

Time and the Narrative of Memory in Sebald's *Austerlitz*

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"I always try to write *pour ceux qui savent lire*"

— Sebald

Narratives of memory written to create a time lost or recover an originary scene from which the present derives its significance have little in common with Sebald's narrative practice. Sebald engages with how the past survives through the experience of the time of its passing. While it is tempting to restrict the time of this experience to a present point abstracted out of time, a point with all the characteristics of being modern (new, original, separated irremediably from the past) such experience becomes in Sebald a journey amongst places haunted by events and histories each of which promise a past by resisting its return. These narratives of journeying derive their significance from Sebald's persistent engagement with this resistance even in those places – and objects such as photographs – where a sense of the past seems so palpably, even viscerally present. While the carefulness of Sebald's writing embodies this quality, it also occurs with the irruption of the visual into his narratives, most notably by means of the photographs, postcards,

or images borrowed from other books. The photograph's temporal framing of a subject within place – so ubiquitous as to indicate a condition of the photographic image and its apparatus – allows it to offer a moment where a human life is preserved, seemingly unchanged for the gaze of future generations. Despite this aspect, photographs in Sebald's narratives are not supplements for an inadequacy of description or representation – as if his writing only aspired to the condition of the visual, that is, to return the narrator, his characters, and his readers to the scenes that animate their journeys. These photographic images haunt Sebald's writing while shaping its relation to a world whose meaning is an engagement with memory and the resistance of time to an entrapment within a specific place.¹ The visual directness of photographs are an easy metaphor for such entrapment – more so than the mediations of language where an image composed of words does not restrict those words from relocation to another image, another place. However, their presence in Sebald's writing is far from being a visual index for what has been described by Sebald's language as well as being far from performing some kind of interruptive role that would merely extend the interruptive practice of much modernist writing and the "experimental" or "contemporary" forms that were its heirs in the later twentieth century. What the presence of these photographs indicate in Sebald's writing are questions that affect the received understanding of narrative and its formal heritage. They articulate what always remains under threat within such a heritage. For Sebald, the event that marks the beginning of memory only survives apart from that event and the place in which it occurred, precisely the opposite to what a heritage claims or what the received practice of modern narrative in the twentieth-century has continued through its retreat to formally defined, experimental writing that preserves this heritage albeit negatively.²

Sebald's writing questions the extent to which memory attains significance through a resort to purpose – either historical purpose because what is remembered is embodied with an intention that it fulfills or because the task of remembering is to insert a purpose and in this way make the passing of time comprehensible. In distinction to a purposeful activity, memory in Sebald's *Austerlitz* stakes out an ethical

undertaking.³ Sebald reorients the presence of memory in our engagement with the past, questions what constitutes that memory as its relation to place and history, as well as to visual and linguistic representation. Above all, it is a memory embedded in a practice of writing for which there is no clear generic guide. As the epigraph to this paper indicates, such an account of the experience of memory is *pour ceux qui savent lire*.

A crucial aspect of this reading appears in the first sentence of *Austerlitz* when the narrator signals we are placed on guard against clarity of purpose as the sole organizing principle of the narrator's journeying:

In the second half of the 1960s I traveled repeatedly from England to Belgium, partly for study purposes (*Studienzwecken*), partly, to myself, not entirely clear reasons (*nicht recht erfindlichen Gründen*), staying sometimes for just one or two days, sometimes for several weeks. (3/9 trans. modified)⁴

In this opening sentence, Sebald places purposes (*Studienzwecken*) alongside reasons (*Gründen*) but not simply because they are close synonyms that allow him to avoid the pedestrian prosaicness of "partly for one purpose, partly for another purpose." This placing of purpose against reason when the travel is not oriented towards study suggests that acting according to purpose is not necessarily the same as acting according to reason. This difference becomes more pronounced when the narrator qualifies these reasons as "never entirely clear to me," indicating difficulty in discerning a precise cause or purpose for this part of his journeys. And, as if it were not bad enough to repeatedly undertake a journey without full knowledge of why it was undertaken, the journey itself, as Sebald's words indicate, did not reveal either what those reasons were since they remained "never entirely clear." Beyond the defined purposes of study, which cannot account fully for these journeys, there remains an aspect of journeying that does not belong to purposes and only has an uncertain sense of possessing a reason.

The language of Sebald's German text clarifies further the status of these "unclear" reasons and their difference to purpose. Here is Sebald's German wording for the phrase translated as "partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me": "*teilweise aus anderen, mir selber, nicht recht erfindlichen Gründe.*" A more strictly literal translation reads, "partly for other, to me, not rightly fabricated reasons." This rendering emphasizes follows the syntactic unfolding of Sebald's German, in particular the place of the interpolated words, of "to me" in a phrase that addresses the purposive claim of reasons. At face value, this suggests that the role of the narrator is not only subjective but a judging subject--as if the lack of clarity is only attributable so the narrator's subjectivity. As the more literal translation given above indicates, the difficulty posed by these reasons is more complex and not easily explained away by a recourse to the subjective. The English translation, in which "not clear" renders "*nicht recht erfindlichen Gründe,*" holds in reserve a rational clarity that could override the narrator's shortcomings, that is, it leaves the idea of reason or purpose intact and blames the narrator rather than reason for any shortcoming. Sebald's German states more exactly what a clear reason would be. In this phrase, retaining *nicht recht* as "not entirely," "not quite," or "not rightly" makes less difference than the word they qualify: "*erfindlichen.*" If we insist on hearing the sense of the verb *erfinden*, to fabricate, invent, fictionalize, within the adverb *erfindlich* then Sebald's text announces that its narrative is not definable according to recalled purposes alone. Rather, the narrator's travels harbor reasons from which a sense of fabrication is not separable. Such a reason is therefore not the opposite of fiction or the subjectivity of a narrator but retains a fictionality or fabricatedness that is proper to it. What seems deficient to the narrator is that the reasons for these trips are rightly invented, fabricated or fictionalized. As a result, attentively reading *erfinden* in *erfindlich* points to a lack of clarity about place and its ability to affirm why a journey has been undertaken. Consequently, what this passage does is to mark this narrative as haunted by a past lacking nostalgia, sentimentality, or other forms of emotion defined by the rationalizing force of a reason or purpose. The question arising from Sebald's narrative practice is that the price reason

and purpose pay for their clarity is an unavoidable invention, fabrication, fiction.

Still, there is also a delicate ambiguity here. Do fabricated reasons retain an element that is “right,” “correct” if not clear (*recht*)? Sebald poses the challenge of locating not just the reason for these journeys but also what part of that reason is correctly, rightly or even clearly a reason since such a reason also requires fabricatedness? In addition, there is the difficulty of locating any such reason in relation to the narrator. The narrator states, “to me, myself, not rightly fabricated reasons.” The emphasis on “to me, myself” (*mir, selber*), indicates how these not entirely clear/fabricated reasons appear to the narrator in relation to travels that do not clarify or fulfill the purpose that is their occasion.

This more complex account of the relation between reason and purpose on the one hand and fiction or fabricatedness on the other explains the separation between subject and place present in the opening sentence of *Austerlitz*. The journeys undertaken in this work traverse places that do not yield the experience of the time associated with them but rather an experience of time expressed as a memory whose unfolding does not rightly fabricate those journeys. Again, this is not because the human capacity to remember is inaccurate or faulty – a belief that seems to indicate or at least hope that there could be something better. Rather, what affects the narrator of *Austerlitz* is also an effect of the narrative in which the narrator is situated.

A remark by Austerlitz in which he relates the effect of travelling on both memory and narrative develops this situation. Reflecting on the relation of travelling to time, Austerlitz observes in the first of his conversations with the narrator that, after the passing of time (“after a while”) in which nothing takes place, travelling produces an illusory relation between time and the space:

Certainly, said Austerlitz after a while (*nach einer Weile*), the relationship of time and space as we experience it in travelling, has to this day something illusionistic and illusory which is why we also, every time we come home

from elsewhere, never know with certainty whether we really went away. (12/22; trans. modified)

What relates time to space in travelling is an illusion that does not allow the destination or place visited to claim for itself a time in which its significance is decided. This inability is so great for Austerlitz that that “every time he comes home” he cannot know with any certainty whether his travelling even took place. Austerlitz distances himself from a sense of time that defaults to the place of origin (home) when it can find no place in which to lodge itself. However, inasmuch as Austerlitz cannot know if he has in fact travelled the obverse of this is also true: he cannot also know if he has remained at home. Until this question posed by travelling is resolved, the time of travelling is neither defined positively (by knowing for sure that a place travelled to is the locus of significance for the travelling) nor is it defined negatively (by knowing that one was always at the place of origin because no travel took place). In either case, time remains unclaimed by either space or the places that occupy space; it uncompromisingly refuses place as the defining reason of travel. The significance of the time of travelling as a different experience of time emerges here as what stands apart from the tendency to subsume both travelling and time into place as its purpose. The consequence of this understanding is that travel is not the experience of place as an inherited history. Here, the narrator’s emphasis on self-reference (“*mir selber nicht recht erfindlichen Gründen* [to me, myself, not rightly fabricated reasons]”) returns with a crucial emphasis on this uncertainty as an experience of the time that both Sebald’s narrator and subject of his narration, Austerlitz, are continually within.

Austerlitz’s reflection indicates that the time of travel does not end in the experience of place and nor does not it receive spatial justification even when it occurs through space. As the narrator recalls his own encounters with Austerlitz in Belgium, travel produces unintended crossings whose reasons remain unknown:

on every one of my completely unplanned (*ganz und gar planlosen*) Belgian excursions at that time, our paths crossed in a way that is inconceivable (*unbegreifliche*) to me to this day. (27/44; trans. modified)

These crossings, which originate and organize the narrative of *Austerlitz*, are not only “unplanned” but also, even in memory, the reason for their occurrence remains “inconceivable.” The Centraal railway station in Antwerp, in which the first meeting of the narrator and Austerlitz happens, underlines this aspect of their history. Not only does the first of these “inconceivable” crossings occur in a railway station, a place for the origination of a planned journey, but also the actual location for their first meeting is in an area of the station named the *Salle des pas perdus* [Room of the lost/useless steps]⁵--a place whose name indicates that travelling, in the form of walking, has no purpose. To begin the narrative of Austerlitz in such an area within such a building is to establish the coincidence that originates the narrative about Austerlitz as an experience of time, waiting, that has coincidence as its origin, and has already lost a destination for its means of movement.⁶ Furthermore, within this scene of origination there is the sense that the space that promises destination, the railway station, also contains a space that runs counter to that promise. The crossing that drives the narrative of *Austerlitz* thus establishes a sense of time not measured or punctuated by what precedes or follows it.⁷

While this first encounter sets “*pas perdus*” against the more rigorously directional purpose of train travel, it also sets up the possibility of continuity and repetition when Austerlitz and the narrator arrange to meet again. When they do meet, the narrator tells us that Austerlitz continues the observations of the preceding evening as if there had been no intervening time: “And just as he had finished with these words the first evening, so Austerlitz continued his observations the following day” (13/23). The narrator’s subsequent remark on Austerlitz’s manner of speaking, which occurs in the narrative placed between the first and second meeting, emphasizes this sense of focus and continuity as a characteristic that distinguishes the narrative of memory from any absorption into what it remembers:

It was for me astonishing how Austerlitz fabricated his thoughts during conversations, how he could develop, as if in a state of distraction (*sozusagen aus der Zerstretheit*), the most balanced sentences, and how, for

him, the narrator-like (*erzählersiche*) mediation of his experience/knowledge about things (*Sachkenntnisse*) was a gradual approach (*schrittweise Annäherung*) to a kind of historical metaphysics, in which what is remembered (*das Erinnerte*) became once again living.” (12-13/22-23; trans. modified).

Austerlitz does not make past events living by making them live again as if the past were living again. He makes what has been subject to memory – *das Erinnerte* – become living in the work of remembering. In this way, what becomes living does so in its “approach” or “approximation” to “a *kind* of historical metaphysics.” “Approach” and “kind of” qualify any conclusion that his words are a historical metaphysics. Austerlitz approaches such a history without becoming it. The significance of his sentences as an approach cannot be overemphasized. Nor can the narrator’s observation that his approach occurs “gradually.” Furthermore, when the sense of *Schritt* as a “step” is recovered in the word for gradually, “schrittweise,” present in this word is recovered, the narrator identifies that the living nature of this memory and the sentences that express it also have a relation to walking in the sense of taking steps. Like “Salle des pas perdue” the area in Antwerp’s Centraal Station where Austerlitz’s observations are given and where their sequence of meetings originates, Austerlitz’s “most balanced sentences” do not complete their journey. Were they to do so, were they to become fully metaphysical, and arrive at a stasis of knowledge that privileges place to the detriment of time, then history, its occurrence as time defined in a place and the knowledge of that occurrence would be one and the same: a historical metaphysics.

There is still another layer that relates their conversations to the place in which they first occur. During the course of the first conversation, Austerlitz speaks about the mirrors in the Salle des pas perdue and their fabrication. These mirrors, and how they are addressed by Austerlitz, help explain the subsequent displacement of a “historical metaphysics” into the formal balance of his sentences. The narrator confides:

I shall never forget how he concluded his comments on the fabrication of the tall waiting room mirrors (*der hohen*

Wartesaalspiegel) by asking, glancing up once more at their dimly shimmering surfaces (*mattschimmernden Flächen*) as he left, *combien des ouvriers périrent, lors de la manufacture de tels miroirs ...*⁸ (13/23)

What the narrator will never forget is precisely what the surfaces of the mirrors do not reflect: their own history. Not only does their ability to reflect give way to surfaces that are dimly shimmering (*mattschimmernden*) rather than giving access to a reflected image but also Austerlitz's glance towards these surfaces becomes the event that spurs a question that seeks historical knowledge about the mirrors. After emphasizing the surface of the mirror, Austerlitz poses an unanswered question concerning how many died in the manufacture of these mirrors. The answer is not something a mirror can reflect nor can a mirror narrate a history that tells the story of those who died. Is this why the question appears in another language in Sebald's text, French? By making Austerlitz pose the question in this way Sebald indicates that the history of these mirrors is one that concludes in something foreign. But, this history of the manufacturing or fabrication of the mirrors, why does it conclude with death? Like the shift to another language, the conclusion stands in contrast to the "most balanced" sentences in which Austerlitz speaks; it shifts abruptly from the history of an architectural object to a human history. In the German edition, this shift is seamless. There is no italicization of the French. Neither the sentence in which the narrator recalls this question nor the language of the question are marked off as separate within the narrative. In the German edition, the French is not externalized within the narrative thus indicating that something foreign, and something like death already inhabits this narrative and that both these elements appear at a moment of discontinuity that remains internal to the narrative.

Experiencing this discontinuity as a sense of time appears most clearly when the narrator, after a second day of conversation with Austerlitz at the Glove Market returns to that same location in the hope that Austerlitz "might perhaps appear again [*möchte vielleicht wieder auftauchen*]" (19/32). Austerlitz does not appear. What occurs instead is the refusal of this third crossing, as an intended, arranged event in which

the promise that time and place is one will be fulfilled. Austerlitz's non-appearance denies the narrator's expectation that his encounters on the first and second days of his acquaintance with Austerlitz establish a repetition that can be predicted (an expectation already placed under doubt by the narrator's qualification "might perhaps appear"). This denial interrupts an historical metaphysic as the reason for their encounters – as if they had been destined to meet in the same way that a train is destined to follow a pre-determined path and, accordingly, justify a destination as the reason for its movement. Because Austerlitz does not appear, the narrator remains in a state of waiting, is left with time on his hands in a place that, despite Austerlitz's presence there on the preceding day, can do nothing to repeat that past in a present now defined by unfulfilled expectation. For Austerlitz to have appeared on the third day would be to create the illusion that the significance of time resides in its surrender to the claim of a space and its history, in this case, their preceding meeting at the Glove Market. The illusion created by such a repetition distorts time by rendering it in terms of a place. This distortion avoids recognizing the time of memory and instead claims that what constitutes memory is what happened in a place even if no material or living trace of that event appears except the shell or frame in which it occurred. The distortion occurring in this memory takes the form of synthesizing time and space into a place so that its meaning can be lived in the presence of its absence. Against this recourse of absence as the presence of the past, the narrator's response asserts a sense of travel in which time and space do not meet despite the encoding of this possibility within the idea of travel. This is why, from the first sentence of *Austerlitz*, travel is partly purposeful and partly incomplete with regard to its reasons. This is the double aspect of travel that is signaled when Austerlitz's approach to a historical metaphysics is first introduced and described by the narrator as "gradual" or, more literally, as "stepwise (*schrittweise*)."⁹

In the journey that arises from Austerlitz's non-appearance this use of space as a distortion of time is made present by the narrator's visit to the fortifications of Breendonk.¹⁰ This visit not only replaces the time left open by Austerlitz's non-appearance at the Glove Market on the third day but it also marks the transition to the narrator's recognition of historical

unpredictability as the condition on which their subsequent encounters took place.¹¹ The narrator describes the occasion of this trip to the fort as the coincidence of two circumstances that occurred while waiting for Austerlitz to appear:

And as I was glancing through the newspapers while I waited I came upon an article... about the fortress of Breendonk... If the name of Breendonk had not come up in my conversation with Austerlitz the previous evening, this mention of it in the paper, even supposing I had noticed it at all, would hardly have made me go to see the fort that very day. (19/32-33)

Two elements cross here in a way that stages the encounter between what the narrator characterized as Austerlitz's "gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysics" and the place of purpose within travel. The narrator admits that the newspaper article alone would not have prompted him to visit the fort. This detail indicates that the newspaper as the document in which history and memory are confined to the immediate present cannot produce a reason for travel. Rather, the newspaper becomes the occasion for the narrator to recall the previous evening's conversation with Austerlitz that then becomes the factor prompting his trip to the fort.

Why fortifications occupy a significant place in this conversation and subsequently become the element that replaces Austerlitz's presence, emerges if the fact that informs their existence is recognized. Fortifications defend place as something not to be overtaken by external forces. Yet, as Austerlitz points out in his summary of the development of fortifications, their history tells the story of an obsolescence: once completed, advances in warfare overtake fortifications and render them obsolete. In his account of their development, Austerlitz remarks that fortifications are defined by a conflict between the space they defend and the time for which that defense is created:

As architectural plans for fortifications became increasingly complex, the time it took to build them increased as well, and with the probability that as soon as they were finished, if not before, they would have been

overtaken by further developments, both in artillery and in strategic planning, which took account of the growing realization that everything was decided in movement, not in a state of rest. (16/28)

Fortifications defend place in a state of rest, they defend the situation of a particular time in that place. Their increasing complexity and size, as Austerlitz implies in his concluding remarks on this evening, is comparable to those outsize buildings that “cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins” (19/32). Fortifications and outsize ruins invoke an architecture whose temporal existence emerges from an inner logic that distorts their spatial purpose: to bring time to a standstill and maintain an historical status quo.

In the case of the Breendonk fortress, the narrator foregrounds this tendency towards stasis before even visiting the fortress by prefacing his visit with the following history provided by the newspaper article:

In 1940, when in the second time in its history the fort had to be surrendered to the Germans, it was made into a reception and penal camp which remained in existence until August 1944, and that since 1947, preserved unchanged (*unverändert*) as far as possible, it had been a national memorial and a museum of the Belgian resistance. (19/32)

Austerlitz’s observation about this fort being “completed just before the outbreak of the First World War in which, within a few months, it proved completely useless for the defense of the city and country” (18/31), establishes that the fort had no time proper to its purpose since this purpose was quickly nullified by the First World War. What the newspaper account then communicates is that despite being rendered obsolete in the First World War, purpose reappears subsequently, first in 1944, and then in 1947 when it becomes a memorial and museum. This desire to preserve the fort unchanged from its 1947 state is the memorializing desire to establish place as a site where a time becomes an unchanged memory and it is this third version of defining time in this

place that the narrator visits. However, what the narrator encounters at Breendonk is not place as memory but an experience of the incomprehension and the dislocation of the architectural image Austerlitz had provided:

From whatever viewpoint I tried to form a picture of the complex it left no knowable architectural plan (*sie ließ keinen Bauplan erkennen*), its projections and indentations kept shifting, so far exceeding my comprehension that in the end I found myself unable to connect it with anything shaped by human civilization, or even with the mute (*stummen*) relics or our prehistory and early history. (20/33-34; trans. modified)

The definition of space given by Austerlitz's description of the plans for the fort become isolated in the narrator's encounter as a result of their real physical existence in the present. This inability to comprehend the fort in terms of its figuration also recognizes that prior representations, as well as representation itself, define a viewpoint that does not bring an image or a figure to a specific time. The narrator's presence at the fort provides no viewpoint to experience the arrest of time in space that an architectural plan promises. The narrator's explanation of why the plan or determining figure can accomplish its promise is that no such plan remains complete because the fort's outline, its projections and indentations, "kept shifting." The issue here is not that the plan is unable to account for the history that the fortress endures. The issue is a lack of relation between the fixity and stasis of the plan and the sense of movement that defines how an object such as the fortress is experienced. Movement as the experience of time prevents recognition of the fort in terms of its architectural definition, that is, in terms of an architectural intent to provide purpose, destination, and reference according to spatial arrangement.

In Sebald's *Austerlitz*, the disjunction of time and space that defines the missed crossing with Austerlitz at the Glove Market carries over into the visit to Breendonk that takes the place of that meeting. Instead of continuing a conversation as if there had been no intervening break (which is how the narrator describes his conversation with Austerlitz from

the first to the second day), the narrator undertakes a journey that becomes the search for a memory that would inform the figures, images, and representations through which the fortress is given significance.¹² What takes place in the time of their missed meeting is the experience that the meaning of an event is the illusion that space holds the memory of time. What emerges from this experience is a recognition that the experience of time in the place of memory remains despite the historical metaphysics that instigate the journey in which that experience happens or which instigate the expectation that Austerlitz will be at the Glove Market on the third day. This disjunction between place and memory becomes the destination of the narrator's journey. Here, the destination is an end for fortresses – Breendonk is the last fort built in this line of defenses around Antwerp (with the Centraal Station named as a center, the journey of the narrator is from the center to the periphery since Breendonk is located on the outskirts of Antwerp). In this respect, the narrator travels to a destination from which an experience of the time of memory emerges as place becomes known as peripheral, obsolescent and surrenders its control of time.

The experience the narrator communicates is not restricted to the outside of the structures at Breendonk – as if the failure of the form of the fort to confirm or mirror its images or plans were simply a matter of viewpoint. In the narrator's recounting of the guided tour of the fort, this disjunctive end also emerges:

My memory of the fourteen stations which the visitor to Breendonk passes between the entrance and the exit has clouded over in the course of time (*verdunkelt im Laufe der Zeit*), or perhaps I could say it clouded over already on the day when I was in the fort, whether because I did not really want to see what was to be seen there or whether because in this world illuminated only by the faint appearance of a few dim lights, and cut off forever from the light of nature, the outlines of things appeared to dissolve. (23-24/39)

The disjunction of time and space appears as the darkening (*verdunkeln*) or clouding over that occurs at both the time of this visit and in the course

of time since the visit. The narrator appeals to the latter first, to what is the more normal and predictable account of memory and the passage of time. But then the narrator traces this effect of time and memory back to the visit which is being remembered and, using exactly the same verb, *verdunkeln*, recalls how a clouding over may already have been at work during the visit to Breendonk. The clouding over which is recounted second is given two very different explanations: one, psychological (the narrator not wanting to see what was visible at Breendonk), and the other, external and material (an inability to see because of the faintness of the electric illumination). No decision is offered about which of these two possibilities is decisive. Instead, the narrator turns to the captions that name each of the fourteen stations and describes, how, in the present, the attempt to recall their meaning through either memory or reading does not lift the clouding over that remained unresolved between a psychological block and inadequate illumination:

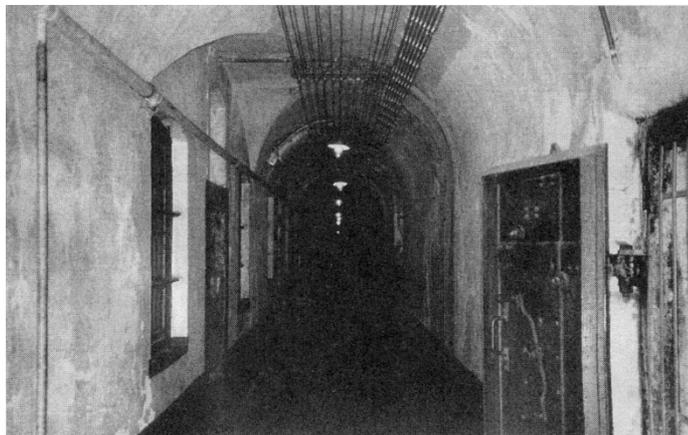
Even now, when I try to remember them [the fourteen stations], when I look back at the crab-like plan of Breendonk and read the words of the captions –*Former Office, Printing Works, Huts, Jacques Ochs hall, Solitary Confinement Cell, Mortuary, Relics Store, and Museum*– the darkness [*Dunke*] does not lift but becomes yet heavier and I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects, which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on. (23-24/38-39)

Rather than arriving at illumination, the previous clouding over now intensifies into a darkness (*verdunkeln* becomes *Dunke*). Remembering alone does not arrive at illumination and neither does the recourse to reading as a supplement to a memory affected by either of the experiences that interfered with the narrator's visit: unwillingness to see or faint illumination. The captions, all of which name places, promise a space in which meaning occurs individually and as a journey, as if these stations also carried the overdetermined significance of the fourteen

Stations of the Cross. Where this over-determination would preserve a prescribed meaning in Christian allegory, the same does not occur for the narrator whose experience of Breendonk's fourteen stations does not produce a repeatable history. For the narrator, there is no metaphysical conclusion whereby the representation of history is also the meaning the presence of that history. Instead, the narrator only recognizes that memory and the representation of the past through names that cannot recall such a past to the present is an index to a continuing disappearance since the meaning of remembrance does not belong to object, place, or stations –whether of the cross or of all the journeys that begin in the *Salle des pas perdus*. To claim a memory in those countless places and objects is to claim that memory does not belong to the course of time in which the narrator's experience of a clouding over and darkness happens. As the narrator observes, a history that belongs to place or object is a history that remains unheard since the experience of memory alone possesses the ability to speak. What the narrator faces at Breendonk is another history, the history of a faithfulness to every extinguished life, a faithfulness that preserves memory from fetishizing the past in a place or an object, and, in so doing, preserves memory from the purposes, political and ideological, which its objectification introduces. Against this, to remember, as this visit to the fort recalls, is to refuse the guided tour in which the shifting movement of time becomes a repeatable action directing the steps of travelers to specific locations each with their own localizing caption. The narrator experiences this memorializing as the draining of the world, a draining that leaves behind a place that history inhabits as the absence of a presence that no memory can hold in mind. What the narrator recognizes at this moment is that memory is what remains from the time in which we traverse the present and not what precedes that traversing.

Nowhere is this recognition put to the test more than in the interplay between language and visual image in Sebald's writing and, in particular, by the appearance of photographs within the narrative. Such photographs can easily affirm an illustrative effect, for instance, when Sebald after describing the fort at Breendonk as a "world illuminated only

by a few dim electric bulbs” inserts a picture showing a passage lit by such bulbs:



This illustrative intent operates with a kind of naïveté as if this image could encapsulate so much more effectively the destination that the narrator’s words aim at. The photograph of the passage is, however, not simply illustrative. Despite the immediate connection between this photograph and the narrator’s reference to electric light bulbs, and despite the occurrence of this photograph at precisely the point when the narrator speaks of a world cut off from the light of nature, the light bulbs in this image only emit enough light to create the illusion of a space into which they disappear. This illusion is precisely what the narrator proceeds to dispel in a passage that takes up the tunnel-like darkness into which the light bulbs fade but does so by foregrounding extensively the time in which it takes place:

In any case, at the time, in that soundless (*lautlosen*) noonday hour in the early summer of 1967 which I spent inside the fort of Breendonk, without encountering any other visitors, I hardly dared to go on to the point where, at the end of a second long tunnel, a corridor not much more than the height of a man, and, as I think I remember (*wie ich mich zu erinnern glaube*), somewhat sloping, leads down to one of the casements. (25/40; trans. modified)

After over-determining markers of time to such an extent (noon, early summer, 1967), the narrator is reluctant to go to the place of the

casement that lies at the end of the tunnel-corridor. The reason for this reluctance appears when two memories, prompted by the narrator's staring at the grey floor of the casement, intrude into the present. About these memories, the narrator remarks: "No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open" (25/41). In the case of the two memories just mentioned, the opening of such doors releases the place from a history as the narrator recalls "a picture of our laundry room at home in W." and "the image of the butcher's shop I always used to pass on my way to school" (25/40). More significantly, in what follows, the door opens onto memories that emphatically leave behind a sense of place as embodying memory:

But I do remember that there in the casement at Breendonk a nauseating smell of soft soap rose to my nostrils, and that this smell, in some strange place in my head, was linked to the bizarre German word for scrubbing brush, *Wurzelbürste*, which was a favorite of my father's and which I had always disliked. (25/41)

The dislike turns to nausea, then the narrator rests his forehead against the wall which, to him, "seems to be perspiring with cold beads of sweat" (25-26/41). The narrator's response to the past he now experiences in the present sets up an associative chain that needs little to bring in the history of this space as a place of torture. For the narrator to follow this associative path would be to deny all he has articulated about the limitation of time and memory to a place. Instead of following this path, a more complex and richer sense of time appears:

It was not that a presentiment rose up in me with the nausea of the kind of so-called intense interrogations which were being conducted here around the time I was born, since it was only a few years later that I read Jean Améry's description of the dreadful physical closeness between torturers and their victims, and of the torture he himself suffered in Breendonk. (26/41-42; trans. modified)

The return to historical representation enfolds a sense of time whose significance does not belong to the order of events.¹³ The nausea is not the register of what took place in this room. That is a history excluded from the narrator's memory at the time of this experience in the casement. Only through the illusion that places and objects have a memory communicated by their existence as place or object could we claim that narrator's nausea is the effect of a time that the casement itself makes felt, describes, and passes on. The narrator is not only emphatic on this point (*Es war nicht so*), but historically precludes any such cause. Place does not remember, place does not see, and place does not hear.

It is at this point that we can begin to speak of an ethics of memory in Sebald, of a holding to what memory is rather than what it can be memorialized as is the case whenever it is dislocated into a place that is then frozen into a false authenticity – such as Breendonk in 1947 – a freezing that ignores the discontinuities between Breendonk's own past significances by privileging one above others. To perform this freezing is to claim place as the memory of a specific time. The issue raised by Sebald is that such a placement of memory risks destroying the past under the enormous weight of what is not present, an absence for which the present is an inadequate index. In a counter to such inadequacy, Sebald's *Austerlitz* presents an experience of memory not determined by the metaphysics of presence and absence and therefore not restrained by the politicization of place and imposition of purpose that makes every journey to a site of memorialization recall that purpose as its historical significance. So frozen, memory can have no presence since to remember only death is to forget to whom memory belongs. To do so is to recognize, as Sebald's narrator does, that the significance of the casement at Breendonk does not preserve a memory that the narrator has not yet read. Rather, memory is the imperative to read in that moment a sense of time that appears gradually, that is, *schritt-weise*, in steps whose historical meaning was never rightly fabricated. Lacking such a history, there remains, *pour ceux qui savent lire*, the distorting illusion that restricts time to the historically reconstructed limits of a place. In such a place, the past is to be re-enacted repeatedly by living ghosts who have journeyed there for the privilege of that enactment in a

kind of repetition compulsion called the experience of history. Against this repetition, there emerges in Sebald an awareness of time, the time of the present as the only experience that narrative can still tell in the face of a history whose incommensurability in the 20th century risks refusing all experience in its darkness. Like the narrator's experience in the casement at Breendonk, this darkness recedes not only into the past but also into the unexperienced time of the future.

¹ Amongst the growing body of critical writing on photography and Sebald, a particularly extensive and useful essay stands out, Clive Scott's "Still Life, Portrait, Photograph, Narrative in the work of W.G. Sebald," in *A Literature of Restitution: Critical essays on W.G. Sebald*, eds. Jeannette Baxter, Valerie Henitiuk and Ben Hutchinson (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013) 203-230.

² These aspects of modern narrative belong within larger tendencies at work with the claims of modernity, notably, a project to control destruction by transferring it from the natural world to the world of science, technology, reason whereby destruction is controlled. The claim that the Enlightenment sets in place the logic that leads to the Holocaust, (see Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) would establish that this destructive event belongs to an inner movement of western thought initiated by the Enlightenment – a grand narrative of modernity that preserves itself, even in the face of atrocity, by assimilating destruction to reason in the modern age. Narrative experimentation, the formalized "play" of chance in modern narrative remain cultural versions of this grand narrative through their aesthetic assimilations. In Sebald's narratives, this assimilation is always the stake hence his relentless emphasis on narrative embedded in a sense of time that is not oriented towards purpose nor towards localization of time in a particular site of memory – as if memory could be frozen into a singular experience of time. For a summary of the history of the relation of Sebald to modernity and the Holocaust, see J.J. Long, *W.G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007), 2-4.

³ What is understood by ethical here is a stance against the purposive critique of modernity by which criticism is invested with the power to direct historical experience. Carol Jacobs also addresses the ethical aspect of Sebald's writing in her closing remarks to a chapter on Austerlitz in *Sebald's Vision* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015).

⁴ Unless otherwise noted all parenthetical page references are to Sebald's *Austerlitz*. Reference will first be made to the English translation (trans. Anthea Bell, New York: Modern Library 2001) followed by the German text [first published 2001] (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003).

⁵ Despite the obvious translation of “Salle des pas perdus” as “waiting room,” the equivalent space in English catches neither the size of the space referred to in the Antwerp Central station nor the fact that it is not exactly as constricted as a room but is rather more of a hall. See, David Danby’s “Stations, dark rooms and false worlds” (in *A literature of restitution: Critical essays on W.G. Sebald*, eds. Jeannette Baxter, Valerie Henitiuk and Ben Hutchinson (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013], 166-184) for a study of the place of the four train stations Sebald refers to in *Austerlitz*, particularly, his remarks on darkness as a temporal and architectural characteristic of these stations. This darkness is examined below in relation to memory during the narrator’s visit to the Breendonk fort.

⁶ In a 2001 interview, Sebald responded with the following remark to a question about inexplicable events: “this whole business of coincidence, which is very prominent in my writing. I hope it’s not obtrusive. But, you know, it does come up in the first book, in “Vertigo,” a good deal. I don’t particularly hold with parapsychological explanations of one kind or another, or Jungian theories about the subject. I find those rather tedious. But it seemed to me an instance that illustrates that we somehow need to make sense of our nonsensical existence. You meet somebody who has the same birthday as you – the odds are one in three hundred and sixty-five, not actually all that amazing. But if you like the person then immediately this takes on more . . . and so we build on it, and I think all our philosophical systems, all our systems of our creed, all constructions, even the technological worlds, are built in that way, in order to make some sort of sense, when there isn’t, as we all know.” Joe Cuomo, “A Conversation with W. G. Sebald,” [first published as “The Meaning of Coincidence”] in *The Emergence of Memory*, ed. Lynn Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories, 2007), 95.

⁷ Why this sense of time should be given in a railway station is pertinent to the narrative of Austerlitz’s history since his survival, and his story, depends on a journey of deracination and uncertain outcome: the *Kindertransport* which brings Austerlitz to Wales and into a setting which invents a past for him in the hope that this past would subsequently decide his future. Also to note: Austerlitz’s repetition of the transport of his mother to Terezin by rail. Austerlitz’s comments about this train journey recount a disorientation of himself as a subject and of time in relation to travel: “while standing on the platform I could not imagine who or what I was . . . When I got out of the train I felt as if I had been travelling for weeks, going further and further east, and further and further back in time” (185-186/269-271).

⁸ Just prior to encountering Austerlitz the narrator refers to these mirrors in a way that also emphasizes their inability to offer a literal reflection. To the narrator they are “partly dull”: “the waiting room . . . struck me as . . . a curious confusion of which may of course have been the result of the sun’s sinking behind city rooftops just as I entered the room. The gleam of the gold and silver on the huge, partly dull mirrors on the wall facing the windows was not yet entirely extinguished” (6/13). The translation of “halbblinde Spiegel” as “partly dull mirror” is offered as a more accurate rendering than “half-obscured mirrors”) by Bettina Mosbach in her essay “Superimposition as a Narrative

Strategy in *Austerlitz*' in *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W.G. Sebald*, ed. Lise Patt and Christel Dillbohner (Los Angeles, CA: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), 409, n.21. The mirrors also form a temporal framing of the narrator's crossings with Austerlitz. In the context of this first meeting the narrator tells us that "once Austerlitz took a camera out of his rucksack . . . and took several pictures of the mirrors, which were now quite dark (*verdunkelte*)" (6/13). The narrator then continues to state that these pictures were given to him by Austerlitz in 1996, the date of their last meeting. The symmetry and balance this might offer is not allowed to assert itself: the narrator can no longer find these photographs (7/15). On the darkened aspect of these photographs, referred to as *verdunkelte* by the narrator, see the discussion below of this word in relation to memory during the narrator's visit to the Breendonk fort.

⁹ In the most extensive volume devoted to travel in Sebald, *The Undiscover'd Country: W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, ed. Marus Zisselsberger (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), the question of temporality is notable underplayed – as the title indicates, travel is to offer an aesthetic yield in the form of a poetics. The emphasis here on the temporal engages with the limits of this way of approaching travel in Sebald.

¹⁰ Other accounts of this passage about Breendonk can be found in, Will Stone, "At Risk of Internment: W.G. Sebald in Terizin and Breendonk," *Vertigo* vol. 4.3 (Summer 2009); Ben Hutchinson, "Fort Breendonk," in *W.G. Sebald: Die Dialektische Imagination* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009) 100-106. Max Pensky, in a broader essay on ruins, rightly argues against seeing Sebald's account of Breendonk as a kind of Benjaminian dialectical image (see, "Three Kinds of Ruin: Heidegger, Benjamin, Sebald," in *Poligrafi* 16. 61/62 [2011], esp. 85-89).

¹¹ Their next meeting, a few days later, is unforeseen. The narrator, at the end of day's walking arrives at a café in which he discovers Austerlitz. His reflection on this encounter recalls the "improbability of our meeting again in a place like this which no sensible person would have sought out" (27-28/44). Their next meeting, shortly before Christmas at Zeebrugge is equally unforeseen (31/49).

¹² The abruptness with which the narrator moves from recalling the reason for visiting the fort and the description of the journey indicates that travelling is at stake here: "would hardly have made me go to see the fort that very day. The passenger train I boarded later that morning took a good half-hour to travel to the short distance to Mechelen, where a bus runs from outside the station to the small town of Willebroek; it is on the outskirts of this town that the fort stands . . ." (19/33).

¹³ On this episode as an instance of individual suffering based in an experience of place, see Markus Zisselsberger, "Introduction," in *The Undiscover'd Country: W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 12-16.