience, and is sought after as a comprehensive mechanism to potentially pull these chances together—to make sense of nonsensical coincidence and absurdity. Throughout my analysis, I use the word “redemption” to express the desire to access such memory that gives the characters a structure of coincidence. Having formulated the structure in this way, however, perhaps it is more accurate to think of it in terms of a condition of the future anterior; that is, *after* having witnessed the effects of the interaction of image and text in the writing, *then* (and only then) *it will be as if* the underlying matrix of relations was already there. In *Vertigo*, I argue that the text-image interaction thereby evokes a sense of time or timelessness. In *The Emigrants*, the interaction generates place or placelessness. Finally, in *Austerlitz*, I assert that text and image unveil the fundamental failures of the very act of writing about time and place, history and memory. These assessments are not to say that each book does not confront each theme. There are important temporal and spatial dimensions in all three texts, and each text delicately depicts the difficulties of writing. Nonetheless, my mode of analysis presents a more efficient method of trying to work through the

various doublings, misdirections, and entrapments encountered in Sebald's literary realm of anachronism and anapopism.

TIME

Yet, of course, when Beyle was in actual fact standing at that spot, he will not have been viewing the scene in this precise way, for in reality, as we know, everything is always quite different (V, 6)

In his first experiments with prose-fiction, Sebald became fascinated by the uncanny resemblances between his own life and those of other writers whose work he had studied and knew intimately. Such initial fascination seems to have moved toward a kind of scrivener's obsession that repeatedly and relentlessly manifests itself in motifs of entrapment and dizziness, all in a depthless and suspended time.

In *Vertigo*, Sebald's first prose fiction text, the obsession begins with a set of completely coincidental but motivating moments in time connecting the narrators: Stendhal was born in 1783, Kafka in 1883; Stendhal arrives in "a continuously elegiac frame of mind," in northern Italy in September 1813; in September 1913, Kafka travels to Riva, suffering from an "almost overflowing" misery. Retracing the journey in the 1980s, the unnamed narrator of *Vertigo*'s second section meets someone reading Leonardo Sciascia's "1912 + 1," a novel about a murder case. Later in the book, the unnamed narrator returns to his unnamed hometown and sees the date "1913" inscribed over a door. *Vertigo*'s pseudo-apocalyptic conclusion is in September 2013. Such coincidences multiply across the book, adding nothing to plot development or outcome, creating, we might say, a mimesis without diegesis. Sebald compulsively contemplates the seemingly banal moments of everyday life to the point that each time, person, place, and event is witnessed only through a lens of

“horrifying absurdity.”² Utilizing *Vertigo*’s four narrators, each separated into single sections, Sebald obscures the line between mental hypersensitivity and torpor. Confronted by haunting coincidences, Sebald’s narrators obsess over the prospect of chance. Paraphrasing Stendhal, Sebald writes (through the narration of Dr. K, whom we assume to represent Kafka), “It is a fundamentally insane notion ... that one is able to influence the course of events by a turn of the helm, by will-power alone, whereas in fact all is determined by the most complex interdependencies” (V, 157). Indeed, each narrator’s survival depends upon the *inability* to recognize chance. To admit that memory is an involuntary, arbitrary phenomenon would be to confess one’s powerlessness under fate. So Sebald gives his characters a semblance of a past that might ostensibly be recovered. The irony, of course, is that Sebald’s constructed unreliabilities and blockages of memory deny his characters their transcendence—the realization of self, the final resting place.

I will suggest that a common desire that appears in Sebald’s works of prose fiction is for some underlying structure and generator that can be said to determine and control the otherwise absurd coincidences of time and place. As we will see, certain temporal and spatial situations become allegories for the incapacity of the human mind to conceive of what is really taking place. In a nonfiction essay, Sebald addresses such analogical thinking directly.

What is the meaning of these similarities, intersections, and correspondences? Are they simply a matter of illusionary memory images, self-deceptions or sensory deceptions, or are they the schemata of an order that is beyond our ken, but that is programmed into the chaos of human relationships and extends over both the quick and the dead?... I have slowly

² Mark Richard McCulloh, *Understanding W.G. Sebald* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 93

come to realize that everything is connected with everything else across time and place.³

Vertigo is the work that most directly works with these questions in terms of time.

To begin to comprehend the complexities of sensory perception in *Vertigo*, it is necessary to analyze the original German title, *Schwindel. Gefühle*. The English translation loses the fragmentation of the German. *Vertigo*, *schwindelgefühle*, is deconstructed into its two foundational components: dizziness or deception; and feeling, sense, or emotion. It is important to note the implication that the vertiginous sensation results only from the combination of the two components—dizziness as a consequence of a sensory or historical-memory overload. Therefore, the original title constructs “twin epigraphs”⁴ for its four narrators, who despite their textual separation lie permanently intertwined as eternal wanderers.

A matrix of repeating binaries, twinning, and doubling seems to be the deep structure of *Vertigo*. The first and third sections connect the travel stories authored by a fictive Stendhal (né Marie-Henri Beyle) and Franz Kafka. The second and fourth sections by an unnamed narrator (whom many scholars consider to be Sebald) mirror primarily Kafka’s story in a conspicuously elevated and anachronistic literary style. The first and third sections are both presented in third person, the second and fourth sections in first person. All four sections are linked with various similarities and modulations of character and theme. Sebald’s most prevalent leitmotif is his recurring reference to Kafka’s “The Hunter Gracchus,” the “strange

³ W. G. Sebald, “Logis in einem Ladhaus,” pp. 137-38; 162. Cited in J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald — Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 106-07.

⁴ Daniel L. Medin, *Three Sons: Franz Kafka and the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee, Philip Roth, and W. G. Sebald* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), p. 91

tale of a corpse condemned to wander the earth in search of the entrance to the underworld.”⁵ Gracchus is a hunter from the Black Forest who falls to his death while hunting. In his travel to the place of death, the pilot of the death boat takes a wrong turn and the hunter ends up journeying over the world’s myriad seas indefinitely, having missed the proper encounter with death and its closure. From his other main literary reference, Stendhal, Sebald “draws inspiration for his narrator’s musings on the nature of memory and the act of recording those memories, as well as thoughts on the purpose of writing itself.”⁶ In a 1992 interview with Piet de Moor, Sebald recalls:

I knew Kafka’s work well, not Stendhal’s and yet a curious coincidence touched me immediately: Stendhal was born in 1783, Kafka in 1883; Stendhal stayed in northern Italy in 1813, Kafka in 1913. After that I wrote two literary-biographical essays on the two authors whom I wanted to bring face to face with one another. While I was still writing, it suddenly occurred to me that in 1980 I too had traveled through northern Italy.⁷

In conjunction, both Stendhal and Kafka form the foundation upon which Sebald structures and explores the uncanny encounters and predetermined steps of his unnamed narrators.

Vertigo’s second chapter, titled “All’estero,” follows the travels of an unnamed, first person narrator. The reader may assume that the section is a loose autobiographical account of Sebald himself, but the text’s narrative blurriness suggests an intentional indistinguishability between fiction and nonfiction, history

⁵ McCulloh, p. 84

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cited in Carol Jacobs, *Sebald’s Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 187 note 32

and false memory. Sebald begins this second section, itself a kind of pseudo-novella with a journalistic documentation of time and place:

In October 1980 I travelled from England, where I had then been living for nearly twenty-five years in a country which was almost always under grey skies, to Vienna, hoping that a change of place would help me get over a particularly difficult period in my life (V, 33).

In the very first sentence, the reader is confronted with a question: to what does the “particularly difficult period” in Sebald’s life refer? Will his stay in Vienna provide a resolution? Sebald offers no answer, and from its inception, the section brings forth recurring themes: the desire to escape entrapment, and a longing for redemption. In the narrator’s travels, it becomes quickly apparent that he will find no therapeutic liberation.

My traversing of the city, often continuing for hours, thus had very clear bounds, and yet at no point did my incomprehensible behaviour become apparent to me: that is to say, my continual walking and my reluctance to cross certain lines which were both invisible and, I presume, wholly arbitrary. All I know is that I found it impossible even to use public transport and, say, simply take the 41 tram out to Pötzleinsdorf or the 58 to Schönbrunn and take a stroll in the Pötzleinsdorf Park, the Dorotheerwald or the Fasangarten, as I has frequently done in the past (V, 34).

The narrator’s diction devolves into an attempted analysis of what he has already deemed incomprehensible. His written description mirrors a stream-of-consciousness thought process of recounting the names of insignificant places. Such detail doubles as a textual illustration of a broken imagination—a rhythmic degeneration signaling a ruptured memory retrieval. He finds no resolution, and instead finds himself walking in circles and traversing the same territory over and over again. Liberation is but an unattainable afterthought, and for the remainder of the section the reader will be forced instead to witness the unraveling—the memory

overload—of the narrator. Analogizing Gracchus, the narrator’s travels act as an interminable wandering towards death and a spiraling of time.

Shortly thereafter, the narrator further loses control. Sebald provides a plethora of detailed description as a way of conveying the workings of memory—in this case, how blockages of memory manifest themselves in diction written as if it were documented in a journal. The narrator begins to hallucinate, envisioning people from his hometown who have long been dead, again recounting minute details of their names and physical appearances. He follows a man whom he recognizes as the poet Dante. He writes, “After one or two turns ... I began to sense in me a vague apprehension, which manifested itself as a feeling of vertigo” (V, 35). It is clear that the reader is now immersed in the vertigo defined as *Schwindel*. *Gefühle*—dizziness and uncertainty caused by a historical memory overload. In the narrator’s continued degeneration, we find time stretched to produce a symbolic encounter with Kafka. The narrator “talks” to “jackdaws in the garden by the city hall” (V, 36), and gives the name of an imaginary creature, *der Senavogel*, to a white-headed blackbird. As scholars note, *Gracchus* shares the same root with “grackle,” or blackbird. In Czech, the word for the grackle is *kavka*.⁸

In his despondent state, the narrator carries “all kinds of useless things around with me in a plastic bag I had brought with me from England, things I found it more impossible to part with as every day went by” (V, 36). His hoarding further symbolizes his torpor, as he gathers useless and miscellaneous objects to fulfill the absence of memory. He clutches the bag to his chest in an attempt to quell his

⁸ Brad Prager, “Sebald’s Kafka,” in *W. G. Sebald. History – Trauma – Memory*, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin: Gruyter, 2006), p. 114

queasiness and stabilize his tiring body. Finally, one evening, he hears children inexplicably singing “Jingle Bells” and “Silent Night” in English, marking the climax of his vertiginous collapse:

The voices of singing children, and now in front of me my tattered and, as it seemed, ownerless shoes. Heaps of shoes and snow piled high — with these words in my head I lay down. When I awoke the next morning from a deep and dreamless sleep, which not even the surging roar of traffic on the Ring had been able to disturb I felt as if I had crossed a wide stretch of water during the hours of my nocturnal absence (V, 37).

The narrator’s prose devolves past the point of journalistic documentation into a vague, patchwork assortment of run-on sentences. Analogies with Kafka’s *Hunter* continue. The narrator feels himself drawn to some kind of falling. His sense of being wholly surrounded by water effects an ominous suspension of time. Whereas he had hours before clutched to his chest his useless objects of ownership, his shoes, the only necessary objects of his travel, are now deemed “ownerless.” The seemingly liberating dream of journeying across water is metaphorically denied a few pages later. The narrator continues his travels and visits the Burg Griefenstein, a medieval castle overlooking the Danube Valley and a river below.



(V, 40)

Sebald, as he often does, interrupts the text mid-sentence to insert a photograph of what is, based on the description on the text, the Burg Griefenstein castle (it is necessary to again consider Kafka and his novel “The Castle”). At first glance, the image appears as a castle with large trees protruding above a courtyard in the center of the structure. In reality, however, the image is rather of a garden model based on the original Burg Griefenstein. The model is placed among various plants in an ambiguous setting—perhaps a backyard. The cactus planter, a ridiculous duplicate in many ways, is confidently constructed and composed with no humor, yet the narrator’s assumption of its verisimilitude is absurd. The reader knows not whether the narrator attempts to pass the crude replica as an archival truth, or whether in the narrator’s memory the false representation is, to him, the actual castle. More than the castle, the narrator centers his recollection on the valley and river that surround the Burg Griefenstein.

I had first visited the castle in the 1960s, and from the terrace of the restaurant had looked down across the gleaming river and the waterlands, on which the shadows of evening were falling (V, 41).



(V, 41)

The obscure, low-contrast photograph induces a sense of muted emotion within the reader—a sentiment that contradicts the textual description of the “gleaming river.” The photograph appears almost as an aged painting of the sun setting over a river. The poor quality of the image reveals that the picture mirrors the text in its representing the uncertainty of memory. One must ponder: is the photograph from the 1960s when the narrator first visited, or is it in his present in the 1980s? Despite its apparent descriptive straightforwardness, the photograph completely confuses in terms of memory and time. Its archival truth-value, therefore, is nonexistent.



(V, 42)

Another photograph of what we assume to be the same river appears on the following page, though the different angles of the images obscure whether or not both photographs capture the same section of the river. In contrast to the previous image, this one is documentary in structure, taken as if it is one of a series of photographs to capture the dam building project. Our knowledge is again obscured, as the narrator offers no documentation regarding the time in which the picture was taken. He writes, “A dam has been built below the castle. The course of the river was straightened, and the sad sight of it now will soon extinguish the memory of what it once was” (V, 42). Even nature cannot withstand time and its profound alterations.

Memory's uncertainty that already was is now further obstructed by a concrete construction—a physical manifestation of a blockage of memory. After this sequence of photographs Sebald juxtaposes such absurdity with a straightforward and illustrative picture of:

...a gruesome building banged together out of breezeblocks and prefab panels. The ground-floor windows are boarded up. Where the roof should be, only a rusty array of iron bars protrude into the sky (V, 43).



(V, 44)

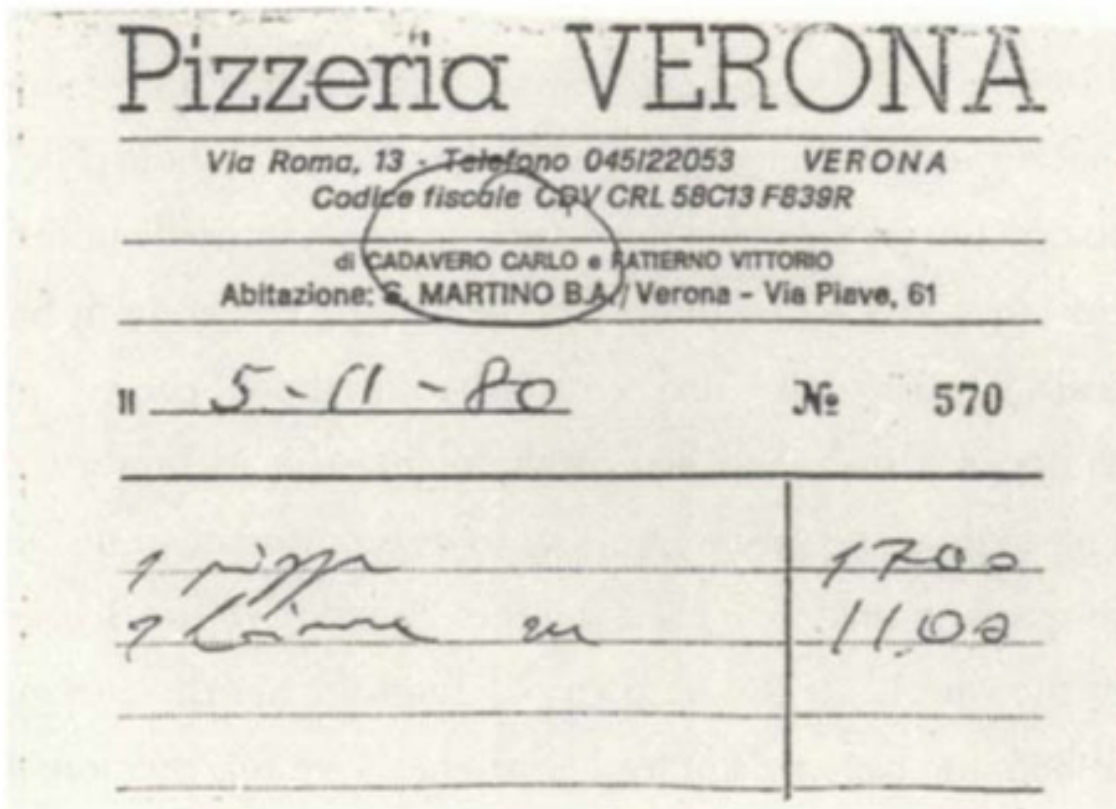
This photograph, in contrast to the previous two, is perfectly and consistently illustrative. But such a straightforward status only deepens the doubt of the archival truth of the previous photographs. Sebald's bricolage method depicts the absurdity of the most trivial occurrences. Calculated in his arbitrary technique, he depicts the

inconsistency and incoherency of memory in search of redemption. Despite the text's straightforward description of the iron bars, the narrator asserts, "looking at [the structure] was like witnessing a hideous crime" (V, 43-44). The crude banality of the structure discomforts the narrator and causes him unease. Each text-photo relation raises the question of redemption in the sense of access to memory that gives his characters the ontological ground of coincidence. The absurdity of triviality, in these instances, denies such an allowance. As in this example, so in general, the interaction between image and text may be both mutually supportive and mutually contradictory.

One witnesses another example of the relationship between documentary and absurdity when the narrator, during the evening of his third day's stay in Verona, gets dinner at a local pizzeria. Disgusted by the décor on the walls and the "hideous marine blue which put an end to all hope [he] might have entertained of ever seeing dry land again" (V, 77), the narrator feels as if he is sea sick, an obvious allegory of vertigo. He describes the mural:

As was commonly the case with such sea pieces, it showed a ship, on the crest of a turquoise wave crowned with snow-white foam, about to plunge into the yawning depths that gape beneath her bows. Plainly this was the moment before a disaster (V, 77).

The narrator's vertigo becomes temporalized. He becomes convinced that the atmosphere of the restaurant is signaling some sort of impending disaster. The bill he receives from the waiter confirms such fears.



(V, 79)

The bill reveals that his waiter's name is Carlo Cadavero. As the narrator struggles to grasp his thoughts, Cadavero picks up a telephone ring from the restaurant's owner. The narrator overhears that the owner is calling to check in on the restaurant while out hunting. For the reader, the reference to the undead Hunter Gracchus surrounded by sea is unmistakable. Overcome with fear, the narrator leaves 10,000 lire on the plate and promptly leaves. The triviality of a regular evening dinner culminates in a moment of absurd coincidence.

More than his insertion of photographs, Sebald produces textual images—written descriptions of the narrator's visual encounters. Sebald's exclusion of a photograph in these instances points toward the moments' significance, demanding a careful analysis of the doublings of meaning otherwise obscured in the obsessive

overload of insignificant details throughout the text. In the narrator's return to Verona we find one of these textual images in the form of another encounter with Kafka. In the bathroom of a train station, the narrator ponders:

As I washed my hands I looked in the mirror and wondered whether Dr K., travelling from Verona, had also been at this station and found himself contemplating his face in this mirror. It would not have been surprising. And one of the graffiti beside the mirror seemed indeed to suggest as much. "Il cacciatore," it read, in awkwardly formed letters. When I had dried my hands, I added the words "nella selva nerva" (V, 87).

"The hunter in the black forest": The reference is a reaffirmation of Sebald's allusion to "The Hunter Gracchus," which has become the foundational axis on which the entirety of *Vertigo* and its characters rotate. The narrator, as if he were living dead, continues his journey in search of redemption—a proper burial place. Sebald refers to Kafka as "Dr. K," foreshadowing *Vertigo's* next chapter which is titled "Dr. K Takes the Waters at Riva," and indicating a concern not with Kafka himself but rather his authorial legacy and influence. Shortly thereafter, the narrator encounters on a bus to Riva twins who appear to be doppelgangers of Kafka—doubles of an authorial double. In this instance, the narrator names Kafka himself:

Not long before the bus departed at twenty-five past, a boy of about fifteen climbed aboard who bore the most uncanny resemblance imaginable to the pictures of Franz Kafka as an adolescent schoolboy. And as if that were not enough, he had a twin brother who, so far as I could tell in my perplexed state of mind, did not differ from him in the slightest (V, 88).

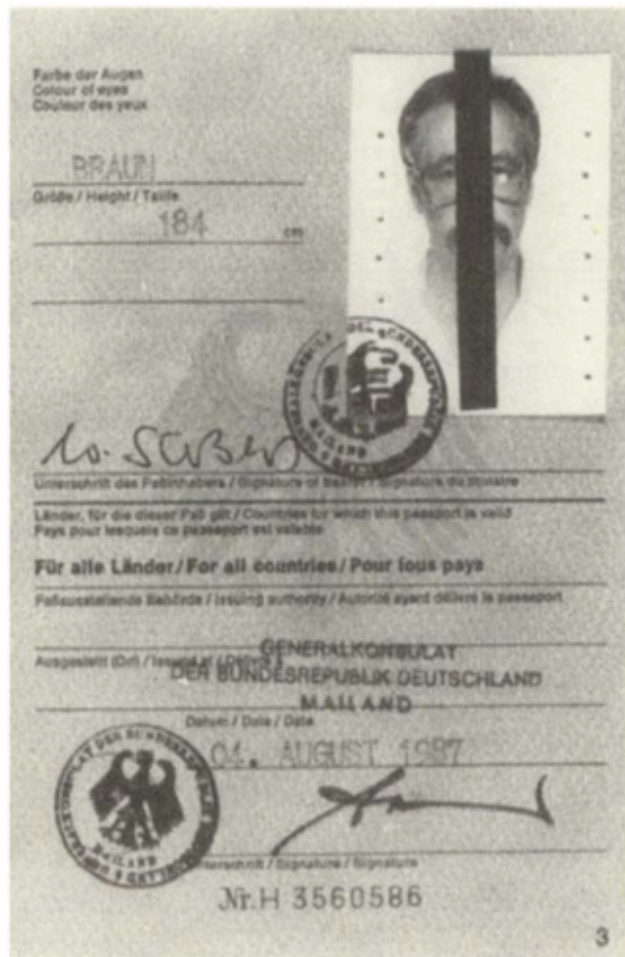
The narrator is again overcome by a "vertiginous feeling." He unsuccessfully attempts to converse with the boys in Italian, initially unaware of their parents' increasing suspicion of his motives. It becomes suddenly apparent that the narrator is mistaken for a pederast, as he attempts to explain to the parents their children's

resemblance to Kafka, and requests that they send a photograph to his address in England.

...I remained motionless on that bus seat from then on, embarrassed to the utmost degree and consumed with an impotent rage at the fact that I would now have no evidence whatsoever to document this most improbable coincidence (V, 90).

Sebald's obsession with the boys derives from his inability to document coincidence—a frustrating side effect of his inability to come to terms with the impossibility of chance.

This intense moment of shame culminates in the disappearance of the primary documentation of the narrator's identity: his passport.



(V, 114)

The copy of the narrator's new passport displays a picture of Sebald with a black strip splitting the center of his face. Some scholars consider the photograph "proof"⁹ of the narrator's identity. Though visual "proof" of Sebald's face is evident, I argue that the black strike induces the photographic equivalent of a textual overload of information, thus making the narrator's identity irrelevant and irreconcilable. .

Documentary evidence is offered then taken away, or at least modified to the point of cognitive dissonance. The reader or viewer cannot identify truth, but must instead attempt to comprehend a piece of false information passing as truth. The narrator's identity is now both textually and photographically denied. The fact that Sebald protects his eyes and parts of his face from the black strikethrough indicates not a confirmation of his role as narrator, but rather his interconnectedness with the narrator. The identity of the narrator is unimportant, but what is significant is that their purposes are intertwined in the search for self, personal history, and memory.

The narrator's journey continues in Milan, where he finds himself in an "immense railway terminus which, when it was built in 1932, outdid all other train stations in Europe" (V, 106). He continues:

...what relation was there between the so-called monuments of the past and the vague longing, propagated through our bodies, to people the dust-blown expanses and tidal plains of the future (V, 106).

In this place of massive interconnectedness, the narrator breaks from journalistic prose and instead ponders the relationship between past and present in rather poetic form. Railways, for Sebald, represent a network of history and information. Overwhelming in their architecture, they depict the spatio-temporal channels

⁹ McCulloh, p. 95

through which memory travels. In the Milan terminal, the most immense of all European train stations, these channels culminate in the form of a labyrinth, even as the sign mundanely promises guidance to restaurants and hotels marked in time, 1987.

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☆ ALBERGHI



(V, 107)

That the narrator notices the circular labyrinth on a sign provides a blatant indication of his obsession with mazes, heterogeneous information, and blockages of thought, uncertainties of position. Immediately below the image of the sign, the narrator writes, “On the back an affirmation that must seem promising and indeed auspicious for anyone who knows what it is to err on one’s way.” What is more, on the same sign are words that appear to haunt the narrator:

Under the archway that gives onto the Piazza Savoia was a Hertz advertisement bearing the words *LA PROSSIMA COINCIDENZA*. I was still gazing up at this message, thinking it might possibly be meant for me, when two young men, talking to each other in a state of great agitation, came straight at me (V, 107-109).

Another straightforward clue of the narrator’s obsessions, the words *LA PROSSIMA COINCIDENZA* (the next coincidence, the moment close by where events converge) provoke a question in the reader—a question we now share with the narrator: are coincidences in actuality, coincidental? Are the narrator’s encounters predetermined? Suddenly, the men converge on the narrator and attempt to pick his pocket. Such an occurrence, however, the narrator foresaw, suggesting that his own subconscious defense mechanism was generated not by chance, but by a series of interconnected thoughts and memories to which the narrator has no access. Later in *Vertigo*, Sebald reveals another source of connection in the form of a narrative that loosely follows the diaries of Kafka himself.

Sebald’s connection with Kafka derives in part from their mutual interest in redemption. Consider the famous photograph of Kafka as a child in his school

uniform, which Walter Benjamin has analyzed, and Sebald reproduced in “Dr. K Takes the Waters at Riva,” the third section of the book.



The child's gaze suggests an anxious discomfort as he poses for the photograph.

Through a Benjaminian analysis of the picture, we may consider this gaze a melancholic longing to retrieve an irrecoverable past. Such a mentality mirrors that of Sebald's own longing for redemption. In Markus Zisselsberger's words, "Rather than offering a key to Kafka's stories, the child's gaze becomes a figure of Sebald's own melancholy longings, which lead him to travel in search for remnants of his own childhood and for the origins of his melancholy disposition to see the world as one of permanent calamity."¹⁰ Travel becomes a necessary action to confront these phantoms of the past time.

¹⁰ Markus Zisselsberger, "Melancholy Longings: Sebald, Benjamin, and the Image of Kafka," *Searching for Sebald*

Throughout “Dr. K Takes the Waters at Riva,” the narrator passes in and out of Kafka’s biographical image, adding another layer of disarray to the already disoriented network of textual relations. Dr. K’s encounter with an angel, a figure with “great silk-white wings, swathed in bluish-violet vestments and bound with golden cords” (V, 106), is an episode almost verbatim from one of Kafka’s diaries.¹¹ Sebald’s carefully orchestrated retellings of Kafka display blatantly Sebald’s obsession with Kafka, and the uncanny resemblances between the two. Nonetheless, what appears to fascinate Sebald the most is the lack of documentation regarding where Kafka has gone and what he has seen. We cannot know the journeys in between Kafka’s documented destinations. In these liminal spaces of travel where no direct relations appear, Sebald nonetheless find interconnectedness, if only within the conjoined authorial legacy of the two. Dr. K follows the same path to Desenzano as did the unnamed narrator previously. The textual order of the chapters contradicts the perceived chronological order in which the events should have occurred. The question of who followed whom is unanswerable and unrecoverable. The reader is given no alternative but to trust Sebald’s accounts, which seem independent of time, but are nevertheless needed as historical markers for the sake of authenticity and the logical cohesion of memory.

The narrator documents two photographs of the townspeople awaiting the arrival of the Deputy Secretary of the Prague Workers’ Insurance Company, who, coincidentally, arrives in Desenzano at the same time as Dr. K.

¹¹ McCulloh, p. 98



(V, 153)

Free from the recognition he would receive in Prague, Dr. K “relishes in the pleasures (but only, as he notes himself, the pleasures) of being declassed and even freed from all social standing” (V, 153). Nonetheless, by circumstance of the deputy’s arrival at the same time, a temporal coincidence creates another encounter. The narrator continues, “In Desenzano, however, even this modest happiness eludes him. Rather he feels ill, sick, as he puts it, at every point of the compass. There remains only the one consolation that nobody knows where he is” (V, 154). Indeed, Dr. K perceives that nobody knows where he is, yet he is sick at “every point of the compass.” Vulnerable in his false isolation, he is denied relief that he desperately seeks. As the central focus of the eyes of the crowd, *everyone* knows where he is.

Further in the chapter during a climactic moment of interconnectedness, Sebald merges Dr. K’s narrative with that of the “Hunter Gracchus.” In the years following Dr. K’s separation with his love interest, he resides in Riva:

...lengthy shadows fell upon those autumn days at Riva, which, as Dr K. on occasion said to himself, had been so beautiful and so appalling, and from these shadows there gradually emerged the silhouette of a barque with masts of an inconceivable height and sails dark and hanging in folds (V, 163-164).

A poorly produced photograph of the ship interrupts the text.



(V, 163)

Dr. K watches the arrival of the near-immobile ship, as if his waiting were a textual image of suspended time—“Three whole years it takes until the vessel, as if it were being borne across the waters, gently drifts into the little port of Riva” (V, 164).

Allegories for death pervade both Kafka and Sebald’s literature. In “The Hunter

Gracchus,” which in many respects symbolizes Kafka’s own deteriorating health, the ominous ship that carries the undead hunter in search of the underworld too docks at Riva. The narratives explicitly converge, one time folded into another, and the Sebaldian narrator assumes ownership of Kafka’s authorial presence:

[The vessel] berths in the early hours of the morning. A man in blue overalls comes ashore and makes fast the ropes. Behind the boatman, two figures in dark tunics with silver buttons carry a bier upon which lies, under a large floral-pattered cover, what was clearly the body of a human being. It is Gracchus the huntsman. His arrival was announced at midnight to Salvatore, the *podestà* of Riva, by a pigeon the size of a cockerel, which flew in at his bedroom window and then spoke in his ear. Tomorrow, the pigeon said, the dead hunter Gracchus will arrive (V, 164).

The narrator’s diction flows in between verb tenses. Moreover, the temporal order of the text shifts from “morning” to “midnight” to “tomorrow.” The huntsman’s rheumatic body represents a register of the long years adrift.

Vertigo’s first chapter, “Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet,” reads as an anticipatory analogue of his yet-to-be-introduced characters. The reader finds it difficult to make sense of the first chapter until the end of the text. Sebald begins *Vertigo* by decontextualizing a historical marker—Napoleon’s army’s crossing of the St. Bernard pass in May of 1800. The reader remains unaware of the authoritative third-person narrator’s identity, though the subject of narration, Marie-Henri Beyle, the birth name of the writer Stendhal, is revealed a few passages later. That Sebald’s first chapter of his first prose fiction text begins with Stendhal reveals Sebald’s fascination with Stendhal’s ideas on memory and writing. What is more, the aptly named “Stendhal Syndrome” refers to incapacitation due to sensory overload.¹² In many respects, “Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet” is writing *about* writing

¹² McCulloh, p. 86

and the complex ways that memory is both the active subject *of* and the ontological inspiration *for* writing. And both involve the determinate relation of writing and time. In Stendhal's words, "I can picture the event, but probably this isn't a direct memory of the mental image I formed of the affair a long way back at the time of the first accounts I was given of it,"¹³ which is something like saying that the memory didn't exist before it was written, but after it was written, it had already been there. For Sebald, the metaphor for a memory or event comes in the form of a sketch of the transalpine march undertaken by Napoleon's army in 1800.



(V, 5)

The mapping of the march represents not the actual events themselves, but the difficulty endured by the act of recollecting.

At times his view of the past consists of nothing but grey patches, then at others images appear of such extraordinary clarity he feels he can scarcely credit them... (V, 5)

¹³ Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard*, trans. John Sturrock (New York: Penguin, 1995) pp. 49-52

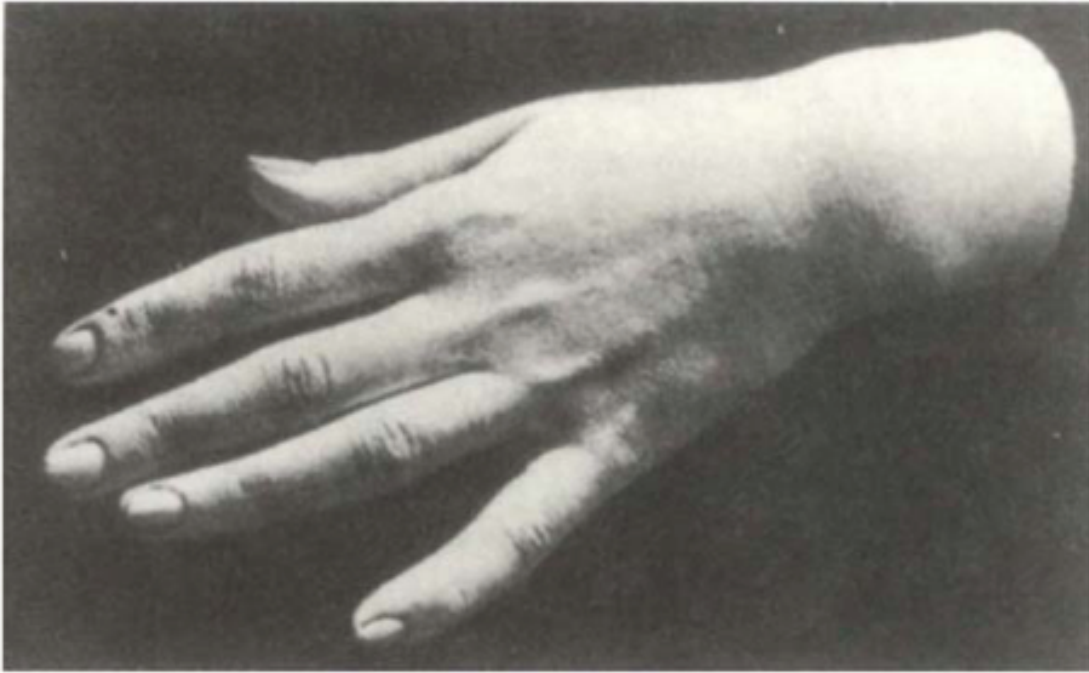
Even the clearest memories are often inaccurate, obscured or erased by events later in history. The image bears the act of witnessing, and displays how such recollection is obscured by “many and various tellings” (V, 17).

Later in the chapter, Beyle first experiences the *schwindel* after which the text is named. He is intensely attracted to a married woman named Métilde whom he met at her salon in Milan. He becomes so obsessed that he follows her incognito for days, and eventually finds her in Volterra, where she had gone to visit her two sons.

She had bent down in the hallway of her house to adjust her footwear, and, suddenly oblivious to everything else, he had beheld, as if through a drifting smoke, a crimson desert behind him. This vision left him in a kind of trance, and it was in that state that he purchased the clothing he meant to wear as a disguise (V, 19).

Aware of Beyle’s advances, Métilde writes a “dry note” that abruptly ends Beyle’s hopes as an innamorato. The text continues:

Beyle was inconsolable. For months he reproached himself, and not until he determined to set down his great passion in a meditation on love did he recover his emotional equilibrium. On his writing desk, as a memento of Métilde, he kept a plaster cast of her left hand which he had contrived to obtain shortly before the debacle, providentially, as he often reflected while writing. That hand now meant almost as much to him as Métilde herself could ever have done. In particular, the slight crookedness of the ring finger occasioned in him emotions of vehemence he had not hitherto experienced (V, 20-21).



(V, 21)

The plaster cast is an indexical marker of time—an object of desire for something and someone who has become inaccessible. It inscribes a certain past time, the moment of the casting, yet simultaneously erases the memory of Métilde as subject insofar as Beyle cares more about the index than he could care for Métilde herself.

That Beyle keeps the cast on his writing desk further interconnects writing, memory, and time. These motifs resurface again in the second chapter of *Vertigo*, “All’estero,” when a photograph captures an unidentifiable man holding his left hand at an angle similar to that of Métilde’s cast.



(V, 38)

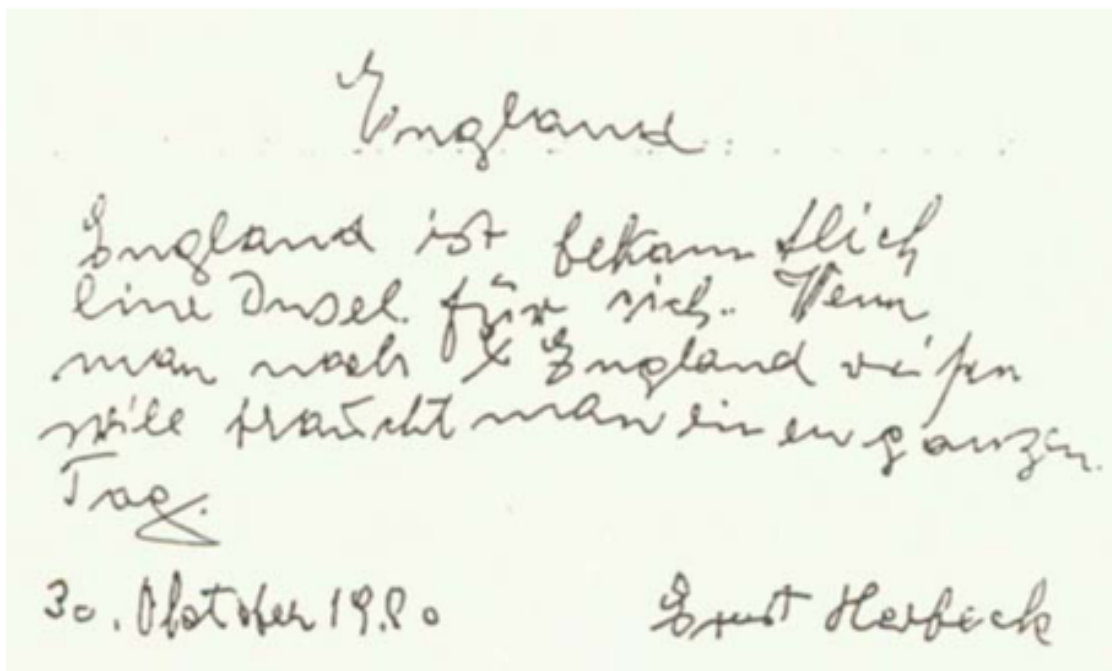
The text preceding the image indicates that the man is the German poet Ernst Herbeck “wearing a glencheck suit with a hiking badge on the lapel. On his head, he wore a narrow-brimmed hat” (V, 38). By cropping the photograph, the narrator has created his own simulacrum that displaces actual memory—a photograph rendered mysterious, foregrounding the left hand, the half-hidden hat carried in the right. In Deanne Blackler’s words, “What is the withheld significance of this detail? Why has the text, through this repetition, emphasized it? What private memory has the

narrator shrouded here? Too much is unexplained, turned to enigmatic metaphor, resisting the generic conventions of the autobiographical essay.”¹⁴

Later in the text, Sebald includes an autographed and dated note written in the narrator’s notebook:

I then asked if [Herbeck] would write something in my notebook, and this he did without the slightest hesitation with the ballpoint pen which he took from his jacket pocket, resting his left hand on the open page (V, 47-48)

The note, written in German, reads, “England, England, as is well known, is an island unto itself. Travelling to England takes an entire day. 30 October 1980.”



Again, the motif of left-handedness reappears, further linking the metonymy of writing, memory, and time. The recurring themes of travel and being surrounded by sea are provided by Herbeck’s note. Only in the final moments of *Vertigo* do all these

¹⁴ Deane Blackler, Reading W.G. Sebald: *Adventure and Disobedience* (Rochester: Camden House, 2007), p. 155

seemingly arbitrary themes come full circle, culminating in the structure of the Gracchus narrative.

I have since learned that an autopsy was carried out on the body of Schlag the hunter, who apparently had no relatives of any sort, at the district hospital; it did not, however, yield any further insight beyond the cause of death already established ... except for the fact, described in the post-mortem report as curious, that a sailing ship was tattooed on the upper left arm of the dead man (V, 249).

PLACE

I often come here, said Uncle Kasimir, it makes me feel that I am a long way away, though I never quite know from where (E, 89)

The very first page of *Vertigo* offers a poorly produced black-and-white photograph of mountain climbers on a vertiginous path. The first phrase of the text, “In mid-May of the year 1800,” is a marker of time conveyed in a spatial figure: the middle of the month of May coincides with the climbers place midway up the mountain; the sentence containing the word itself, “mid,” is set in the middle of the page.



(V, 3)

In the original German, the text is further divided into fragments, generating a spatialization of the text—a sense of moving up the hill in a jumpy, disjointed way. Sebald centers the image directly underneath the title of the chapter, as if the image represents a cover illustration of the section (or, entire text) as a whole. Compared to many of the images throughout *Vertigo* that are embedded within or interrupt the text, this picture of the mountain holds a certain autonomy based solely on its positioning as an overarching illustration of the writing to come. The physical symmetry and spatial equality between image and text demand recognition of the importance of the interaction between the two literary devices, an interaction which provides a provisional frame for the event of reading. Moreover, this is an altered image, the exact medium of which is unclear—a photograph of a painting or engraving, or a reproduction of a preliminary sketch? The complex situation of this inaugural representation attests to the primary characteristic of Sebald's use of text and image, which we have already seen: the dialectic of inscription and erasure that constructs his images as unreliable markers of events.

On closer examination and with further reading, it is revealed, or at least implied, that the image is, in fact, a representation of Napoleon Bonaparte's crossing of the Great St Bernard Pass in 1800—a momentous eruption of historical force in time and place. Deane Blackler notes that further knowledge is required of the reader: "In the informed reader's mind, the most famous painting of the transalpine crossing is that of Napoleon in full uniform on a rearing horse in which Jacques-Louis David has captured a scene of the historical grandeur of this 'next to impossible' undertaking." In Sebald's representation, however, "grandeur belongs to

the mountains, not the men,"¹⁵ which is to say, what is insisted upon is the importance of place as much as time.

In *The Emigrants*, Sebald's second prose-fiction text, such a spatial dimension takes priority. Like *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants* is separated into four distinct chapters, each focused on a different episode. Unlike *Vertigo*, however, the narrator in *The Emigrants* does not change; instead, each chapter is a story told by the narrator about his interactions and journeys with four separate characters, all of whom are German emigrants. Though thematically similar to *Vertigo* before it, *The Emigrants* more explicitly confronts notions of identity, specifically in regard to German identity in the wake of World War II. With his second text, Sebald transforms his prose fiction into writing that is more intensely personal, but still personal by nature of interconnectedness rather than any stabilized autobiographical information. Indeed, one scholar suggested that the author's textual longing qualifies him as the "unofficial 'fifth emigrant.'"¹⁶ References to other authors, explicit or otherwise, still pervade the text, but Sebald's authorial voice remains consistent. In terms of time and place, the ontological question of the nature of memory might seem to find here a source of broader meaning—a greater history to which it can connect. However, Sebald again blocks such potential connecting, denying his characters access to such memory retrieval. What results is both a geographic and psychic exile, a displacement through which Sebald displays how the interaction of text and image generates a sense of either place or placelessness.

¹⁵ Blackler, p. 151

¹⁶ Christopher C. Gregory-Guider, "The 'Sixth Emigrant': Traveling Places in the Works of W. G. Sebald," *Contemporary Literature* vol 46 no 3 (Fall 2005), p. 425

All four stories in *The Emigrants* depict the experience of dislocation, whether that dislocation is geographical, cultural, political, or economic. Whereas in my analysis of *Vertigo* I described the events out of the order that they appear in the text, I will examine *The Emigrants* in order of the chapters in an effort to sharpen our focus on the spatial dimension.



(E, 3)

Like the opening page of *Vertigo*, that of *The Emigrants* displays an image in symmetrical unity with the text—a photograph of a large tree sheltering old gravestones. The thickness of the tree renders its branches indistinguishable from

one another. One may imagine the tree's roots like an inverted image of its branches, proliferating under the ground beneath the graves as they entangle the remnants of bodies long buried. The tree's depth appears to Frances L. Restuccia like a Barthesian "flat death." She writes,

The stunning opening graveyard photo in *The Emigrants* ... triply flaunts Roland Barthes's theory in *Camera Lucida* that "[w]ith the photograph, we enter into *flat* Death," given that not only the cemetery setting and the yew tree but also photography per se radiate death in the world of Barthes.¹⁷

However, the text that follows the tree contradicts the gloomy tone of the image.

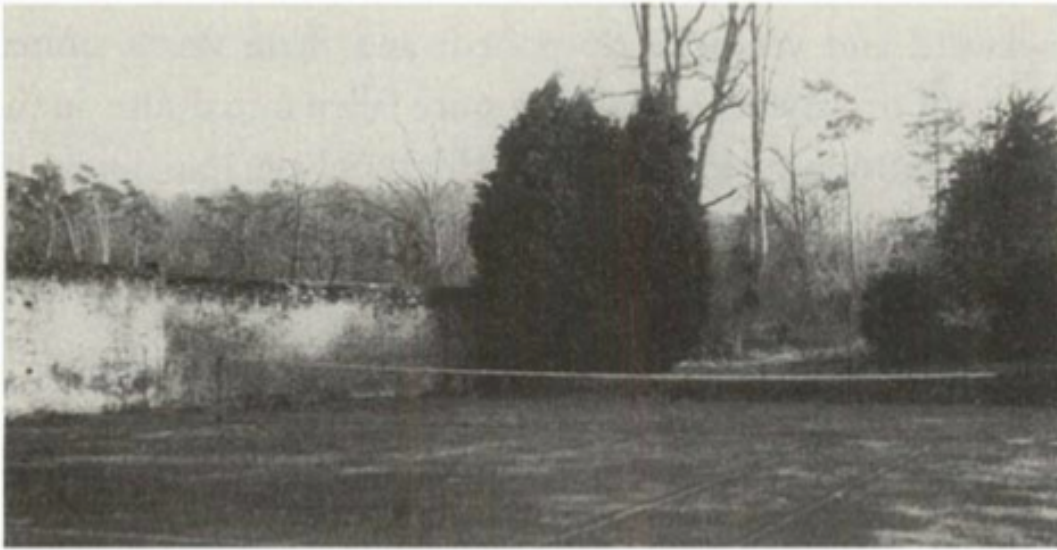
Furthermore, the narrator never explains the tree, instead describing his travel to various places:

At the end of September 1970, shortly before I took up my position in Norwich, I drove out to Hingham with Clara in search of somewhere to live. For some 25 kilometres the road runs amidst fields and hedgerows, beneath spreading oak trees, past a few scattered hamlets, till at length Hingham appears, its asymmetrical gables, church tower and treetops barely rising above the flatland (E, 3).

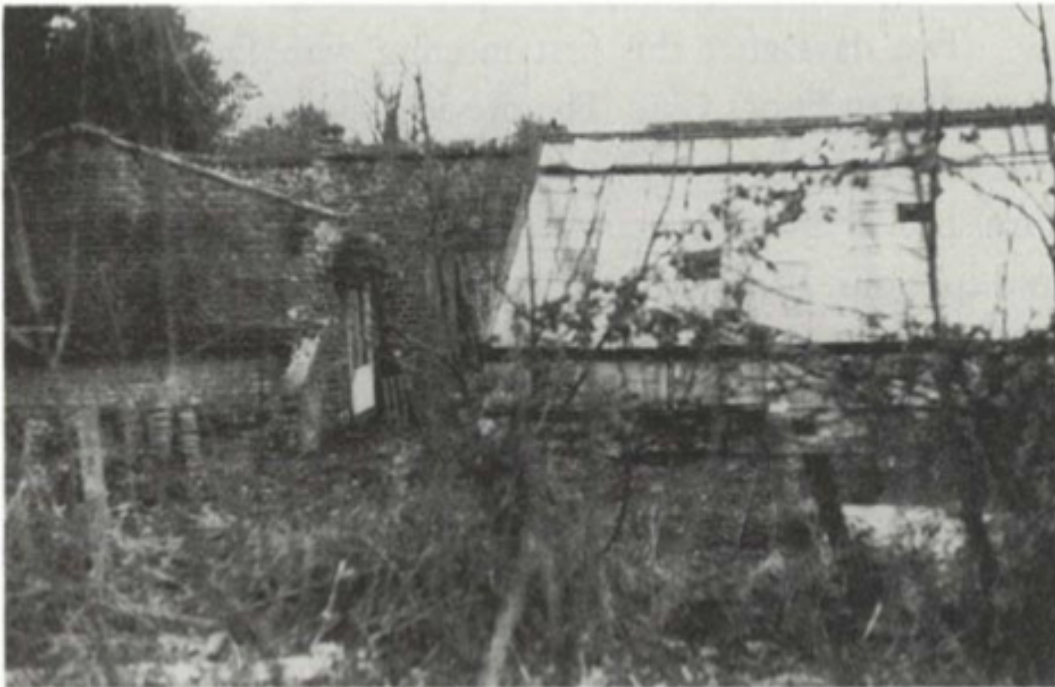
The narrator and Clara (his wife, we presume) shortly thereafter encounter a distracted Dr. Henry Selwyn, the subject of the eponymous first chapter, who, "Though he was tall and broad-shouldered ... seemed quite stocky, even short" (E, 5). In the opening pages, we witness that visual descriptions and interpretations are dubious—that things are not as they may seem. Selwyn apologizes for his absent-mindedness: "I was counting the blades of grass" (E, 5). Sebald uses no quotation marks when the characters speak, and only occasionally uses "he said" or "she said" markers of reference to indicate speech, blurring the voice of the narrator with that of the characters.

¹⁷ Frances L. Restuccia, *Sebald's 'Punctum': Awakening to Holocaust Trauma in 'Austerlitz.'*

Sebald describes and depicts Selwyn's estate in a condition of beautiful disarray. He includes images of a tennis court and an old Victorian greenhouse that have both succumbed to years of neglect—"Nature was groaning and collapsing beneath the burden we placed upon it" (E, 7).



(E, 6)



(E, 7)

The whitewashed brick wall of the tennis court blurs with surrounding sky, separated only by a visual barrier of flattened treetops. The point where the clay of the court meets the grass is nearly indistinguishable. The greenhouse in the next image appears completely enveloped by the surrounding shrubs, which appear proportionally larger than their actual size. Like the whitewashed brick of the tennis court photograph, the reflective glass of the greenhouse blends with the sky, creating an abstract geometrical figure in color contrast to the darkened brick of the house and the ground below. The absence of human presence in these desolate spaces amplifies the effect of the photographs. In the first few images of the text, Sebald has further elaborated the necropolis theme generated by the first photograph of the yew tree in the graveyard.¹⁸ He creates a pattern of spaces overtaken by nature and uninhabited by humans. These prolific places sometimes seem to have taken on creaturely qualities. Selwyn's garden, for example, "despite the neglect, [produced] so much that he had far more than he needed for his own requirements, which admittedly were becoming increasingly modest" (E, 7).

As the chapter continues, the narrator gradually learns of Selwyn's history through a series of visits in which Selwyn recounts his childhood, "which now seems more vividly real to him than the present."¹⁹ The narrator describes the "flint-built hermitage in a remote corner of the garden" in which Selwyn spends most of his time, and includes a photograph of what Selwyn describes as his "folly."

¹⁸ *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lise Patt with Christel Dillbohner (Los Angeles, The Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), p. 169

¹⁹ McCulloh, p. 28



(E, 11)

The photograph's lack of background surrounding the hermitage focuses its lack of functional purpose. Sebald continues the illustrative theme of images devoid of human habitation, yet the anachronistic folly is the space in which Selwyn is said to reside most frequently. The reader expects this narrative line to develop, but Sebald misdirects the course of the text. This moment is an instance in which the photograph does not relate to the trajectory of the text. The narrator instead finds Selwyn in a different place:

But one morning just a week or so after we had moved in, I saw him standing at an open window of one of his rooms on the west side of the house. He had his spectacles on and was wearing a tartan dressing gown and a white neckerchief. He was aiming a gun with two inordinately long barrels up into the blue. When at last he fired the shot, after what seemed to me an eternity, the report fell upon the gardens with a shattering crash (E, 11).

The tranquil disarray of the estate is thunderously interrupted by the crash of the shot. Selwyn explains that he was testing whether or not the gun was still in working order, but the drama of the encounters foreshadows an event much more sinister. He concludes that the gun indeed still works, and that the “recoil alone was enough to kill one” (E, 11).

Before the reader has space to interpret the encounter, Sebald digresses by introducing Selwyn’s good friend Elwin Elliot, who, ironically, is a “well-known botanist and entomologist” (E, 12). Over dinner, Selwyn and Elliot recount their trip to Crete, and show a picture of Selwyn “in knee-length shorts, with a shoulder bag and a butterfly net” (E, 15). The narrator is transfixed by the photograph, which he describes as a near exact resemblance to “a photograph of Nabokov in the mountains of Gstaad” that the narrator had by chance “clipped from a Swiss magazine a few days before” (E, 16). A man stands in a mountainous landscape, brightly lit, the sun shining so intensely on the white fabric that the butterfly net has become luminous.



(E, 16)

Here, we witness the first of many references in *The Emigrants* to Vladimir Nabokov, and have again entered the vertiginous folding of time-place coincidence reminiscent of Sebald's first prose-fiction text. What is more, Sebald unveils a principal theme that McCulloh refers to as "the floating nature of identity"²⁰—that the history and memory of identity are unreliable, and that they are instead formed

²⁰ McCulloh, p. 29

through interconnectedness and fluidity between people and places. In the above figure, Selwyn could be Nabokov and vice-versa. Feiereisen and Pope write:

Within the logic of diegesis, these photos can be seen as serving the conventional role of evidentiary documents, lending authenticity to the fictional narrative and contributing to the reader's immersion in the story. Instead, what we see in the Selwyn story is a well-known photograph of Vladimir Nabokov taken by his son Dmitry during a lepidoptery outing in the Swiss Alps.²¹

The reader must not only question the authenticity of history and memory, but also ponder Sebald's representation of both in the text. The photograph of Nabokov in the mountains with this incandescent net is a metonym of memory itself and its elusive radiance. The photograph provides the reader relief from Selwyn's despair, but the man with the net evokes a hunter of butterflies brought to a place of hope, fleeting perhaps, but not altogether abandoned. In an essay on Sebald and Nabokov, R.J.A. Kilbourn puts the point powerfully: "The butterfly hunter embodies for Sebald the salvific potential of the Nabokovian art of memory, in a bitterly ironic symbolism whose radically negative significance at key points in the narrative underscores the peculiar situation of these characters as not so much subjects *of* memory as subjected *by* memory."²²

The notion of the "floating identity" reaches a thematic climax when Selwyn reveals that he had concealed his Jewish identity, and recounts his personal memory of the Jewish exodus from Germany:

²¹ Florence Feiereisen and Daniel Pope, "True Fictions and Fictional Truths: The Enigmatic in Sebald's Use of Images in *The Emigrants*," in *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lisa Patt (Los Angeles: Institute Critical Inquiry, 2007), p. 167

²² R. J. A. Kilbourn, "Kafka, Nabokov ... Sebald: Intertextuality and Narratives of Redemption in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*," in *W. G. Sebald. History – Trauma – Memory*, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin: Gruyter, 2006), p. 54

When we disembarked we were still in no doubt whatsoever that beneath our feet was the soil of the New World, of the Promised City of New York. But in fact, as we learnt some time later to our dismay (the ship having long since cast off again), we had gone ashore in London. Most of the emigrants, of necessity, adjusted to the situation, but some, in the teeth of all evidence to the contrary, persisted for a long time in the belief that they were in America (E, 19)

Sebald couples the question of representability of the past with the constructedness of memory and the uncertainty of place. The emigrants yearn for a utopia, to be manifest in New York, but their hopes are blocked by their own false belief that they have actually achieved it, the results of which are not so much despair and as a displacement—anatopia. The subconscious need for a sense of belonging, a sense of place, is rejected by the unreliability of memory.

From Selwyn's continued revelations, it becomes clear to both the narrator and the reader that he has undergone intense misfortune as a result of his concealing his identity. In hindsight, the foreshadowing of Selwyn's death was explicit, and his suicide (by the hand of his own gun) predictable. Sebald finalizes the chapter with another coincidental encounter. As the narrator travels through the Alps by train from Zurich to Lausanne, he opens a newspaper and finds an article telling that the remains of Johannes Naegeli, missing since 1914, had been found. The narrator's memory is flooded with thoughts of Selwyn, who shared the story of Naegeli at the dinner table some years before. The narrator writes:

And so they are ever returning to us, the dead. At times they come back from the ice more than seven decades later and are found at the edge of the moraine, a few polished bones and a pair of hobnailed boots (E, 23).

Place, both in a geographic and mental capacity, provides the catalyst for a chance encounter with a memory of the past. Despite the unreliability of memory, the dead

survive history, but return in the present only as restructured, perhaps unrecognizable, remnants.

The first passage of the second chapter describes in detail the method of its subject's suicide:

Paul Bereyter²³, who had been my teacher at primary school, had put an end to his life. A short distance from S, where the railway track curves out of a willow copse into the open fields, he had lain himself down in front of a train. The obituary in the local paper was headed "Grief at the Loss of a Popular Teacher" and there was no mention of the fact that Paul Bereyter had died of his own free will, or through a self-destructive compulsion (E, 27).

The text instantly and disruptively generates a tone of despair, especially considering the erratic beauty of the previous chapter (Selwyn's chapter too began with death, but in a visual form, the symbolic significance of which was revealed explicitly only later). Bereyter's chapter, therefore, is not a journey towards death but rather an exploration of retracing the steps that caused his demise. Throughout the section, Sebald often refers to Bereyter only by his first name, that by which he was known by his students and friends, indicating an erasure of the deeper historical identity of Paul's family name. As Sebald explores the people and places connected to Paul, the narrator meets Lucy Landau, who had arranged Paul's funeral. Landau recalls walking with Paul, conversing about architecture and the desire for Utopia.

...Paul, in a conjecture she felt to be most daring, had linked the bourgeois concept of Utopia and order, as expressed in the designs and buildings of Nicolas Ledoux, with the progressive destruction of natural life (E, 45).

Again, the text reveals the importance of a sense of belonging to a place—a sense to which Paul did not have access. Landau shows the narrator a collection of Paul's

²³ As scholars note, the name "Bereyter" is prevalent throughout Stendhal's *Life of Henry Brulard* (McCulloh, p. 32)

photos, the most striking of which is of a classroom that includes the narrator himself.



(E, 47)

One can see Paul standing idly in the background of the photo, his black suit nearly merged with the large furnace behind him. While each child gazes at the camera, Paul's eyes are fixed to the side, as if he is in deep contemplative thought. His pose is reminiscent of the young Kafka I discussed in the previous chapter, as both men gaze obliquely in melancholic longing for an irrecoverable past. Describing his own looking at the pictures, the narrator writes, "... it truly seemed to me, and still does, as if the dead were coming back, or as if we were on the point of joining them" (E, 46). Again, images bring back remnants of the dead through memory, though the

narrator and reader alike are unable to recover the differences of and meanings behind the “scarcely distinguishable” faces of the photographed.

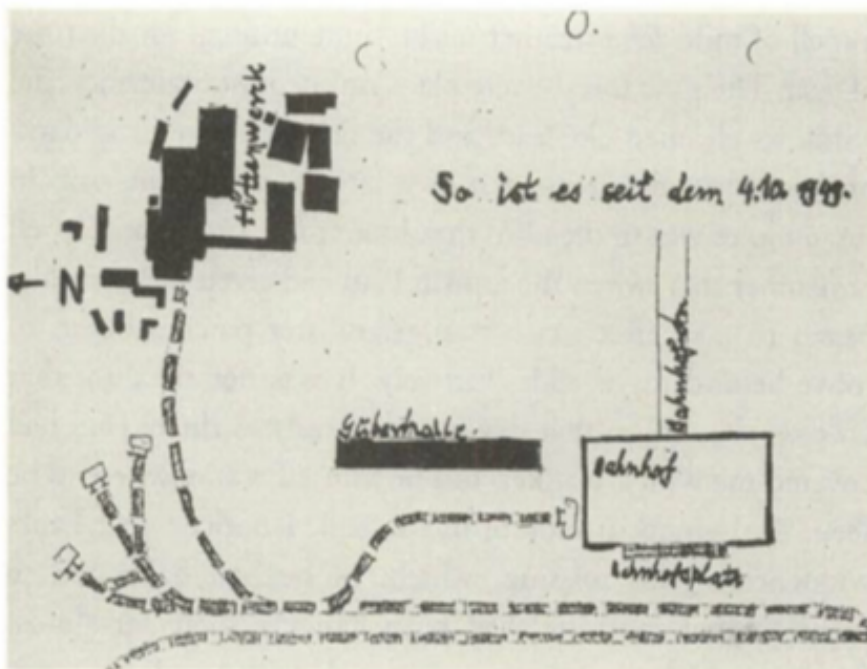
The narrator’s continued conversation with Landau succinctly unveils both the mental collapse of Paul, and the Nazi policies that directly accelerated his personal undoing. The story, “Paul Bereyter,” is a documentative endeavor to retrace the inaccessible past of a Jewish life. In its totality, the chapter is a microcosmic representation of Jewish identity as a whole. In the final passages of the chapter, Sebald reveals the significance of Paul’s death:

It was only the manner in which he died, a death so inconceivable to me, that robbed me of my self-control at first; yet, as I soon realized it was for Paul a perfectly logical step. Railways had always meant a great deal to him — perhaps he felt they were headed for death. Timetables and directories, all the logistics of railways, had at times become an obsession with him, as his flat in S showed. I can still see the Märklin model railway he had laid out on a deal table in the spare north-facing room: to me it is the very image and symbol of Paul’s German tragedy (E, 61).



(E, 27)

The second chapter had begun with an eye-level photograph of railway tracks curving into the horizon, the photograph itself seeming to mimic Paul's visual search into the oblique distance, "out of a willow copse into the open fields," looking for a place of psychic anchorage. The reader-viewer was (unwittingly at the time) placed by the photograph at the site of Paul's demise, the viewer's head laid down on the rail to await the terrible approach. Railways are always highly symbolic in Sebald's texts, but particularly for Paul, as they quite explicitly signify the place of death. The narrator recollects that Paul insisted that his students learn about railways. As if to illustrate, Sebald includes an image of a child's drawing of a railway station.



(E, 62)

Despite the text's assertion that a child drew the diagram, the drawing appears rather detailed, abstract, and advanced: an architectural plan view of a railway yard

complete with an elaborate ironworks, train car storage and shunts, a terminal building with an articulated symmetrical entrance, an adjacent large hall, even a geographic direction indicator. “So it is since 4 October 1949,” a caption says. The conceptual inconsistency between textual description and image jolts the reader out of the story and out of place. Sebald’s insertion of such documents of uncertain authenticity destabilizes what might otherwise be conceived as biographies of the emigrants and a historical account of their displacement. Despite the image’s questionable authenticity as a child’s railway diagram, it is nonetheless a striking metaphor of death at two different scales. First, the inscription of the date, 1949, which is to say, post-war, reminds the viewer of what is missing from the drawing: the war-time rail transport of Jews to the death camps. Second, recounting Paul’s frequent use of the expression *end up on the railways*, the narrator writes:

The disquiet I experienced because of that momentary failure to see what was meant — I now sometimes feel that at that moment I beheld an image of death — lasted only a very short time, and passed over me like the shadow of a bird in flight (E, 63).

Death at both scales has survived memory, but again returns only in an altered and incomprehensible form. Memory passes in and out of mind in a temporary and anatomic lapse of place. What remains is but a shadow diagram of what once was.

In the third chapter, the narrator recalls the demise of his own uncle, Ambros Adelwarth. Compared to the previous chapter, Sebald includes a more distinctive variety of photographs in “Ambros Adelwarth,” indicating the narrator’s deepened involvement and storied connection with his subject. There are a number of old photographs of Adelwarth with his family members:



(E, 71)

The narrator refers to his uncle by his last name, in contrast to his use of “Paul” in the second chapter. Paramount to Adelworth’s persona is the question of his homosexuality, though the narrator references it mostly indirectly. During his time with the Solomon family in New York, Adelwarth develops a deep relationship with Cosmo, the younger son, and accompanies Cosmo during his travels. It remains somewhat ambiguous throughout the story whether Adelwarth and Cosmo’s relationship was romantic, as Sebald utilizes the uncertainty of their relationship to inhibit the reader’s understanding of what would be an otherwise straightforward theme. Cosmo becomes mentally ill and dies tragically, causing Adelwarth to subsequently spiral into a severe and prolonged depression.

Consistent with the motive of *The Emigrants*, the chapter “Ambros Adelwarth” confronts mental and physical exile from home, from family, though

with greater severity and gloom. The narrator converses with Uncle Kasimir regarding the latter's story of exile:

This is the edge of darkness, [Kasimir] said. And in truth it seemed as if the mainland were submerged behind us and as if there were nothing about the watery waste but this narrow strip of sand running up to the north and down towards the south. I often come here, said Uncle Kasimir, it makes me feel that I am a long way away, though I never quite know from where (E, 88-89).

The textual description of the space of depression is focused in a photograph of a place. Following the text is an image of Kasimir standing on the beach. The white crests of the waves contrast Kasimir's black outfit as he borders the "edge of darkness" posing for the photograph.



(E, 89)

Though the phrase depicts the direness of exile, "the edge of darkness" doubles in meaning, as it serves as a metaphor for 1913, the year in which Adelwarth and

Cosmo traveled most strenuously. Adding yet another layer of significance,

McCulloh notes that

[1913] appears also in Sebald's chapter on Kafka's visit to Italy in the novel *Vertigo*, and serves as an implicit watershed. It represents the last period ... before [European nations] unleashed an apocalypse of modern technological warfare...²⁴

In this hinge point of place and time, Sebald presents the profound interconnectedness not only between the chapters of *The Emigrants*, but between both of the prose fiction texts he had written at this point.

Throughout the course of "Ambros Adelwarth," specific places of the setting function as characters in the narrative. The narrator describes in vivid detail the Sarmia Sanatorium, the place of Adelwarth's death. Interestingly, Sebald includes no photograph to compliment the description:

A long drive swept through a park that must have covered almost a hundred acres and led up to a villa built entirely of wood. With its covered verandahs and balconies it resembled a Russian dacha, or one of those immense pinewood lodges stuffed with trophies that Austrian archdukes and princes built all over their hunting grounds in Styria and the Tyrol in the late nineteenth century ... So clear were the signs of decay, so singularly did the window panes flash in the sunlight, that I did not dare go any closer, and instead began by looking around the park, where conifers of almost every kind — Lebanese cedars, mountain hemlocks, Douglas firs, larches, Arolla and Monterey pines, and feathery swamp cypresses — had all grown to their full size (E, 108-109).

That Sebald includes no photograph indicates that the atmosphere of the sanatorium is nearly incomprehensible even though markers of place abound in the textual image. Throughout *The Emigrants*, Sebald writes vivid descriptions of nature as if to foreshadow its eventual and inevitable destruction. What is more, nature's destruction parallels the narrator's subjects' growing mental incapacity. In another

²⁴ McCulloh, pp. 38-39

passage saturated with imagery, Sebald describes the multitudes of mice that have seemingly taken over the sanatorium:

[The mice] took over the madhouse when it was closed and have been multiplying without cease ever since; at all events, on nights when there is no wind blowing I can hear a constant scurrying and rustling in the dried-out shell of the building, and at times, when a full moon rises beyond the trees, I imagine I can hear the pathetic song of a thousand tiny upraised throats. Nowadays I place all of my hope in the mice, and in the woodworm and deathwatch beetles. The sanatorium is creaking, and in places already caving in, and sooner or later they will bring about its collapse (E, 112).

The sanatorium's mice destroy the documents that detailed the violent therapies through which the patients suffered. Place is again destroyed by its inhabitants. The emigrants journey in search of redemption, but in their displacement, every place, natural and constructed, crumbles into a "pile of powder, pollen-like wood dust."

Sebald's fourth chapter, "Max Ferber," represents his most blatantly personal narrative in *The Emigrants*. It begins with Sebald's own recounting of his emigration to England:

Until my twenty-second year I had never been further away from home than a five- or six-hour train journey, and it was because of this that in the autumn of 1966, when I decided, for various reasons, to move to England, I had a barely adequate notion of what the country was like or how, thrown back entirely on my own resources, I would fare abroad (E, 149)

The pseudo-autobiographical account blends with Ferber's fictional narrative. In the original German, Ferber's last name is instead Aurach, named after Frank Auerbach, the English Jewish painter. That Sebald changes the character to Ferber in the English version signifies a play on words—"Färber in German is a dyer or literally 'one who colors.' The use of the word hints at Sebald's authorial role as one who 'colors' actual reminiscences with fictional hues, altering and expanding on reality,

rendering facts fictive.”²⁵ Throughout “Max Ferber,” the first person pronoun shifts between the narrator and Ferber, again obscuring the clarity of the narrative voice. Consistent with the previous chapters, Sebald uses no quotation marks to indicate dialogue. Ferber often references his deep connection with Manchester, having traveled abroad only once since his arrival in England. During this travel he went to see the Isenheim Altar in France, allured by Matthias Grünewald’s paintings, which are not depicted in the text. Ferber, a visual artist, documents his reaction to the paintings:

The extreme vision of that strange man, which was lodged in every detail, distorted every limb, and infected the colours like an illness, was one I had always felt in tune with, and now I found my feeling confirmed by the direct encounter. The monstrosity of that suffering, which, emanating from the figures depicted, spread to cover the whole of Nature, only to flood back from the lifeless landscape to the humans marked by death, rose and ebbed within me like a tide. (E, 170).

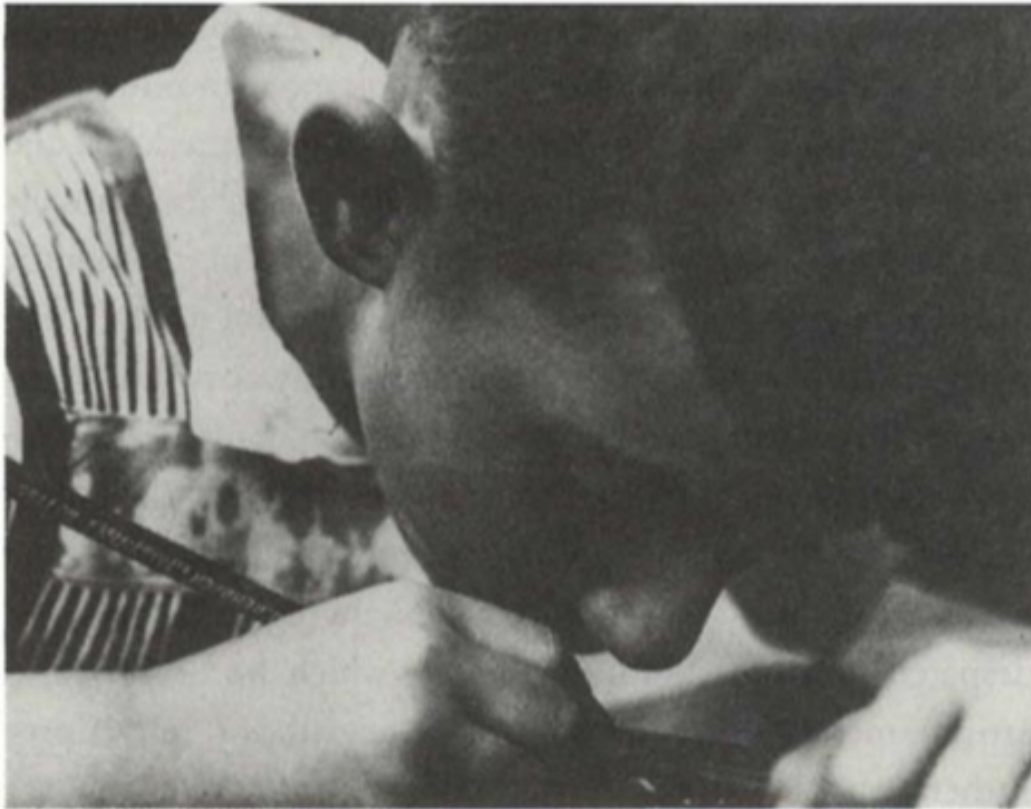
Grünewald’s illustration of suffering protrudes into nature itself, which, for Ferber, exposes an understanding of the human condition:

Looking at those gashed bodies, and at the witness of the execution doubled up by grief like snapped reeds, I gradually understood that, beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced — consciousness — and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about this. What is certain, though, is that mental suffering is effectively without end. One may think one has reached the very limit, but there are always more torments to come. One plunges from one abyss into the next (E, 170).

At a certain point, pain erases everything, even pain itself. Ferber relates the painting to the memory of his own damaged vertebrae, his own body mimicking the mental image of “snapped reeds.” In hindsight, Ferber realizes the irony that his damaged body also symbolized his mental depression, reflecting his “inner

²⁵ McCulloh, p. 42

constitution.” Pain causes one to travel between points of placelessness. Sebald interjects the text with a picture of a young boy (whom we assume is an adolescent Ferber) “bent over his writing,” and “utterly crippled by [the] pain” of his slipped disc.



(E, 171)

The angular details of the photograph create an abstract geometric figure out of the child's body. Though the rest of his body is not seen, the reader may picture his distorted and slender frame. The boy's face, however, appears calm, focused, and absorbed, unphased by the immobilizing pain. The photograph's darkness obscures the “tears [running] down [his] face,” nullifying the rest of the photograph's descriptive allegiance to the text. Is the child indeed Ferber, or a mental projection of his archived pain?

After a “lengthy pause” in his story, Ferber changes subject to his trip to Lake Geneva, a setting that appears in all of Sebald’s work. Like many of the characters before him, Ferber unravels into a lethargic, almost immobile state. The textual descriptions of Ferber’s condition pass quickly, embedded in between depictions of beautiful landscape. Confining himself to the Palace at Montreaux, he determines that only the “reality outside” could awake him from his state. He sets off to climb the Grammont, “The day was as bright as it had been the first time” (E, 173), Ferber exclaimed, recounting his first hike of mountain with his father in 1936. In a moment of near transfixation, Ferber encounters a man with a butterfly net:

That world [of deep blue water], at once near and unattainably far, said Ferber, exerted so powerful an attraction on him that he was afraid he might leap down into it, and might really have done so had not a man of about sixty suddenly appeared before him — like someone who’s popped out of the bloody ground. He was carrying a large white gauze butterfly net and said, in an English voice that was refined but quite unplaceable, that it was time to be thinking of going down if one were to be in Montreaux for dinner (E, 174).

As Ferber intensely attunes himself to his surroundings, Nabokov, the man with a butterfly net, ruptures the sequence, instead causing Ferber to again spiral into a realm of placelessness. Ferber and the man with the butterfly net travel down the mountain, yet Ferber has no memory of the descent:

Why exactly this lagoon of oblivion had spread in him, and how far it extended, had remained a mystery to him however hard he thought about it. If he tried to think back to the time in question, he could not see himself again till he was back in the studio, working at a painting which took him almost a full year, with minor interruptions — the faceless portrait “Man with a Butterfly Net” (E, 174).

The reappearance of the man with the butterfly net is a striking image. In terms of diegesis, the effect of the appearance is again to feign a moment of salvation and then to remove it altogether from possibility. Unable to come to terms with the

man with the butterfly net's appearance, or even the reality of the encounter, Ferber describes the portrait as one of his "least satisfactory" works. The narrator reveals that Ferber's painting became laborious, even torturous, forcing him to work through sleepless nights and to scratch off and reapply layers of paint. At times, Ferber burned or destroyed the portrait altogether.

As Ferber's story unfolds, it becomes clear that a central source of his trauma is his family's isolation from the outside world. The distinction between appearance and reality becomes increasingly obscured. Such a division is one of the lessons Ferber's Uncle Leo teaches him at a young age, exclaiming that a photograph of a Nazi book burning is a forgery.



(E, 184)

In fact, the photograph is clearly from another event; the smoke added later on. What is more, the color of the sky is altered, given that a camera from 1933 (the

year in which the photograph appeared in a newspaper) would be unable to document a dark night with such detail. Following the photograph, Ferber describes his experience in the great hall of the palace in the very same square of Würzburg.

...I stood beside Uncle, craing up at Tiepolo's glorious ceiling fresco above the stairwell, which at that time meant nothing to me; beneath the loftiest of skies, the creatures and people of the four realms of the world are assembled on it in fantastic array (E, 184-185).

The Tiepelo fresco diametrically opposes the integrity of the false book burning photograph. The "ironic subtext," however, as McCulloh asserts, "suggests that the ceiling fresco itself is a deceptive medium; in order to achieve the illusion of verticality and infinity as perceived at a distance from below..."²⁶ In other words, both the ceiling fresco and false photograph intentionally deceive the viewer. In the case of the fresco, such a deception derives from the symbolization of divine belonging—a sense of ultimate *placeness*. The photograph, on the other hand, crudely falsifies a documented history that pervades Ferber's memory and blocks his comprehension of truth. The event of the book burning indeed took place on May 10, 1933, and its significance is intertwined with Ferber's identity, yet his cognitive reflection of such an occurrence is but an imitative photograph attempting to pass as truth.

As Ferber recounts the last months he spent with his parents, the strength of these cognitive blockages is further revealed. He describes his father's return from six weeks at Dachau, and includes a picture of his father "distinctly thinner and with his hair cropped short."

²⁶ McCulloh, p. 46



(E, 186)

The photograph shows Ferber's smiling father on a skiing vacation. The mountains in the background evoke a sense of tranquility, directly contradicting the intense despair of Sebald's prose. Ferber indirectly unveils his parents' efforts to arrange his escape, culminating in a scene at the Oberwiesefeld airport where his parents bid him farewell:

He no longer knew what was the last thing his mother or father had said to him was, or he to them, or whether he and his parents had embraced or not. He could still see his parents sitting in the back of the hired car on the drive out to Oberwiesefeld, but he could not see them at the airport itself. And yet he could picture Oberwiesefeld down to the last detail, and all these years

had been able to envisualize it with that fearful precision, time and time again (E, 187).

He continues to describe the airport in vivid visual detail, indicating the intense power of sight for Ferber in not just his art, but his memory as well. From this point onward, Ferber is confined to both a geographic and psychic exile. He stopped speaking German the moment he arrived in England, and was severed from the language completely when letters from his parents stopped arriving—all but an official confirmation of their inevitable deaths:

Only gradually did it dawn on me that I would never again be able to write home; in fact, to tell the truth, I do not know if I have really grasped it to this day. But it now seems to me that the course of my life, down to the tiniest detail, was ordained not only by the deportation of my parents but also by the delay with which the news of their death reached me, news I could not believe at first and the meaning of which only sank in by degrees (E, 191).

While his repression maintained a sense of equability,

... the fact is that tragedy in my youth struck such deep roots within me that it later shot up again, put forth evil flowers, and spread the poisonous canopy over me which has kept me so much in the shade and dark in recent years (E, 191).

Here, Sebald signifies a phenomenon unique to Ferber and his situation, but one that is symbolically representative of each of the emigrants. A consequence of the interconnectedness that holds Sebald's narratives and characters together is that such intertwinement provides the channels through which the flowers of evil may spawn in the most damnable moments of history.

Sebald writes the remainder of the narrative through a series of letters to Ferber from his mother, Luisa Lanzberg. It is unclear to the reader to whom the authorship belongs, though the narrator frequently inserts phrases such as "Louisa writes," suggesting the authorship is primarily hers. Her memoir is a haunting will

written in anticipation of her forthcoming death. Louisa recounts Ferber's proposal, and the image of Nabokov again returns:

I did not know what to reply, but I nodded, and, though everything else around me blurred, I saw that long-forgotten Russian boy as clearly as anything, leaping about the meadows with his butterfly net; I saw him as a messenger of joy, returning from that distant summer day to open his specimen box and release the most beautiful red admirals, peacock butterflies, brimstones, and tortoiseshells to signal my final liberation (E, 214).

The passage unveils yet a deeper understanding of Sebald's Nabokov figure. The butterfly boy represents the cheerful and innocent search for beautiful objects in nature. Nabokov, for Sebald, embodies the positive counterpart to nature destruction in all other instances. The Nabokov avatar appears four times in *The Emigrants* in reverse chronology, from the older Nabokov of the photograph to a butterfly boy who appears to Lanzberg. The reverse chronology is structurally related to the "floating identity" mentioned earlier, insofar as the butterfly hunter brings optimism in inverse relation to the progressive mnemonic burdens born by Sebald's characters.

The butterfly boy, if for but a fleeting moment, is the amalgamation of belonging where all other senses are lost. Lanzberg includes numerous images of beautiful and peaceful nature, even in the context of graveyard sights. The following images are placed symmetrically next to one another across two pages:



(E, 222)



(E, 223)

Such symmetry, as well as the graceful equality within the photographs of manmade structures and nature, suggests a delicate balance between man and nature and life and death in Lanzberg's world. The tone of her memoir, however, suggests that no remnants of her world remain. The Jewish names are overtaken by nature, ignored by the cemetery's visitors. "All in all, the visit [to the cemetery] has the

unsatisfactory feeling of a homecoming to a permanently altered place,” McCulloh argues, “a place that has been drained of its meaning.”²⁷

The memoir subtly ends, and the unnamed narrator again assumes the role of a traveler. He visits the Midland Hotel in Manchester—a peculiar building that only Ferber would appreciate.



(E, 233)

The building is antiquated—the plumbing is rusting, and the windows are covered with thick layers of dust. Sections of the hotel are closed off to the public. In a seemingly permanent state of decay, the hotel nonetheless evokes a distinctive disposition. Indeed, the place is another setting in the novel that takes on the role of a character. Sebald traces the decline of the hotel from its early origins, and loathes the fact that its only future will come in the form of a refurbished Holiday Inn.

²⁷ McCulloh, p. 51

When I entered my room on the fifth floor I suddenly felt as if I were in a hotel somewhere in Poland. The old fashioned interior put me curiously in mind of a faded wine-red velvet lining, the inside of a jewellery box or violin case. I kept my coat on and sat down on one of the plush armchairs in the corner bay window, watching darkness fall outside (E, 233-234)

The seemingly arbitrary and insignificant connection with Poland finds greater meaning later in Sebald's description:

...I saw, one by one, pictures from an exhibition that I had seen in Frankfurt the year before. They were colour photographs, tinted with a greenish-blue or reddish-brown, of the Litzmannstadt ghetto that was established in 1940 in the Polish industrial center of Lodz, once known as *polski Manchester* (E, 235-236)

In these pictures, which are not shown in the text, those being photographed appear happy, unsuspecting of their fate.

Behind the perpendicular frame of a loom sit three young women, perhaps aged twenty. The irregular geometrical patterns of the carpet they are knotting, and even its colours, remind me of the settee in our living room at home. Who the young women are I do not know. The light falls on them from the window in the background, so I cannot make out their eyes clearly, but I sense that all three of them are looking across at me, since I am standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera. The young woman in the middle is blonde and has the air of a bride about her. The weaver to her left has inclined her head a little to one side, whilst the woman on the right is looking at me with so steady and relentless a gaze that I cannot meet it for long. I wonder what the three women's names were — Roza, Luisa and Lea, or Nona, Decuma and Morta, the daughters of night, with spindle, scissors, and thread (E, 237).

Sebald closes Ferber's story with a detailed description of a photograph (again not shown) of three women seated at a loom. Luisa, of course, is a reference to Ferber's mother. The latter three guesses for the names, especially coupled with "spindle, scissors, and thread," allude to the Three Fates of Roman mythology. The names also

“correspond to the Latin words for ninth, tenth, and death.”²⁸ In her research, Carol Jacobs finds what is presumed to be the missing photograph.²⁹



The match of text to image seems perfect. Indeed, Sebald’s is almost a literal description of the of the photograph. With the missing picture at hand, the hauntingness of their gaze becomes more apparent, as does the notion that it was taken by a Nazi photographer. The narrator is fixed in place by the gaze of these women—the gaze of memory and history—yet the narrator chooses not to give the photograph to the reader. Sebald has screened himself, managed the gaze, dampened its horror, by misplacing the photograph; but the trace of the womens’

²⁸ McCulloh, p. 53

²⁹ Carol Jacobs, *Sebald’s Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Jacobs publishes the photograph from the Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt am Main, on page 37.

gaze, the gaze of history itself, fixes him in place. It is as if he cannot manage to truly look at their photograph, as if doing so would be the equivalent of gazing into the eyes of Medusa. What likely happened to the women is unthinkable—to show their photograph would be a negation of truth, as the viewer could not possibly understand the picture's true significance. In this ending passage, Sebald attempts most passionately to represent that which is inaccessible, to present the unthinkable. Nonetheless, there is a triumphant aura to the moment. Despite their death, the women have been “brought back from the brink of oblivion.”³⁰ In Jacobs's words, “The interwovenness of all four, better still, their cross-pollination, the way in which anything can rupture into anything else, challenges a politics based on identity and bursts the gazes (of author, narrator, reader) that have been held fast: a liberation of sorts that shatters the frame and keeps alive the resistance—the resistance to thinking in terms of bio-logical definition, believing it might yet mean something to count as a Jew.”³¹

³⁰ McCulloh, p. 53

³¹ Jacobs, p. 38

WRITING

Sebald's first two prose fiction texts—likely written together as story fragments which he then assembled as separate works during the same timeframe—both develop intertexts structured by narratives borrowed from Sebald's most cherished authors—Kafka and “The Hunter Gracchus” diagram in *Vertigo*, Nabokov and the “butterfly hunter” in *The Emigrants*. By intertext in this context, I understand a kind of character diagram, an unseen and unsaid but generative diegetic matrix that ultimately organizes all the salient character actions. In *Austerlitz*, Sebald's final prose-fiction text before his early death, the narrative structure is not to be found in a separate diegetic register, but is built solely upon the text's eponymous protagonist. It is noteworthy that many scholars classify *Austerlitz* not as prose fiction but rather as a novel, despite the fact that *Austerlitz* frequently uses a vertiginous writing style similar to the previous prose fiction texts.³² Perhaps the novel-ness of *Austerlitz* can be attributed to the more comprehensive and refined ways it displays such familiar Sebaldian themes of mnemonic inscription and erasure, a journey of recollection across places folded together and times collapsed. As I have mentioned previously, I analyze Sebald's last text in conjunction with his firsts not for the sake of skipping the intricacies of those in between, but rather to most explicitly confront the ways in which what were distinct narrators in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* now, in *Austerlitz*, coalesce into

³² Considering Sebald's entire collection of texts, there is perhaps no better example of such dizzying writing than in *Austerlitz*, where one sentence describing the setting of Theresienstadt continues for eleven pages (A, 236-247).

one. The technique of collapsing and enfolding of writers—Stendhal, Kafka, Nabokov, among many others—finds its final embodiment in the protagonist of *Austerlitz*, an architecture historian whose search for remnants of his past we follow through the descriptions of the unnamed journalist narrator. The mirrors and folds of the text trace and redouble the fundamental transactions of writer and reader.

Like *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, *Austerlitz* is an Orphic text — of movement toward destiny without closure — and the role of architecture in the novel, coupled with the themes of travel, time, and place, as in the early texts, explicitly capture the theme of descent, as *Austerlitz* and the narrator quite frequently find themselves lost or metaphorically trapped within dark dungeons and archives. In *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, photographs seem to be inserted by the narrator, while the characters themselves are unaware. In *Austerlitz*, however, photography and archives are part of the profiles of both narrator and protagonist. In other words, the unnamed narrator inserts photographs with an explicit journalistic intent of documentation. The photographs are unambiguously his own, and are meant to be seen by the reader and *Austerlitz* alike. The narration of *Austerlitz* is a complex interplay between author and protagonist, who merge into a singular, unified author-function whose quest is the insatiable necessity, through iterative and spiraling movement, of constructing an image of a past that forever draws away.

Austerlitz's profession and journey are direct consequence of his childhood exile. Raised in Wales under the name Dafydd Elias, *Austerlitz* slowly reveals the archeology of his birth and adolescence in what was then Czechoslovakia. He was evacuated to England via the *Kindertransport* shortly before the beginning of the

war. His escape saved his life, but permanently exiled him from his past. Austerlitz and the narrator tell the story of his quest. The text amalgamates the voices of Austerlitz and narrator to the point that they become nearly indistinguishable. Structurally, the narrator is a past listener who presently retells the story he has heard from Austerlitz. This reflective narrative task has been assigned to him by Austerlitz himself, from whom self-narration has become impossible due to cumulative psychic damage and eventually by death. This mirrored, mimetic storytelling is scrupulously indexed in time and place, but in a non-linear and slightly rhetorical way to the paradoxical point that the episodes become anachronic and anatomic. The narrator's reports are as unverifiable as Austerlitz's own memories are unavailable. As Deane Blackler writes, "Austerlitz, or rather his consciousness, exists outside time in the narrator's memory, just as the reading (and listening) strike the reader as atemporal, occurring in the illusion of stasis that the narration, the reported speech, the [place] itself creates."³³ The only fixity of memory, Austerlitz's or the narrator's, is in the text itself and the reader's reading performance—the dialogical transaction between writing and reading. We are asked to make the memories our own, to see what the narrator-Austerlitz sees, hear what the narrator-Austerlitz has heard. But memory flees when the reading performance stops.

The first conversation between the narrator and Austerlitz is in the Centraal Station I Antwerp. The first scene of the novel, however, takes place before the narrator meets Austerlitz. In this sequence, the narrator vividly describes his visit to

³³ Blackler, p. 106

the Antwerp Nocturama—a place where creatures are thrown together, grabbed from their homes and put in an unnatural place. The narrator’s obsession with the Nocturama is encapsulated by an image of the gazing stares of a loris and an owl.



(A, 4)

The photograph is paralleled by an image of two pairs of human eyes. Both images are separated in the novel by only two lines of text.



(A, 4)

The narrator takes in natural history, not just as symbolism, but as the ineluctable fact of being's belonging to an intertwined history of loss and exile. Like Austerlitz, the animals of the Nocturama see something is wrong but without the ability to represent it themselves.

All I remember of the denizens of the Nocturama is that several of them had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us by means of looking and thinking (A, 4-5).

The photographs of animals' eyes are cropped to focus on and illustrate the text; the text provides the diegetic code to situate the photographic referent in the larger narrative, which opens onto Austerlitz's own desire "to penetrate the darkness ... by means of looking and thinking." John Sears argues that this text-image interaction "establishes a set of connections between the act of looking [and] the act of interpreting ... The text relentlessly pursues its visual logic of the failure of words and images to illuminate their objects, and ultimately concerns itself with the disappearance of precisely those things that words and images ostensibly recuperate."³⁴ The textuality of the image traces the same structure of the dialogical transaction of writing and reading noted before. The very introductory episode of the novel conveys the failure of words—an ironic and tragic frame for a written quest for memory and identity. The Nocturama is an artificial world that is not meant to be, foreshadowing that the events in Austerlitz's world should never have happened. Before Austerlitz is ever even introduced, the thematic structure suggests that Austerlitz is destined to fail. The narrator later recounts,

³⁴ John Sears, "Photography, Images, and the Space of Literature in Sebald's Prose," *Searching for Sebald* p. 219

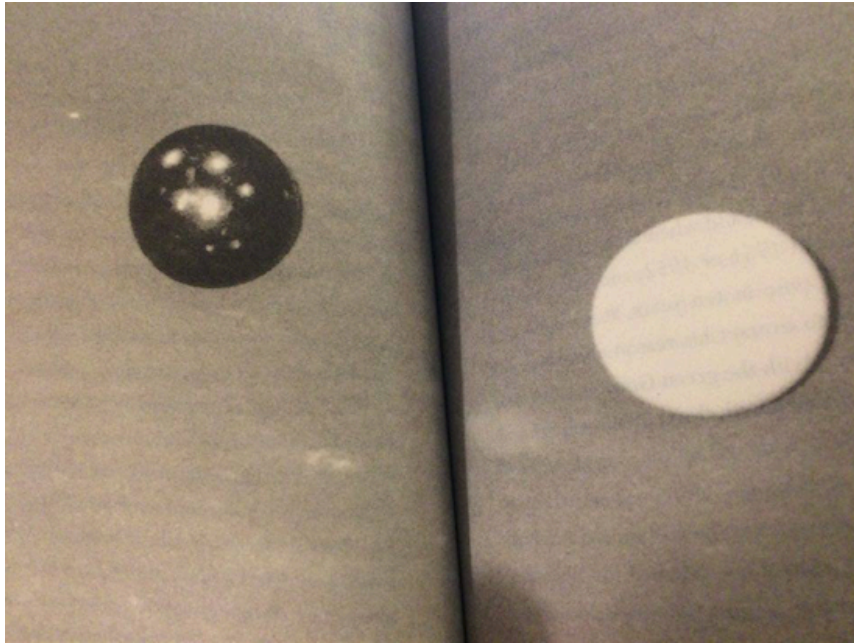
Even now, when I try to remember... the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described, never passed on (A, 30-31).

Austerlitz's persona is one of discomfort, unbelonging, and unfulfilled ambition. A struggling writer, he takes on an unachievable book project, the process of which is a manifestation of Austerlitz's frustration in retracing his untraceable identity. The narrator notices a sign of this dejected persona when he and Austerlitz take the same ferry together to England. Well versed in French, the language the two use to communicate, Austerlitz experiences a strange discomfort when he switches to English.

When we switched to English, in which I was better versed, I was strangely touched to notice in him an insecurity which had been entirely concealed from me before, expressing itself in a slight speech impediment and occasional fits of stammering, during which he clutched the worn spectacle case he always held in his left hand so tightly that you could see the white of his knuckles beneath the skin (A, 31-32).

Austerlitz's lives a life of perpetual unfulfillment, making his identity impossible to pinpoint despite his attempts to find lost history. One of Austerlitz's most profound memories of his upbringing in Wales is the shut doors and closed windows of the large house. Such blockages symbolize the inaccessibility of memory and further emphasize the theme of concealed passages. Several images spread far apart throughout the novel connect to one another in the sense that they generate a sensation of isolation, though through completely different means. The narrator describes the "self-contained universe" generated by the visual unusualness of two

billiard balls. The billiard room was sealed off in 1951, itself a marker of paralyzed time.



(A, 106-107)

The balls are displayed in such an obscure form that one can barely tell what they are—a moon and a planet in eclipse? Orbs of nocturnal eyes? The gaze of philosophers? The actual denotation—grainy black and white orbs separated by a fold of the book itself—is so abstract that the image becomes meaningless. The image generates blockage of memory not as entrapment but rather a spatial and temporal void. What remains is the utter facticity of seeing itself. The isolation of the image is unbearably austere, as there is no information to hold on to, and one feels the sensation of detachment with no means of locating oneself. In this and other images in the book, the sheer materiality of seeing seems to join a similar materiality of writing.

In a return to Terezín, Austerlitz makes an effort to retrace steps in a peripatetic research of the streets of the old ghetto. In a series of photographs

across several pages, the narrator depicts closed doors, subtly reminiscent of the closed doors in Austerlitz's childhood home in Wales. Nonetheless, the doors of Terezín take on an autonomy much more significant than their mere referential use.



(A, 190)



(A, 191)



(A, 192)



(A, 193)

As Austerlitz constructs an archive in his mind to give himself an identity, the photographs refuse any information outside their denotative referent—the doors

simply are what they are. Connotation is useless, as the photographs are cropped so tightly (the last three fill the height of the text column and are all cropped to the same narrow width) that the viewer cannot see any connotation that slips through—the inevitable portent of the death camps, for example—remains clichéd and inadequate. The images become bleak and claustrophobic, inducing a sense of putting oneself inside the room. The irony of such photographs is that Austerlitz's own construction of self lies in the fact that he needs the photographs and archival information the same as he needs writing; to give himself a history and identity, even if momentary. However, the photographs will not yield that information. They are closed to him, and are inescapably exterior. In John Sears's words:

In the doorways and shop windows of Terezín, Austerlitz perceives the true weight of the absence towards which his narrative strives, which he comprehends as 'a darkness ... in which there was no movement at all.' Each doorway contributes to the construction of simultaneous potential revelation and concealment, of movement (egress or ingress) and of stasis (the doors are shut, the windows blank, the walls imposing), and to the simultaneous presence of the modern and indefinitely old.³⁵

Both the image of the billiard balls and the doorway sequence induce a temporal and cosmic stasis. It is as if the entirety of the universe is both contained within and restricted by these photographs.

At this point in the two narrators' journey, Austerlitz is losing touch with his writing and his command of language. These haunting dungeons that withhold fragments of the past depict sentiments that Austerlitz is unable to describe with words. Preceding the doorway sequence is an image of a little blonde boy dressed as

³⁵ Sears, pp. 219-222

a cavalier in a white satin costume. It is noteworthy that the photograph, rendered in melancholy sepia, is also the cover image for the entire novel.



(A, 183)

The narrator, in a state of intense curiosity, feels the

... piercing, inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues, who was waiting in the gray light of dawn on the empty field for me to accept the challenge and avert the misfortune lying ahead of him (A, 184).

Despite the gaze of touching innocence on the boy's face, Sebald does not sentimentalize Austerlitz's reaction to the photograph. The image, though elegant, nearly satirizes the naivety of such common childhood photographs; but now it demands its dues. Austerlitz's discomfort derives from this very commonality; though he is a victim, his oppressors likely at one point posed for the same type of

photograph. The photograph is the one pure confirmation of Austerlitz's identity, but the child could be *anyone*. Austerlitz continues, attesting to the anachronic and anatomic effects produced by the mnemonic quest:

It does not seem to me ... that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of some higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like, and the longer I think about it the more it seems to me that we who are still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead, that only occasionally, in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, do we appear in their field of vision.

Austerlitz inverts the recurring theme of the living dead. It is not the dead who occasionally become visible to us, but only under certain "atmospheric conditions" do we appear to them. Roland Barthes's essential claim for photographic ontology, that "I can never deny that the thing has been there... a superimposition of reality and of the past... [that] the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography... will therefore be: 'That-has-been',"³⁶ is defeated, for it is in no way certain that Austerlitz has been there. Still fixed by the photographic gaze of his younger self, Austerlitz affirms his long realized sentiment that at least a part of him, if not all, was never alive.

As the narration continues over the course of the novel, the reader witnesses Austerlitz's academic and existential unraveling. He loses his ability to write and destroys his notes, perhaps in realization of writing's inadequacy to express with the same power as images, perhaps in recognition of the futility of both. He trusts photographs more than words for the inscription of place and time, for

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 76-77

photographs' mnemonics are emergent rather than residual, and any memories produced must be constantly renegotiated.

I could stay [in a house on Alderny Street in London] whenever I liked, he said, and study the black and white photographs which, one day, would be all that was left of his life (A, 293).

Perhaps the grandest irony of *Austerlitz* is that his failure to write allows for Sebald's masterpiece. The refined narrative unity of *Austerlitz* (in contrast to the heterogeneity of the earlier texts), in its very failure, represents the difficult necessity of writing; it attests to a project that for existential reasons must be undertaken—to *write ourselves into being*—but ultimately is brought to failure by a dynamic integral to the project itself.

One evening, said Austerlitz, I gathered up all my papers, bundled or loose, my notepads and exercise books, my files and lecture notes, anything with my writing on it, and carried the entire collection out of the house to the far end of the garden, where I threw it on the compost heap and buried it under layers of rotten leaves and spadefuls of earth (A, 123-125).

The ending of *Austerlitz* embodies an uncannily appropriate termination of Sebald's authorial career. To the Sebaldian narrator, virtually erased by the burden of his narrative task, Austerlitz gifts a book, *Heshel's Kingdom*, a reference to the literary scholar Dan Jacobson and his grandfather, known as Heshel.³⁷ Jacobson is interconnected with Austerlitz—much of both of their families died during the war. The last sentence of the novel reads:

Sitting by the moat of the fortress of Breendonk, I read to the end of the fifteenth chapter of *Heshel's Kingdom*, and then set out on my way back to Mechelen, reaching the town as evening began to fall (A, 298).

³⁷ McCulloh, pp. 131-132

In the context of thematic inscription and erasure of his own work, Sebald is determined to ensure the survival of the stories and authors he encountered during his personal lifetime, whether these stories and figures are represented through metonymy or explicit reference. Though he does not tell us so, Sebald inscribes his final indictment of the Holocaust trauma, confronting evil at its source. He traces the steps of the Jews in reverse order as he returns to Mechelen, the site of deportation for every Belgian Jew destined for the death camps.³⁸

³⁸ McCulloh, p. 132

CONCLUSION

Eric Santner has argued that the study of historical trauma can be approached as if the event had not yet taken place. For Santner, this means that the Holocaust transformed the way we must think about history, because “there persists an anxious awareness that we have missed the essential thing;”³⁹ a kind of persistent and perpetual survivor’s guilt of having escaped the paradigm of modern trauma. Certainly for Jacques Austerlitz, the *Kindertransport* from Antwerp meant his having missed the moment of trauma he then spent his life and career trying to recover, to find concepts and representations adequate to the “thing.” For Sebald the writer, however, it seems that it is the moment of a certain kind of writing that has past which is his trauma. Perhaps we can call it modern, a particular sort of modern writing from a specific set of modern writers: Stendhal, Kafka, Nabokov, but also of Paul Celan, Walter Benjamin, and others I have not considered here. But for Sebald, having arrived too late in the history of literature to write like them, writing proves to be possible only by virtue of having missed the time of its realization. And therefore, it is *only in the miss*, and only by virtue of *writing the miss*, that Sebald’s writing can proceed at all. Sebald transfers this sense of having missed the event to the whole of his writing—he feels as if the writer and reader herself have missed out on the ability to write more directly and vividly. Perhaps envious of his

³⁹ “No matter how much we attempt to circumscribe the Holocaust with historiographic information, there persists an anxious awareness that we have missed the essential thing, that what transpired there has not yet found a conceptual or linguistic representation.” Eric Santner, “Freud’s Moses and the Ethics of Nomotropic Desire,” *October* 88 (Spring 1999): pp. 36-37

predecessors, Sebald coopts their narratives but empties them of content, leaving only their structure, their diagram, to be refunctioned for an era after Auschwitz⁴⁰. Themes of place and time and their inaccessibility, in an analysis of Sebald's texts, therefore, are neither arbitrary nor incidental.

In my analysis of *Vertigo*, I argued that the times of events from stories of Kafka and Stendhal provide arbitrary beginnings but definitive character diagrams for narratives concerned primarily with the unstable time of history and memory, in which the structure of travel, wandering, descent, doubling, and the failure to come home, map a dizzying sensory reception of time and image. In *The Emigrants*, it is primarily a sense of place or placelessness that is generated by the interaction of text and image. Nabokov's butterfly hunter provides the intertext of a character forever chasing memories across landscapes. In *Austerlitz*, the narration shifts from the composite narrator or protagonist seen in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* to a unified whole combined of two enfolded parts: Jacques Austerlitz and the unnamed Sebaldian narrator. This unification derives from a complex doubling and circling of one narrator filling in the gaps for the other; it is implied that the unnamed narrator has talked to Austerlitz in the past, and is connecting the stories by using information that he has been previously told. At a structural level, this folded relationship between narrators again doubles as the relationship between reader and writer. Through text-image interaction, Sebald requires that the reader and

⁴⁰ "Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today." Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), p. 34

make decisions of such a relationship. This interaction requires the reader's participation—the narrator guides the participation, but nonetheless needs the reader to fill in the gaps in the same way that the Sebaldian narrator needs Austerlitz and vice-versa. In other words, the relationship between Austerlitz and the narrator is diagrammatically mapped to the relationship of reader and writer. *Austerlitz's* main concern, therefore, is the act of writing.

But this is a method of and confrontation with writing particular to Sebald; that is, writing in a way that can never be direct. Sebald presents a text-image dialectic for the reader to take on, but does so in a way that is oblique and therefore can be read only indirectly—to be read as we might look at an anamorphosis, or catch a sideways glimpse in a mirror. Sebald makes his point by writing of the missed chance to write of modernity. Of course, the Holocaust trauma pervades Sebald's work, but his writing more generally confronts missing the whole issue of modernization and the trauma of modernity itself, of which the Holocaust is a paradigm. In his first prose-fiction text, Sebald writes of Stendhal:

He was one of the last to quit the cloakroom, and in leaving he gave a parting glance at his reflection in the mirror and, thus confronting himself, posed for the first time the question that was to occupy him over the ensuing decades: what is it that undoes a writer? (V, 15)

In his last work, Sebald answers his predecessor: Writing itself is the origin of this undoing.

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