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THE TOPOGRAPHY OF MEMORY IN W. G. SEBALD'S AUSTERLITZ

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Abstract: *The paper, which is an afterthought of a previous study on Time, Memory and Narration in W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz, investigates the interconnectedness between space and memory, between the places of private memory and the heritage of cultural memory in the same novel. Sebald is preoccupied with the relationship between the collective experience called history and the dramas inherent in personal fates. What survives past traumas becomes, in the best case, a place of cult, of obligatory memory. Austerlitz, the spatial reference of the eponymous hero of Sebald's last novel, is such a place: the scene of the Battle of Austerlitz is now a place of cult, blurring personal traumas and pushing them back into a never again nameable past. The protagonist's quest for the self and for the traces of his effaced past reveals places (railroad stations, buildings, institutions) that connect space and time, serving as chronotopes of memory. Gare d'Austerlitz in Paris (Austerlitz also associating Auschwitz), the traumatic place, the living wound on the body of Europe, will stand as a memento, as the place of memory, not in the sense of cultic, ceremonial recollection, but in that of profound personal involvement and awareness of the ethical responsibility of remembering.*

The year 2001 indicates, drastically and unchangeably, the birth of W. G. Sebald's fourth novel, entitled *Austerlitz*, and the death of the author, unfortunately not merely in the Barthesian sense, but actually, in a road accident. The preoccupation of the novel itself with the complex interconnectedness between life and writing, the huge amount of "life" accumulated on the pages of the novel call the biographical data back from the exile of contemporary literary theory, and mark the author's death as a significant moment of literary history and literary criticism, when Winfried Georg Sebald (1944–2001), author of the novels entitled *Vertigo* (1990), *The Emigrants* (1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) and finally *Austerlitz* (2001), emigrates once and for all from contemporary literature to the realm of the classics.

Prior to this moment of "emigration", W. G. Sebald used to be an emigrant of German literature: he was born in Wertach, Germany; he worked as a secondary school teacher in Switzerland, then he moved to Norwich, East England, where he became member of the university staff. His significant works, both in the field of *belles lettres* and that of literary criticism, became known after 1990. Thus, for

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Sebald emigration is both a personal experience and a literary preoccupation, what is more, the boundary between the personal and the literary can never be localized with exactness. It may be due to the “migrant” character of his oeuvre – both in terms of authorial biography and textual reference – that W. G. Sebald’s prose seems to have had a greater echo in Great Britain and in the United States than in Germany. As Mark Richard McCulloh states:

Ironically, despite numerous literary prizes in his homeland, he seems to have struck a chord with English-speaking readers to a greater extent than with his fellow Germans. Part of the reason for this is precisely his ‘Europeanness’ in the minds of English-speaking readers; his idiosyncratic prose has a distinctly exotic appeal (McCulloh 25).

The predominant feature of his novels is the permanent oscillation between fact and fiction, presence and absence, between memoir-like documentation and imagination, between private memories and the interpersonal heritage of cultural memory. The map of emigration of Sebald’s protagonists is in fact the map of Europe, modelling a geo-cultural terrain determined by the continuous confrontation between the self and the other, the private and the collective, the familiar and the foreign. Sebald’s heroes seem to be lost on the map of Europe and on the map of their own identity: they desperately try to find themselves and their roots in this territory, which is but a land of foreignness, a land of incurable, open wounds that recall past traumas. Sebald is profoundly preoccupied with the relationship between the collective experience called history and the dramas inherent in personal fates: the events that have become part of the collective consciousness, speak of – or more often, repress into deep silence – the dramas of individual bodies and personal relations.

Besides the above outlined predominant feature that W. G. Sebald’s novels share, further common thematic, narrative and stylistic features can be enumerated: the novels resort to first-person-narration, the (primary) narrator being/ resembling the author’s figure, Sebald himself, being on the road, *all’estero*, that is, abroad. Thus, the texts conform to the generic requirements of memoirs and travel journals, and employ a flowing, sophisticated, essay-like style, which moves his works towards the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. And, maybe the most interesting feature of the Sebaldian prose is that textual references are completed, counterpointed by illustrations, photos, paintings, drawings, maps, various reproductions that are systematically inserted into the body of the texts, contributing on their own to further blurring the silhouettes of fact and fiction.

Austerlitz, the spatial reference of the eponymous hero of Sebald’s last novel, is the scene of the Battle of Austerlitz, also known as the Battle of the Three Emperors (1805), one of Napoleon’s greatest victories, bearing the burden of a huge number of dead soldiers, horses and locals; now it is a place of annual feasts, reviving the past in the annual reenactment of the Battle of Austerlitz, but at the same time, definitely blurring the former faces and voices and pushing them back into a never again nameable past. Besides, the fact that Sebald gives the name of a place to his protagonist reveals his concept according to which there is a profound

interconnectedness between the self and its spatial determination: the space, the unfolded map becomes the living body of memory, the only possibility, in fact, for us to preserve memories and to pass on memories that are not even our own.

The storyline of the novel *Austerlitz* unfolds in accordance with the meeting occasions, in various scenes in Europe, of Sebald's primary narrator and Jacques Austerlitz, the secondary narrator, who conveys his "own" story, often quoting other implied people – further implied narrators – for the primary narrator to write it down with the implicit purpose of further transmitting it to the reader. Obviously, multiple narration is not a contemporary invention, however, with *Austerlitz*, the reader may have the impression of some kind of novelty and unprecedentedness as concerns the employed narrative technique, as here multiple narration does not serve the introduction of a subjective filter that makes the reader reflect upon the mediated nature, the inaccessibility of reality; here this filter is inserted between the secondary narrator, Austerlitz and his own self, his own past, and the reader is invited to share *this* experience of inaccessibility. At every turn of the text the reader is reminded of the manifold mediatedness of narration by such formulae as "said Austerlitz, said Vera". These embedded narratorial voices further mediate something that is becoming ever closer and ever more distant at the same time, resulting in the dizziness of confusion. The act of remembering creates, on the one hand, the illusion of the accessibility of the past, but on the other, due to the very act of mediation, the past remains foreign and, in the last instance, inaccessible. The reader gradually becomes aware, together with Austerlitz, that closeness and distance, familiarity and foreignness, the self and the other are not opposing poles but different signifiers that denote the same signified.

The meeting occasions between the first-person narrator and the third-person Austerlitz transform the repetitive attempts of transmitting Austerlitz's story into a ritual, thus the act of storytelling becomes a self-imposed rite of preservation, also involving the impression that the ultimate, total conveyance is doomed to failure from the start. Close to the ending of the book, the Sebald-narrator says: "I took the book Austerlitz had given me on our first meeting in Paris out of my rucksack" (412). It is not the book that can be regarded here as the sign of transmission, but rather the rucksack: on one of the earlier pages of the book the reader can see a photo of Austerlitz's rucksack, similar to the one Wittgenstein used to wear; the similitude of the rucksacks alludes to the fact that those wearing them are soulmates, and the Sebald-narrator also joins their spiritual community by taking over the ethical task of remembering and of conveying, writing down Austerlitz's "own" story:

Austerlitz also reminds us that the ethics of memory requires the necessity not of the silence Wittgenstein invokes at the end of the *Tractatus* (...), but of an ongoing journeying into new literary genres (Straus 43).

The "own" proves to be the most problematic for Austerlitz. The absence of memories related to his roots and early childhood urges him to start a private investigation and to explore his past. In the period immediately following World War II he is raised by a couple called Elias in Wales, in a dark and pressing

environment that is inexplicably foreign to him. At the deathbed of his step-father he finds out that his real name is not Dafydd Elias but Jacques Austerlitz, however, he gets back nothing else but his name, sounding utterly foreign to him, from his obscure, effaced past. The ambitious adolescent finds out that his name coincides with a place-name from Moravia, a battle scene from the early nineteenth century. The adolescent turns into a young scholar, who dedicates himself to research, pursued both as a profession and as a personal urge having the ultimate goal of finding himself. His confessions to the Sebald-narrator display the episodes of this quest for the self.

Austerlitz, the young scholar doing research into architecture, barricades himself from the mnemonic void that separates him from his origins. Psychoanalytically speaking, he represses his wish to reveal the truth about his origins. He applies a twofold strategy: on the one hand, he accounts for history as if it had come to an end at the end of the nineteenth century, leaving – half willing, half unaware – the pages of his knowledge about the twentieth century empty; on the other hand, he constructs a huge building of knowledge in himself, as if he strove to revive the scholarly ideals and practice of nineteenth-century positivism, led by the conviction that archiving as much knowledge as possible about the past constitutes the only way that guarantees the possibility of reconstructing the past. Austerlitz confesses the following to the primary narrator:

As far as I was concerned, the world ended in the late nineteenth century. I dared go no further than that, although in fact the whole history of the architecture and civilization of the bourgeois age, the subject of my research, pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadow before them at the time. I did not read newspapers because, as I now know, I feared unwelcome revelations, I turned on the radio only at certain hours of the day, I was always refining my defensive reactions, creating a kind of quarantine or immune system which, as I maintained my existence in a smaller and smaller space, protected me from anything that could be connected in any way, however distant, with my own early history. Moreover, I had constantly been preoccupied by that accumulation of knowledge which I had pursued for decades, and which served as a substitute or compensatory memory (201).

Thus, Austerlitz's immense effort of archiving in the manner of a positivist scholar, meant to collect knowledge referring to the past in order to provide the desired access to history, turns out to be a "substitute" or "compensatory" activity that is meant to protect him from being confronted with the true knowledge of his own self. In this way, the "archive fever" (Derrida) proves to be but an artificial substitute of memory, a means of continuous postponement of the moment of completion, in the Derridean sense of the infinite regress of the ultimate signified.

J. J. Long defines Austerlitz's personality as embodying the "archival subject":

The archive is both a symptom of Austerlitz's lack of memory *and*, at the moment of discovery that constitutes the provisional *telos* of the narrative, the resource of

the cure. There is thus no escape: Austerlitz seems to represent an extreme example of a subject constituted entirely by the archive (Long 20).

In terms of knowledge, Austerlitz is led by opposing forces; he accumulates knowledge just to keep another set of knowledge apart, however, it is only later on that he realizes his own drives and motivations. He wishes to reestablish his connections with the real dimensions of the burdened European collective consciousness; however, this means leaving the artificially created “quarantine” behind and risking a profoundly personal confrontation.

For Austerlitz buildings bear a special relevance, as they remind us of the past, about which we do not dispose of personal memories; it is the very role of these buildings to convey the spirit of the past for us, and in this way, the past becomes part of our own presence. Buildings constitute the upper, visible layer in the actual structure of a city; the previous states are in part revealed, in part concealed; in other words, architecture stands closest to the logic of memory, sharing its palimpsest-like configuration. Besides, buildings also remind us of the functioning of memory, which is not only temporal, but maybe even more significantly, also spatial: we can *recollect* memories *par excellence* through moving to and fro in space, through *collecting* scenes, spectacles, voices and smells, and in this way a – Proustian – repeated, *re-generated* spatial and sensory experience will serve as the basis of memories.

The railroad stations are highly preferred by Austerlitz (the closure of the novel will reveal the real reason for this preference); they connect space and time, being chronotopes themselves. They mark some kind of absence, they stand for places where something hinders the free flow of memories, where remembering becomes a profoundly personalised ethical task. The building of the Central Station from Antwerp – the scene of the first meeting of Austerlitz and the Sebald-narrator – stands as a memento of the nineteenth century, inserted into the present. The engineering plan of the rail lines of Broadstreet Station in London (there is also an illustration of it in the book) reminds of muscles and sinews in an anatomical atlas. The rail network is built on earlier layers, on a former graveyard in 19th century London’s poverty-stricken quarter, covering/ concealing a sea of bones.

According to Walter Benjamin, “[t]here is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256); this is the way culture and civilization stratifies, forming a present layer which conceals a deeper, past layer whose traces are forcefully effaced, nevertheless, they are there, accumulated underneath; the buildings, the cities are “traces of pain”, the carriers of the wounds of the past.

In his dialogue with Márió Nemes Z. on the uncanny modernity of Sebald’s prose, Mátyás Dunajcsik points out that

the great railroad stations, built at the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth century, in the novel also Liverpool Street Station, which is the scene of Austerlitz’s great memory shock, are paradigmatic examples of the built heritage of the past, which constitute integral parts of the everyday life of European cities, regularly used for pragmatic purposes without the awareness of their being in fact places of memory.

The impressive glass halls, built out of colonial or technological pride and enthusiasm, are deeply silent about the origin of the capital necessary for their construction, about the sufferings of the simple people who had built them, and also about the way they used to form part of the logistics of war, especially about their role in deportations. Now these buildings are not regarded as “documents of barbarism”; they are not usually approached with the state of mind tuned for remembrance and work of mourning, as we approach the cultic places of memory of World War II or Holocaust museums. This is why the presence of the memories of the dead, of the deportees and of the emigrants in these places is not something “natural” as in a cultic place of memory, but rather uncanny, pushing the self into a whirl of reflection, blurring the boundaries between the everyday life of the citizen and historical horrors, and turns the city, the whole European modernity in fact, into one huge hecatomb (Dunajcsik–Nemes “Sebaldia”, translation mine).

Thus, Austerlitz’s interest in architecture is nourished by this wish to uncover, to bring to the surface the invisible layers, the unconscious contents. This is the source of his later interest in archaeology, manifesting itself in his curiosity towards the layered structures of cities to the same extent as in his outbreking wish to explore his private *pre*-history. As a real *tour de force*, Austerlitz’s denial of the past turns into a feverish self-archaeology.

Austerlitz goes to do research into his past to the Bibliothèque Nationale from Paris: it is another example of the above-mentioned layeredness: a building with inhuman proportions, its Cartesian design disregarding the real necessities of the visiting reader. Bibliothèque Nationale appears in the novel as the symbol of institutional repression. The monumentality and inhumanity of the actual building becomes a way of expression, a possible attitude to the past, that is, repression, ignorance, indifference. The paradox of the library is that it serves as a huge archive of the past, while it actually conceals the past whose archiving it aims to carry out. As a result of Austerlitz’s research into the history of the building, it turns out that prior to the building of today’s library, there used to be a huge storehouse in its place. By the end of World War II the Germans used that storehouse to store the possessions expropriated from the Jews. What is more, the storehouse halls were called *Les Galeries d’Austerlitz*.

In a similar vein, the grandiosity of the Baroque castle with vaulted ceiling, which serves as the scene of Alain Resnais’s *Last Year in Marienbad* (*L’Année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961) breathes the air of impassivity and disquieting foreignness. The film constitutes a significant intertext of Sebald’s novel: Marienbad is a determining stage of Austerlitz’s journey. The allusive Sebaldian sentence – “We left from here for Marienbad only last summer” – instantly triggers the visual connotation in the cinephile reader, who may be overwhelmed by a peculiar *déjà vu* impression: as a spectator s/he has already toured these spaces where s/he now returns as a reader. Thus, the novel activates the reader’s cultural memory; on the one hand, the transmediated experience serves to convey the mediatedness of memory, on the other hand, it tells “an enigmatic tale of indeterminate institutional repression” (Frey 229).

Thus, what has been concealed for Austerlitz brings his “own” story close to the Holocaust trauma of European history, more precisely, to a Central European

scene, namely the Prague of World War II, from where Austerlitz is rescued by a train transporting Jewish children to Britain. However, the parents remain in the lethal environment; after finding out about his Central European roots, Austerlitz goes back to Prague along the track of the effaced traces of his lost childhood. His memories seem to be revived, among others, by the patterns of the floor tile of a dwelling-house from Prague reminding of the geometrical shape of Belgian fortress of Breendonk.

The Fort of Breendonk was built at the beginning of the 20th century to defend Belgium against a German attack and was used as a prison camp by the Nazis during World War II. The star-shaped fortress built in the spirit of the architectural ideals of the Enlightenment, stands for a cultural-historical paradigm which represented the connection between central power and reason with the help of architectural metaphors. In the depth of the Enlightenment logic there lies the stage of terror, the dark centre of monumentality. When Austerlitz visits Breendonk, the “monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence” earlier in the novel, he experiences that the ideal geometrical shape exists only from a bird’s eye view, from a human perspective it is but an amorphous mass of concrete, suggesting the irrationality of the power that conceived it. The dark truth of the star-shaped fortress becomes part of the network of the places which are signs of the cipher of violence in European history (cf. Dunajcsik–Nemes “Sebaldia”).

In Prague Austerlitz finds Věra, his nursemaid; the traces of his mother, Agáta lead towards the ghetto from Theresienstadt, where they are definitely lost, whereas he will lose trace of his father, Maximilian in Paris. At the end of the novel, when Austerlitz, brooding over the façade of the Gare d’Austerlitz from Paris, from where his father had probably left Paris in the direction of the concentration camps, Austerlitz recalls his earlier memories when he felt as if he had been on the premises of an unretaliated crime. In this moment of simultaneous reflection and recollection, the personal name (Austerlitz), also consonant with the sounding of the word Auschwitz, and the placename (Gare d’Austerlitz) become metaleptically interchangeable; Austerlitz’s private history will stand for Europe’s collective history.

According to Aleida Assmann, the traumatic place is “multi-faceted, ambiguous, and associated with different memories and interpretations” (221) as

it disposes of the aura of the topographic-historical “here-and-now”, however, as a result of the musealisation of the world and of the institutionalisation of cultural memory, it can be perceived in the in-betweenness of authenticity and artificiality. The traumatic place is further characterised by palimpsest-like feature and multiperspectivity, thus, differently from traditional places of memory, it cannot be appropriated with the help of ritual acts of memory, as there always remains an untalisable difference or “rupture” which displaces the framing-filling endeavours (Dunajcsik–Nemes “Sebaldia”, translation mine).

Gare d’Austerlitz, the living wound on the body of Europe, will stand as a memento, as the place of memory, not in the sense of cultic, ceremonial

recollection, but in that of profound personal involvement and awareness of the ethical responsibility of remembering.

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