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**Towards a “Living Connection With the Past”: Ludwig Wittgenstein and  
the Representation of History in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz***

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**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed by candidate

Date:

27/10/09

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## ABSTRACT

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This dissertation utilises certain aspects of the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein to explore W.G. Sebald's representation of history in his novel *Austerlitz* (2001). Wittgenstein is explicitly mentioned in the text of the novel; this dissertation argues that his philosophy can help us to understand Sebald's project of restoring the past through literary engagement.

In the first chapter I explore Sebald's critical writings on the literary representation of history, and show that these works give valuable insight into this aspect of Sebald's own literature. Furthermore, I argue that Sebald's critical writing can be usefully validated, elucidated and supplemented by Wittgenstein's central philosophical investigation into the representation of history, his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" (1993). By drawing on Sebald and Wittgenstein's primary texts, and on various critical responses to them, I show that both Sebald and Wittgenstein advocate a subjective, personal understanding of history, and that both argue for a model which represents history "synoptically" or "perspicuously" by emphasising various *connections*: between historical facts, between the facts and our personal responses to them, and between historical events and the "forms of life" of those who were involved.

The second chapter explores the manifestation of this "Sebaldian," "Wittgensteinian" model of historical representation in *Austerlitz*. Through a close reading of the novel, I investigate Jacques Austerlitz's attempts to understand his personal history, and to make the various types of connections which Sebald and Wittgenstein advocate. In addition to the theoretical tools created in the last chapter, this discussion is informed by the writing of several of Sebald's critics, the "later" Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, and the writing of Jean Améry. However, this chapter also shows that Austerlitz fails to attain a synoptic, perspicuous view of his past, and argues that, for him, this would be impossible – aside from the fact that certain crucial pieces of information and evidence of his past are missing, Austerlitz is confronted with too many possible connections, and frequent excesses of emotional and associative meaning.

The third chapter explores the consequences of Austerlitz's failure to make full sense of his personal history. By drawing an analogy between Austerlitz's investigation of his past, the novel's representation of history, and Wittgenstein's failed attempt in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1958) to give an overview of the whole of language, I argue that *Austerlitz* rejects the synoptic, perspicuous, elevated view of history (which both Sebald and Wittgenstein recommend in the writing on historical representation) for a situated, endless exploration of history. The chapter concludes by arguing that it is precisely through this representative approach that the novel attains the status of a text which maintains a "living connection with the past," since it forces us to participate in an endless investigation of history. The discussion in this chapter draws heavily on critical interpretations of Wittgenstein, especially those of David Schalkwyk.

The Conclusion briefly considers the advantageous implications that a discussion of the resonances between Sebald and Wittgenstein's work (as is attempted in this dissertation) could have for the fields of Sebald *and* Wittgenstein scholarship.

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## INTRODUCTION

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The end pages of W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001) offer a scathing critique of an architectural site, a critique which can also be read as a literary manifesto. Jacques Austerlitz, the protagonist of the novel, visits the Grande Bibliothèque in Paris, where he hopes to find traces of his father, who was deported from the city during the Second World War. However, Austerlitz finds that the library cannot help him in his search, since it is built and organised in such a way as to be "unwelcoming if not inimical to human beings, and runs counter, on principle, [...] to the requirements of any true reader" (2001: 386). Furthermore, the library stands on the former site of a Nazi warehouse that held the possessions of the Jews who were deported from Paris, among whom Austerlitz's father may very possibly have been. Their property remains "in the hands of the city and the state to this day," and "no-one will now admit to knowing" where they went (2001: 402-403). For both these reasons, the library is condemned as "the official manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything that still has some *living connection with the past*" (2001: 398; my emphasis).

Austerlitz's condemnation of the library highlights several central concerns of Sebald's literature. It is an argument for the maintenance of a living connection with the past, and an attack on those forces which, according to Mark McCulloh in *Understanding W.G. Sebald*, are "bent on neutralising all historical consciousness; they are continually wiping the slate clean, as if the experience of living – of having lived – means nothing" (2003: 109). The very structure of the Grande Bibliothèque makes it an active means of resistance against the uncovering of the past, and its concealment of the shameful history of the Parisians' treatment of their Jewish fellow citizens means that it participates in what Sebald called a "conspiracy of silence" about the victims of the Second World War, which he railed against in various interviews and articles of literary criticism (Sebald cited in Silverblatt, 2007: 84). The library denies the living presence of the past, even as that past supplies a part of its means of existence.

However, the discussion of the library is not only a condemnation, but a challenge. Sebald is suggesting, perhaps, that an institution which accumulates information as the library does is

not the best way to maintain a living connection with the past. If this is the case, how *can* the past be kept alive? For Sebald, this was precisely the task of *literature*. When asked in an interview whether literature has a special role to play in remembrance, Sebald said that “the moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory” (Sebald cited in Jaggi, 2001a: online). In various critical pieces, Sebald argues that literature has an ethical duty to act as a form of remembrance of subjects such as the aerial bombing attacks on Germany (in “Air War and Literature” (2004a) and related articles) or the Holocaust (in “Constructs of Mourning” (2006a) and other articles). Furthermore, the literary treatment of the past should, according to Sebald, be concerned with more than the remembrance of facts and events, important as these objectives are. In his speech “An Attempt at Restitution,” Sebald asks: “So what is literature good for?,” and answers: “There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts and over and above scholarship” (2006b: 214-215). What, exactly, can literature restore? And has Sebald managed to achieve this restitution in his own work?

These questions have exercised many of Sebald’s commentators. The field of Sebald scholarship presents a variety of combined critical and theoretical positions from which to interpret Sebald’s literary representation of history. The diversity of these approaches is testament to the complexity of Sebald’s writing, which engages with many of the central preoccupations of contemporary critical theory. Some critics propose psychoanalytic readings of Sebald’s explorations of memory and trauma, and offer Freudian and Lacanian interpretations of how these concepts affect the remembrance of the past,<sup>1</sup> how Sebald uses externalised phenomena to represent the working of memory,<sup>2</sup> or focus on the concept of “postmemory,” and the constructed and invariably mediated nature of shared historical narratives.<sup>3</sup> Other critics explore elements of Sebald’s style, such as his use and interrogation

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<sup>1</sup> See Anne Whitehead’s *Trauma Fiction* (2004) and Dora Osborne’s “Blind Spots: Viewing Trauma in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*” (2007).

<sup>2</sup> See Russel J.A. Kilbourn’s “Architecture and Cinema: The Representation of Memory in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*” (2004).

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Crownshaw’s “Reconsidering Postmemory: Photography, the Archive, and Post-Holocaust Memory in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*” (2004).

of photography as a medium of historical remembrance and representation,<sup>4</sup> his transgressive blending of fact and fiction,<sup>5</sup> and the distinctive prose style he uses to depict historical events.<sup>6</sup> Still others attempt to locate Sebald within a socio-political and literary context, investigating his texts in relation to others which deal with similar subjects, such as the Holocaust<sup>7</sup> and the Allied air raids on Germany during the Second World War,<sup>8</sup> or finding points of comparison with other historians or thinkers about historiography such as Nietzsche and Benjamin.<sup>9</sup> These are just some of the approaches to Sebald's representation of history, a subject which has clearly undergone close scrutiny, and which this dissertation aims to enlarge through the utilisation of a theoretical resource which has so far received little attention in Sebald scholarship: the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's philosophy might seem an odd choice for examining Sebald's attempt to maintain a living connection with the past through literature. Wittgenstein is famous for his writings on logic and language, and is rarely regarded as a philosopher of literature or of history. In fact, he was by all accounts fundamentally opposed to any theorising about art, including literature. However, there are several reasons for considering Wittgenstein a relevant commentator on these subjects. Firstly, it is clear that Wittgenstein's influence is not confined to the field of logical and linguistic philosophy; as A.C. Grayling notes in *Wittgenstein*, "his name is mentioned surprisingly often and in a surprising variety of connections" among non-philosophers (1996: 1). This is especially true of his influence on and popularity among artists, a phenomenon that has been noted by many critics, including Terry Eagleton, who has himself written a novel, *Saints and Scholars* (1987), which features

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<sup>4</sup> See Carolin Duttlinger's "Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*" (2004), J.J. Long's "History, Narrative, and Photography in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*" (2003), and Elinor Shaffer's "W.G. Sebald's Photographic Narrative" (2005).

<sup>5</sup> See Todd Samuel Presner's "'What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals': Extreme History and the Modernism of W.G. Sebald's Realism" (2004).

<sup>6</sup> See Jonathan Lamb's "Sterne, Sebald, and Siege Architecture" (2007).

<sup>7</sup> See Philip Schlesinger's "W.G. Sebald and the Condition of Exile" (2004), Julia Hell's "Eyes Wide Shut: German Post-Holocaust Authorship" (2003), and Ernestine's Schlant's *The Language of Silence – West German Literature and the Holocaust* (1999).

<sup>8</sup> See Wilfried Wilms' "Taboo and Repression in W.G. Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction*" (2004).

<sup>9</sup> See Karin Bauer's "The Dystopian Entwinement of Histories and Identities in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*" (2006).

Wittgenstein as a central character, and a screenplay for a film based on Wittgenstein's life.

In his foreword to the published text of the screenplay, Eagleton writes:

The library of artistic works on Ludwig Wittgenstein continues to accumulate. What is it about this man, whose philosophy can be taxing and technical enough, which so fascinates the *artistic* imagination? Frege is a philosopher's philosopher, Bertrand Russell every shopkeeper's image of the sage, and Sartre the media's idea of an intellectual; but Wittgenstein is the philosopher of poets and composers, playwrights and novelists, and snatches of his mighty *Tractatus* have even been set to music.

(1993: 5; original emphasis)

W.G. Sebald has, in *Austerlitz*, fallen under the spell of "fascination" with Wittgenstein, and the novel contains many explicit and hidden references to the philosopher. One of the first pictures in the novel is a detail of Wittgenstein's eyes, interleaved with text which speaks of "the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain [...] philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking".<sup>10</sup>



(Sebald, 2001: 3)

Eagleton notes that Wittgenstein's character and biography are inherently fascinating, and that his life has a "fabular or fairy-tale quality" about it which holds a great attraction for

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that the metaphor of "penetrating the darkness" has been used to describe Wittgenstein before. Rudolf Carnap, who attended several of Wittgenstein's meetings with the Vienna Circle in 1927, describes the group's encounters with Wittgenstein in the following way: "When he started to formulate his view on some specific philosophical problem, we often felt the internal struggle that occurred in him at that very moment, a struggle by which he tried to penetrate from darkness into light under an intense and painful strain, which was even visible on his most expressive face" (Carnap cited in Monk, 1991: 244).

novelists and dramatists in particular, since it “lends itself easily to literary or dramatic representation” (Eagleton, 1993: 5). In *Austerlitz*, Sebald uses elements of his life to inform the character of Jacques Austerlitz, whom, he admitted in an interview, was “quite consciously” “modelled” on Wittgenstein<sup>11</sup> (Baker, 2001: online).<sup>12</sup> Early in the novel the narrator forms the idea of “a certain physical likeness” between Austerlitz and Wittgenstein, and writes that

now, whenever I see a photograph of Wittgenstein somewhere or other, I feel more and more as if Austerlitz were gazing at me out of it, and when I look at Austerlitz it is as if I see in him the disconsolate philosopher, a man locked into the glaring clarity of his logical thinking as inextricably as into his confused emotions, so striking is the likeness between the two of them: in stature, in the way they study one as if across an invisible barrier, in the makeshift organisation of their lives, in a wish to manage with as few possessions as possible, and in the inability, typical of Austerlitz as it was of Wittgenstein, to linger over any kind of preliminaries.

(Sebald, 2001: 55-56)

This is not the only allusion to Wittgenstein in *Austerlitz*, which contains several unreferenced quotations from Wittgenstein’s writing. This should not be surprising, since Wittgenstein’s prose has a certain artistic and poetic quality to it, and this quality is another reason for the artistic fascination with him. Wittgenstein himself said that “philosophy ought really to be written as a form of poetic composition” (Wittgenstein cited in Schalkwyk,

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, *Austerlitz* is not the only novel in which Sebald has alluded to Wittgenstein. In *The Emigrants* (1996), the character Paul Bereyter is, by Sebald’s own admission, partly based on Wittgenstein, and his story particularly alludes to Wittgenstein’s period as a primary school teacher in rural Germany (Angier, 2007: 72-73). For a discussion of this part of Wittgenstein’s career, see Ray Monk’s seminal biography *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (1991), pages 192-233. Throughout this dissertation, I have relied on Monk’s work as my main source on Wittgenstein’s life.

<sup>12</sup> In the interview he goes on to express a personal fascination with Wittgenstein’s life:

The astonishing places that were the scenes of [Wittgenstein’s] life are for me a source of endless fascination [...] And of course Wittgenstein went to Manchester as a young man, as I did, although I didn’t know about that at the time. I have this thing about feeling close to the people who have passed through the same streets I have. Once you’re fascinated with them they stay with you.

(Baker, 2001: online)

2004a: 56).<sup>13</sup> In *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, Marjorie Perloff notes that Wittgenstein's "Heraclitean epigrams easily shade into poetry," and "open up new spaces, as 'poetic' as they are 'philosophical'" (1996: 9; 23). Thus we find in *Austerlitz* several Wittgensteinian phrases, similes and metaphors: among others, there is talk of "family resemblances," the comparison of language to an ancient city, and a re-rendering of Wittgenstein's most famous statement, the last proposition of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence"<sup>14</sup> (1961: §7)<sup>15</sup> (Sebald, 2001: 168; 174-5; 194).

However, the resonances between the work of Sebald and Wittgenstein do not end there. In this dissertation, I will show that Wittgenstein's actual *philosophy* can help us to understand a very specific facet of Sebald's writing: his literary attempt to maintain a "living connection with the past," to restore it "over and above the mere recital of facts and over and above scholarship." For the sake of clarity and simplicity, my discussion will focus on the novel *Austerlitz* which, as we have seen, contains many references to Wittgenstein.

In the first chapter I will address the question: how can literature maintain a "living connection with the past"? To do so, I will explore Wittgenstein's central engagement with historical representation, a collection of criticisms of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922). In the "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" (1993), Wittgenstein makes a number of recommendations for a "living" representation of history, one that does justice to the facts by going over and above them. As I will show, these are remarkably similar to Sebald's recommendations for the literary representation of history, as put forward in his literary criticism. Although Sebald did not produce any comprehensive theoretical writing on this subject, some of his critical works, particularly "Air War and Literature" and "Between History and Natural History: On the Literary Description of Total Destruction" (2006c), present clear thoughts on literary historical representation. Many critics have noted the

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<sup>13</sup> Although the remark is collected in *Culture and Value* (1998), I have used Schalkwyk's translation in "Wittgenstein's Imperfect Garden" (2004a), since Schalkwyk convincingly argues that his translation has greater fidelity to the original German than the rendering in *Culture and Value*.

<sup>14</sup> This rendering of the statement is different from the most common translation, which reads: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (see Perloff, 1996 and Schalkwyk, 1996). I have chosen this translation for consistency, since it is from the same source translation as my other quotations from the *Tractatus*.

<sup>15</sup> I will return to Sebald's reformulation of this statement in the third chapter.

relevance of Sebald's literary criticism to the understanding of his novels; few, however, have considered one as a kind of blueprint for the other. By illustrating the similarities between Sebald's literary criticism, Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer, and *Austerlitz*, I will show that Sebald's literary criticism allows us to understand the form, central preoccupations and method of his novels. Wittgenstein is crucial to this discussion, since his work both validates Sebald's ideas and clarifies their underlying principles. I will argue that both authors think that a representation of history, if it is to maintain a living connection with the past, must focus on and illuminate the personal connection that we have with history. To this end, the representation of history must create and draw attention to various types of *connections*: between historical "facts," between the historical facts and the "forms of life" (a Wittgensteinian concept which I will explain in due course) of the historical subjects, and, most importantly, between history and our present selves. Crucially, both Wittgenstein and Sebald think that historical representation is meant to display all these connections in such a way that they can be seen clearly and simultaneously; Wittgenstein calls this a "perspicuous representation;" Sebald calls it a "synoptic view."

The second chapter will consider *Austerlitz* as an application and manifestation of the model of historical representation outlined in the first chapter. In this novel, Sebald has met his own demands of literary representation by writing the story of Jacques Austerlitz, a man who has an urgent personal need to investigate history: as he expresses it at the start of his story, he has never known who he "really is" (Sebald, 2001: 60). Austerlitz's investigation is primarily concerned with finding and understanding connections: between his early and present self, his present connection to his early "form of life," the connection between the things he finds in his investigation, and their connection to himself. Through an application of Sebald and Wittgenstein's ideas, which will be expanded and contextualised by the writing of Jean Améry, I will show how Austerlitz attempts to form these connections. As I will argue, Austerlitz needs to understand his entire history in the form of a "synoptic view" or "perspicuous representation," which will allow him to see all these various connections, and tie them together to form an idea of who he really is. It is here, however, where *Austerlitz* problematises and challenges the model of historical representation recommended by Sebald and Wittgenstein. At the end of his investigative journey (or rather, as he and the narrator of the novel part ways, seemingly forever), Austerlitz has not managed to attain a synoptic view which connects all the elements of his past; he himself admits that he does not "know what

all this means” (2001: 408). This failure is due, on the one hand, to the fact that some crucial elements of his search are lost forever. However, this is not the only reason. As I will show, Austerlitz’s inability to see his past perspicuously is a direct consequence of his investigation itself. The field of enquiry is too vast to be surveyed synoptically, and the number of possible connections are simply too many. Therefore, this chapter will show how *Austerlitz* both applies *and* problematises Sebald and Wittgenstein’s recommendations for literary historical representation.

The third chapter will interrogate the idea of a synoptic view of history, and show that it is precisely in the “failure” of Austerlitz to attain such a view that the novel maintains a truly living connection with the past. I will argue that *Austerlitz* is a literary work which, while showing the desirability of a synoptic view of history, represents the past from a situated, exploratory perspective. To illustrate Sebald’s method, I will explore the resonances between Austerlitz’s investigation of his past, the novel’s representation of history, and Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1958). Referring to David Schalkwyk’s commentaries on Wittgenstein, I will show that Wittgenstein’s failure to attain an elevated, perspicuous view of the whole of language, the stated aim of his work, is *analogous* to Austerlitz’s failure to attain a synoptic view of his past. Both fail for the same reasons: their objects of investigation are too big to be surveyed in their entirety, and they are too situated in these objects to rise above them and see them aright. Furthermore, I will argue that Sebald represents history as Wittgenstein does language: as a vast field of possible meanings and connections which cannot be seen synoptically, but must be explored from a situated perspective. By representing history in this way, Sebald engages with some of the tasks which Wittgenstein sets for philosophy: he shows us the contextual situatedness of meaning, as well as the immense variety of “language-games” which can be used to understand and represent the past. Lastly, I will argue that Sebald represents the exploration of history as an unending journey. Just as Wittgenstein saw philosophy as a task of “clarification without end,” Austerlitz cannot ever end his investigation of his past. By recounting Austerlitz’s story, Sebald creates a text which demonstrates that the investigation of history cannot ever be complete. It is in this way that *Austerlitz* maintains a living connection with the past.

Since the argument of the dissertation effectively ends in the third chapter, the conclusion will be a necessarily brief discussion of the overall contribution which this dissertation makes

to the fields of Sebald *and* Wittgenstein scholarship. I will argue that, aside from exploring Sebald's explicit and intertextual references to Wittgenstein, a subject which has received little attention in Sebald scholarship, my investigation of the relationship between the writer and philosopher provides a valuable solution to the question of Sebald's representation of history. Conversely, I will also argue that *Austerlitz*, through its engagement with Wittgenstein's philosophy, is a text which can help us to understand that philosophy. Most importantly, though, this dissertation shows that the novel fulfils literature's responsibility to history by both forcing us to remember, and by making us question our ways of remembrance. In *Austerlitz*, Sebald has managed to meet his own high demands.

Before proceeding to the dissertation proper, I must acknowledge the debt which this work owes to Professor David Schalkwyk. Professor Schalkwyk introduced me to this topic during a seminar in 2007 and supervised the early stages of the dissertation writing process. Though he has not (to my knowledge) published any work on the relationship between Wittgenstein and Sebald, I have found his published interpretations of Wittgenstein's philosophy immensely useful to my own work.

# CHAPTER 1:

## LITERATURE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF HISTORY

**history** *n.* Note the ambiguity: an account of certain events, or the events themselves.

– *Dictionary of Philosophy*

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### 1.1 Introduction

What role does literature have to play in the remembrance and understanding of history? This question greatly exercised W.G. Sebald, who attempted to answer it in various articles, books and speeches. His four novels and first published poem also had this question as their central concern. All his literary works explore the remembrance of the past in one way or another; in *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*, the content is presented as a series of historical investigations. In his speech “An Attempt at Restitution,” Sebald asks what literature is “good for,” and answers: “There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts and over and above scholarship” (2006b: 214-215). What form should such restitution take, and what can it tell us?

In this chapter, I will address the question of literary historical representation by examining Sebald’s own thoughts on the subject, as expressed in his works of literary criticism. I will particularly focus on two works, “Air War and Literature” and “Between History and Natural History: On the Literary Description of Total Destruction,” both of which deal with the literary engagement with the Allied air war against Germany. My discussion of these pieces is not concerned with the political or historical validity of Sebald’s claims, but with the general demands he makes of historical literature, as these demands illuminate his approach to his own literary work.

In “Eyes Wide Shut: German Post-Holocaust Authorship,” Julia Hell states that “Air War and Literature” can be read as Sebald’s poetics, “but an inconsistent poetics, internally conflicted and contradicting his other texts” (2003: 29). Indeed, the lecture and the articles relating to it do present some apparent contradictions, particularly between Sebald’s advocacy of both an objective, factual view of history, and a subjective, “metaphysical” engagement with it. On the one hand, he argues that historical literature must stick to the facts, and on the other notes that the facts are not always enough, and need to be supplemented. He holds that understanding the past and its connection to the present is vital, but also that these connections are sometimes inexplicable, and that this inexplicability must be admitted. I will show, however, that these demands are not necessarily contradictory, but form a sophisticated and coherent view of the function of historical literature. In the next chapter, I will show that Sebald has realised and developed this view in *Austerlitz*.

To clarify and supplement Sebald’s thoughts, I will compare them to Wittgenstein’s writing on historical representation in his “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*.” Wittgenstein’s Remarks share many of Sebald’s concerns, and are above all an attempt to formulate a model of historical representation which will help us to understand history. However, this understanding cannot come about through causal “explanation,” but must give us clarity about our intellectual and emotional relation to history. As I will show, Wittgenstein and Sebald’s thoughts on how such an understanding can be created through historical representation are remarkably similar. In showing the similarities between Wittgenstein and Sebald’s thoughts, I aim to do two things. Firstly, I argue for the validity of Sebald’s claims by using Wittgenstein to show that they are adequate responses to philosophical issues about historical representation. Secondly, my aim is to create a theoretical tool which will help us to understand Sebald’s representation of history in *Austerlitz*. However, I am not claiming that Wittgenstein and Sebald’s thoughts correlate exactly. This would not be possible, since Sebald is writing about historical literature, whereas Wittgenstein is criticising an anthropological text. As such, their writings have different intentions. However, I will show that there are definite correlations, and that Wittgenstein is a useful supplement to Sebald. For the sake of clarity I will first discuss Sebald’s critical writing, then Wittgenstein’s remarks on Frazer, and then the similarities between the two. This last discussion will lead into the next chapter.

Before proceeding further, I need to clarify my use of the terms “history” and “historical.” As the epigraph to this chapter states, the word “history” is ambiguous: we use it to refer to the actual events of the past, *and* to our accounts of these events, and there is, inevitably, always a “gap” between these two things. In recent decades, many branches of literary criticism (feminist, postcolonial, Marxist, deconstructionist, and so on) have shown the various ways in which historical accounts are by nature constructs (whether subjective or in the service of ideological ends), and have questioned whether it is actually possible to give a “true” account of the events of the past. In diverse ways, the very idea of “history,” as a set of “facts” which can be viewed “objectively,” has been problematised. Nevertheless, in order to discuss Sebald and Wittgenstein’s writing, I am using terms such as “history,” “historical facts” and “historical events” in the innocent sense: “history” denotes that which was before the present; “historical” facts and events are what existed and happened then. However, both Sebald and Wittgenstein are aware that our understanding of history is always shaped by our accounts of it; as we will see, both strive to articulate a set of principles which will facilitate a *specific type of account* of history, one which is reliant on extra-factual interpretation and, in Sebald’s case, fictional intervention to create meaning. Furthermore, *Austerlitz* problematises the very idea of a “factual” history, since its protagonist has to rely on unconfirmable memories and recountings as much as on direct experience and documentary evidence in order to form a personally intelligible account of his past. As such, both Wittgenstein and Sebald already question the idea of an “objective” history, and attempt to formulate a model for a subjective and personally useful one. I therefore believe that my “innocent” use of these terms is justified, since it facilitates a discussion of Sebald and Wittgenstein’s complex interrogation of the concepts inherent in them.

## 1.2 “*A quoi bon la littérature?*”

In various articles and lectures, Sebald criticises post-war German literature’s inability, or unwillingness, to come to terms with (or even remember) Germany’s past. In the article “Between History and Natural History” and the lecture “Air War and Literature,” he discusses this phenomenon in relation to the aerial bombing of Germany during the Second

World War. Sebald is convinced that “if those born after the war were to rely solely on the testimony of writers, they would scarcely be able to form any idea of the extent, nature and consequences of the catastrophe inflicted on Germany by the air raids” (2004a: 69). The literature which was produced “is of relatively slight value as a source of information on the objective reality of the time, more particularly the devastation of the German cities and the patterns of psychological and social behaviour affected by it” (2006c: 70).

Sebald’s response to this lack takes the form of a complex polemic. “Between History and Natural History” is a scathing critique of various writers, with occasional praise for those who managed to give some insight into the historical events. “Air War and Literature” takes this approach further, and combines it with Sebald’s own “artificial and synoptic view” of the air raids, as well as autobiographical reflection (2004a: 26). In these discussions, Sebald does not present a sustained theory of literary historical representation. However, he does put forward several demands which give a clear picture of his view of literature’s duty towards history.

One of the most striking aspects of these works is Sebald’s demand that historical literature must contain factual, objective information about its subject. In “Air War and Literature,” he describes reading post-war German literature “hoping to glean more *information* about the monstrous events” (2004a: 70; my emphasis). To this end, he advocates the use, even in literary works, of historical documentary evidence. He praises Hubert Fichte’s novel *Detleivs Imitationen ‘Grünspan’* (1982) for including a genuine historical document, in the form of a medical account of an autopsy of a burn victim (2004a: 60-61). Sebald states that “all fiction pales” before “the informative value of such authentic documents” (2004a: 61). Importantly, “documentary evidence” is not limited to official documents such as the medical text. Sebald also praises Alexander Kluge’s use of photographs in *Gesichte und Eigensinn* (1981), and notes that the value of Frederich Reck’s wartime diary, later published as *Tagebuch eine Verzweifelten* (1994), “can hardly be overestimated as genuine contemporary evidence” (2004: 66, 23).

Sebald sees this factual approach as the answer to the aestheticisation of horrific subjects such as the air raids on Germany, which he considers unforgivable. He accuses writers such as Hermann Kasack, author of the apocalyptic postwar novel *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom* (1978), of constructing “aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated

world” by writing pretentious mythical narratives, which deprive “literature of its right to exist” (Sebald, 2004: 53). Conversely, Sebald praises Hans Erich Nossack’s “Der Untergang” in *Interview Mit dem Tode* (1972) for its “entirely unpretentious objectivity,” which “proves itself the only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction” (Sebald, 2004: 53). Such an approach is needed when dealing with “a subject exceeding anything in the artistic imagination,” since what is called for is a new approach to writing fiction (Sebald, 2006: 80). Instead of the grandiose semi-philosophical epic, Nossack simply recounts the various details of the event. He “experiments with the prosaic genre of the report, the documentary account, the investigation, to make room for the historical contingency that breaks the mould of the culture of the novel” (Sebald, 2006: 80-81). This approach is also the solution to Germany’s convenient amnesia:

The ideal of truth contained in the form of an entirely unpretentious report proves to be the irreducible foundation of all literary effort. It crystallizes resistance to the human faculty of suppressing any memories that might in some way be an obstacle to the continuance of life.

(2006: 86)

However, Sebald is not arguing that all literature which deals with history must become pure documentary. To achieve the needed account of the “objective reality,” some interpretation of the facts is required, since they cannot always speak for themselves. For example, Sebald does not trust the supposed objectivity of eyewitness reports of mass destruction, since the trauma of the experience impairs the ability to give an accurate account of it (2004: 26). He notes that eyewitness reports also have a “curious vacuity,” a “tendency to follow a set routine and go over and over the same material” (2004: 80). Furthermore, eyewitness accounts cannot fully do justice to “the immensity of the event,” since they only recount a small part of it, as Jonathan Lamb puts it in “Sterne, Sebald and Siege Architecture” (2007: 25). Such accounts, therefore, are “of only qualified value,” and must “be supplemented by what a synoptic and artificial view reveals” (Sebald, 2004: 26).

Sebald never defines the exact nature of this “synoptic and artificial view.” However, “Air War and Literature” perhaps *shows* us what such a view would look like. In “‘What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals’: Extreme History and the Modernism of W.G. Sebald’s Realism” (2004), Todd Samuel Presner argues that we can see Sebald’s attempt to

attain this view in his account of the firebombing of Hamburg. Sebald's account starts by giving the wider context of the firebombing, describing how it fitted into the RAF's broad plan of the total destruction of German cities, and then describes the events of the night of Hamburg's destruction. Here, Sebald gives both an overall description of the effect of the firebombing, noting the height and temperatures of the flames. He describes the effects of the destruction on both buildings and objects, and on the bodies of the victims. He then moves on to the aftermath of the bombing, describing the exodus from the city and the efforts of the punishment labour gangs to clear away the corpses. Finally, Sebald quotes the responses of various journalists and writers to the event (Sebald, 2004: 26-31).

What is remarkable about this account is its utilisation of diverse sources of information and its combination of those sources to produce a single account. As Presner writes,

Sebald has spliced together information and experiences culled from a multiplicity of perspectives: the U.S. Air Force and the RAF, the bomber pilots in the planes, eyewitnesses on the ground, as well as reports made by meteorologists, police, survivors, punishment battalions, and historians. His description oscillates between global and local views, perspectives from above and below, points of view within and external to the bombing, and, finally, knowledge gained before, during and after the catastrophe.

(Presner, 2004: 354)

Furthermore, Sebald does not merely reproduce factual information, but supplements it with his own literary and aesthetic descriptions, and employs what Lamb calls "figurative language" (2007: 25). Sebald personifies the fire caused by the bombs by saying that it "violently" "snatched oxygen to itself," and invites us to imagine the experiences of those who died and what they saw (Sebald, 2004: 27). In this way, "it is the imaginary and fictional that contributes to and extends the real and historical" (Presner, 2004: 351).

Sebald's account of the firebombing of Hamburg is both artificial and synoptic. It is artificial because it presents the view of someone (Sebald) who was not directly involved, and is writing about the events half a century later (Presner, 2004: 351). It is also artificial because it recounts and visualises events which no eyewitness could possibly have seen (Presner, 2004: 351). It is synoptic in two senses of the word. The *Chambers Dictionary* defines "synoptic" as "affording or taking a general view of the whole" (2006: 1549). Sebald's account, which

condenses the destruction of an entire city into five pages, certainly does afford us a general view of an historical event. However, if we trace the word “synoptic” to its etymological roots, we find that it is derived from the Greek word “synopsis,” which is itself a composite of “syn,” meaning “with” or “together,” and “opsis,” meaning “a view” (2006: 1549). A “synoptic view” is thus a “together-view,” or a view which sees things together. Sebald’s account of the Hamburg fire-bombing is certainly such a view, since it connects various facts, descriptions and experiences, and also allows us to see the event from several perspectives simultaneously.

We can see, then, that Sebald’s “artificial and synoptic view” is one which brings several historical elements into connection with each other. For Sebald, this is vital, since it does justice to the immensity of the event. However, this view by itself is not enough. Sebald not only wants to “see” the historical event, but to understand its *meaning*. This desire is articulated at the start of “Air War and Literature,” where Sebald, after quoting several statistics and figures to demonstrate the extent of the destruction, states that “we do not grasp what it all actually meant” (2004: 3). For Sebald, understanding the meaning of historical events is not only a matter of seeing these events synoptically, but also of relating them to our present circumstances.

We can see Sebald’s insistence on this notion in his praise of Kluge’s short story collection *Neue Geschichten. Hefte 1-18* (1977). Sebald commends this work as an example of how “personal involvement in collective experience” can be made meaningful by “relating it to immediately preceding events and later developments, to the present and to possible future perspectives” (2006: 90). Although Kluge discusses the various military, political and economic factors of the aerial bombings, Sebald finds that “the point upon which the author’s didactic intention turns” is “the link between the vast extent of the destruction ‘produced’ by human beings and the reality we experience daily” (2006: 98). The “meaning” of the air raids is the principle “that fundamentally everything is just a matter of organisation,” which is discernable in both the raids and our present daily activities (2006: 98). Kluge is thus able to relate historical fact to present-day life. Sebald quotes a description of an air raid which combines historical facts with subtle authorial interjection, and notes that “Kluge’s way of providing his documentary material with vectors through his presentation of it transfers what he quotes into the context of our own present” (2006: 100). Citing Bowie, Sebald argues that

Kluge uses “*details* to illustrate the main current of the dismal course so far taken by history” (2006: 99; original emphasis). Kluge picks facts and historical incidents which “correspond [...] neither to the pattern of retrospective historiography nor to the fictional story, nor do they try to offer a philosophy of history” (2006: 99). Instead, Kluge’s selection and arrangement of facts is “a form of reflection on all these methods of ours for understanding the world,” and thus give insight into our relation to history itself (2006: 99).

This attraction to Kluge’s method is due, perhaps, to the fact that Sebald’s need to investigate the air war originated in his desire to understand how it relates to his own life. Although he was too young to remember the destruction of Germany, and lived in an area not affected by the bombings, he maintains that, when he sees images of the war, he feels “as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience had cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge” (2004: 71). Towards the end of the lecture, he writes the following about the “few points at which [his] own life touches the history of the air war”:

Entirely insignificant in themselves, they have none the less haunted my mind, and finally impelled me to go at least a little way into the question of why German writers would not or could not describe the destruction of the German cities as millions experienced it.

(2004: 78-79)

We can see, then, that the task of historical literature is one of *connection*. Literature must connect the facts of history, and the perspectives from which history is viewed, into a synoptic whole. Furthermore, literature must connect history to our present circumstances, as our need to investigate history is often a personal one. This view of the literary representation of history, expressed in Sebald’s critical writing, resonates with his thoughts on his own literary work. In the speech “An Attempt at Restitution,” Sebald describes his method of writing as functioning by “adhering to an exact historical perspective, in patiently engraving and linking together apparently disparate things in the manner of a still life” (2006: 210). In his work, he keeps asking himself “what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run” (2006: 210). However, Sebald is also suspicious of any attempt to make sense of these connections through a form of causal explanation. In the same speech, Sebald asks:

*A quoi bon la littérature?* [What is literature good for?] Perhaps only to help us to remember, and teach us to understand that some strange connections cannot be explained by causal logic.

(2006: 213-214)

Sebald's interest in the personal relationship to history, and his resistance to explanation and causal logic, are perhaps related to what he called his "metaphysical" interest in history. In an interview given in 2001, Sebald spoke of his regular research trips to the War Archive in Munich, where he perused documents that had lain untouched for decades. When he first held the files which bound these documents, he felt that they were disproportionately heavy to their size, and wondered whether their weight was due to natural factors, or whether something stranger was involved:

If you have any imagination, you can't help but wonder at it. These are questions a historian is not permitted to ask, because they are of a metaphysical nature. And if one thing interests me, it is metaphysics.

(Sebald cited in Lubow, 2007: 165)

Even though Sebald does not define what he means by "metaphysics," we can presume that it is related to his conviction that literature can restore the past "over and above the mere recital of facts and over and above scholarship" (Sebald, 2006: 215). For Sebald, an understanding of history not only consists in the investigation and connection of facts, important though this activity is. Rather, to understand history, we must investigate our own relation to it, a relation which is itself resistant to any causal "explanation," and which often lies beyond what the historian is permitted to investigate. Presumably, it is through literature that we can do all of this, and thus maintain a living connection with the past.

How generally valid is Sebald's conception of the literary representation of history? Is he right to make the demands that he does? For the rest of this chapter, I will argue for the validity of Sebald's approach by showing its similarity to Wittgenstein's conception of historical representation, as set forth in his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*." In his critique of Frazer, Wittgenstein shows us the necessity of an approach which, like Sebald's one, both respects historical facts and goes beyond them in order to create a personal understanding of history. Furthermore, I will show that Wittgenstein's recommended approach is remarkably similar to Sebald's. Essentially, I will argue that Wittgenstein's

“Remarks” validate the role that literature has to play in the remembrance and understanding of history.

### 1.3 “Nothing is so difficult as doing justice to the facts.”

In 1931, Wittgenstein attempted to read Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, a monumental thirteen-volume account of ancient magic, ritual and religion. Wittgenstein’s interest in Frazer’s work had two aspects. Firstly, Wittgenstein was deeply interested in religion, and felt himself to be influenced by it. In *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, Norman Malcolm reports that Wittgenstein once said the following: “I am not a religious man, but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view” (1993: 1). However, the second reason for Wittgenstein’s interest in Frazer’s subject was his conviction that magic, which he considered a form of religion, is somehow beyond language, and therefore resistant to philosophical logic and examination. This is expressed in his first book (and the only one which was published in his lifetime), the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. According to Grayling, this work argues that “what can be *said* is the same as what can be *thought*” (1996: 14; original italics). Wittgenstein defines the purpose of the book as setting “a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts” (1961: 3). This limit can be set “only in language,” and “what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense”:

The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must consign to silence.

(1961: 3)

Wittgenstein defines “what can be said clearly” as “propositions of natural science” (1961: §6.53). In contrast to these, he maintains that “there are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words [...] They are what is mystical” (1961: §6.522). Wittgenstein does not say what these things are. According to his argument, it would be impossible to do this, since they are beyond language. However, Wittgenstein is clear that traditional philosophical investigations into ethics, aesthetics, or anything at all outside of what can be proven in science are bound to

be nonsense, since “they cannot be put into words” (1961: §6.421). Hence the last, famous remark of the *Tractatus*: “What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence” (1961: §7).

For Wittgenstein, religion, whether “primitive” or modern, definitely lay outside of what can be philosophically investigated. This view is clearly articulated in his “Lecture on Ethics” (1993c), given two years before he read Frazer. In the lecture, Wittgenstein argues that speaking about metaphysical subjects such as ethics, aesthetics or religion is fundamentally senseless, insofar as one tries to create a theory or logical philosophy about them. He concludes the lecture by saying:

My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. [...] But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I cannot for my life ridicule it.

(1993c: 44)

Despite this respect, Wittgenstein had very little patience with Frazer’s work, which was precisely an attempt to theorise magic and ritual. Though he studied it with Maurice Drury for several weeks, they did not get very far into the first volume, since Wittgenstein constantly interrupted with his disagreements (Monk, 1991: 310). In his “Remarks,” Wittgenstein objects to Frazer’s approach on several grounds. He thinks that Frazer’s attempt to give an account of the internal logic of magical rituals, an account which also attributes certain psychological and intellectual motivations to the practitioners, shows that Frazer’s “explanations of primitive practices are much cruder than the meaning of these practices themselves” (Wittgenstein, 1993: 131). This is because Frazer, who ascribes a cause and effect logic to magical rituals, tends to see magical rituals as primitive forms of science, “based on faulty views about the physics of things” (1993: 129). Such a view reflects an entirely inadequate grasp of religion, which Wittgenstein does not think operates according to causal logic, and a lack of imagination. Frazer imagines the practitioners of ancient magic as mere primitive versions of modern-day people, and is consequently unable to imagine that the rituals can have any other meaning than savage acts or expressions of a delusional world-view:

All that Frazer does is to make them plausible to people who think as he does.

How impossible it was for him to conceive of a life different from that of the England of his time! Frazer cannot imagine a priest who is not basically a present-day English parson with the same stupidity and dullness.

(Wittgenstein, 1993: 125)

We can see, then, that the attempt to “explain” the inner logic of magic and ritual fails through a misunderstanding of the historical material in question. As Wittgenstein writes, “nothing is so difficult as doing justice to the facts” (1993: 129). However, it is in Wittgenstein’s objections to another aspect in Frazer’s work, namely his theoretical speculations about the origins and development of specific magical practices, that we see his more fundamental objection to Frazer’s study. Here, Wittgenstein questions the value of “explanation” itself when it comes to historical understanding and representation. It is this argument which truly aligns Wittgenstein’s criticism of Frazer with Sebald’s writing on literary historical explanation, and which I will now consider. In this discussion, I will be drawing on two important critical interpretations of Wittgenstein’s “Remarks”: Frank Cioffi’s *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer* (1998) and David Schalkwyk’s chapter “Greenblatt and Wittgenstein” in *Literature and the Touch of the Real* (2004a).

In a remark written in 1947, and collected in *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein states that “nothing [is] more stupid than the chatter about cause & effect in history books; nothing more wrong-headed, and half-baked” (1998: 71). It is this stupidity that Wittgenstein sees in action when Frazer attempts to “explain” the function and significance of various rituals, and their internal elements, by tracing their sources back to a specific origin, and describing their development through a causal history. Wittgenstein does not object to the factual correctness of Frazer’s “developmental hypothesis” (Wittgenstein, 1993: 131). Rather, he questions whether such “explanations” are an adequate response to the historical material being examined. This material, especially the accounts of ritual human sacrifice, produces a deep and profound impression on the reader of *The Golden Bough*, which Frazer does not address at all. As Wittgenstein puts it,

Compared with the impression which the thing makes on us, the explanation is too uncertain.

Every explanation is after all an hypothesis.

But a hypothetical explanation will be of little help to someone, say,  
who is upset because of love. – It will not calm him.

(1993: 123)

Wittgenstein's point, as formulated by Schalkwyk, is that a causal assembly of the facts, such as Frazer's, "leaves certain questions untouched" (2004: 195). These questions concern the relation of magic and ritual to the lives of the participants, as well as their relation to the modern reader's life, and the impression they make upon her. Frazer's causal explanations do not in any way answer these questions. Wittgenstein notes that, "when Frazer begins by telling us the story of the King of the Wood of Nemi", which concerns ritual human sacrifice, "he does this in a tone which shows that he feels, and wants us to feel, that something strange and dreadful is happening" (1993: 121). One can interpret this statement, as Cioffi does, to mean that Frazer's tone "betrays signs of interests more central than that of the only information-resolvable question addressed, but which, nevertheless, make their presence felt" (Cioffi, 1998: 3). Although Wittgenstein's claim is debatable, Cioffi argues that "this need not absolve Frazer from error," since "the question that Frazer does not raise," that of impression, "nevertheless arises, and it was remiss of him not to address it" (1998: 4). In this sense, Frazer is "failing to rise to the occasion" (1998: 2).

It is important to note that Wittgenstein is not rejecting the causal hypothesis of development entirely, or claiming that it is generally useless. His point is that "the historical explanation, the explanation as an hypothesis of development, is only *one* way of assembling the data" (Wittgenstein, 1993: 131; original emphasis). However, he notes that "it is just as possible to see the data in their relation to one another and to embrace them in a general picture without putting it in the form of an hypothesis about temporal development." (1993: 131).

Throughout the "Remarks," Wittgenstein gives an idea of what such a general picture should look like. Where Frazer attempts a causal explanation of the rituals, arranging the facts according to cause and effect, Wittgenstein advocates what he calls a "perspicuous representation," which is "of fundamental importance" and "denotes the form of our representation, of the way we see things" (Wittgenstein, 1993: 133). Such a representation consists of assembling historical materials so that "we 'see the connections'" (1993: 133). No explanation of Frazer's type should be added, "because one must only piece together what

one already *knows*, and the satisfaction being sought through the explanation follows of itself” (1993: 121; original emphasis). Wittgenstein’s perspicuous representation consists of various kinds of connections, which I will now examine individually.

Firstly, the perspicuous representation should show us the connections between the historical *facts* in question, in this case the magical rituals. Because the perspicuous representation is one which shows connections, it is important to find “*connecting links*” (Wittgenstein, 1993: 133; original emphasis). However, these links cannot be attempts at “explanation,” such as Frazer’s hypothesis of development. Wittgenstein writes:

But an hypothetical connecting link should in this case do nothing but direct the attention to the similarity, the relatedness, of the *facts*. As one may illustrate an internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually converting an ellipse into a circle; *but not in order to assert that a certain ellipse actually, historically, originated from a circle* (evolutionary hypothesis), but only in order to sharpen our eye for a formal connection.<sup>1</sup>

(1993: 133; original emphasis)

However, it is not enough to connect the facts of the magical rituals to each other. To truly understand what Wittgenstein calls the “inner nature” of the rituals, we must also connect them to their surrounding cultural and social context:

When I speak of the inner nature of the practice, I mean all the circumstances under which it is carried out and which are not included in a report of the festival, since they consist not so much in specific actions which characterise the festival as in what one might call the spirit of the festival; such things as would be included in one’s description, for example, of the kind of people who take part in it,

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<sup>1</sup> In “On Wittgenstein’s Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough,” Thomas de Zengotita argues that the conception of formal resemblances presented in the “Remarks” is one of the earliest formulations of the “family resemblance” concept (1989: 394). De Zengotita draws particular attention to another remark, where Wittgenstein discusses Frazer’s comments on the similarity of ancient fire festivals in Europe:

Besides these similarities, what seems to me to be most striking is the dissimilarity of all these rites. It is a multiplicity of faces with common features which continually emerges here and there. And one would like to draw lines connecting these common ingredients.

(Wittgenstein, 1993: 143)

This formulation is very similar to that given in the “Lecture on Ethics,” where Wittgenstein refers to Galton’s photographic arrangements of faces to demonstrate his understanding of ethics (Wittgenstein, 1993c: 38).

their behaviour at other times, that is, their character; the kind of games which they otherwise play.

(Wittgenstein, 1993: 145)

This insistence on contextual understanding forms a cornerstone of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, which argues that human activity only makes sense if it is understood as part of a "form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1958: §19).<sup>2</sup> Schalkwyk defines "forms of life" as the "vast domain" of "the natural, cultural, social, and discursive worlds" in which we exist (2004a: 70-71). Every individual exists in the actual, concrete world, and lives in the midst of a (perhaps innumerable) set of customs, practices, views and beliefs which influence every aspect of her life, from philosophical speculation to mundane daily activities. In fact, it is this form of life which determines the way we think and act. Monk writes that Wittgenstein was convinced "that the way we look at things is determined, not by our philosophical beliefs, but by our culture, by the way we are brought up" (1991: 533). In a remark collected in *Zettel*, Wittgenstein stresses the determining importance of a form of life for human thought and action:

How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by sketching the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. What determines our judgement, our concepts and reactions, is not what *one* man is doing *now*, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action.

(1967: §567)

Therefore, an understanding of the historical facts of something like a magical ritual cannot dispense with a consideration of the wider context, or "form of life," in which it occurs.

As we can see, a perspicuous representation of historical material must both connect the historical facts to each other, and connect them to the form of life in which they have meaning. However, this alone is not enough; as Wittgenstein writes, "one part of our account would still be missing, namely, that which brings this picture into connection with our own

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<sup>2</sup> This reference refers to a remark from the *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein is specifically talking about the concept of a "form of life" in relation to *language*. I will discuss this relation in the next chapter; for now, I am just using this reference to show the connection between the "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough" and his later work.

feelings and thoughts. This part is what gives the account its depth” (1993: 143). This depth is important because the very purpose of the perspicuous representation is to clarify our own responses to the historical material. In doing so, we must remember that our thoughts and feelings about the rituals are not only formed in response to the facts themselves, but that we imbue them with connotative meanings arising from our own wider experience. For Wittgenstein, “What I see in these stories is [...] acquired through the evidence, including such evidence as does not appear directly connected with them, – through the thoughts of man and his past, through all the strange things I see, and have seen and heard about, in myself and others” (1993: 151). In other words, “it is *we* who ascribe” the profound feelings to the historical materials “from an inner experience” (1993: 147).

Therefore, as formulated by Schalkwyk, “we need an account of the relationship between the phenomenon that makes an impression on us and an array of concepts that play a part in our lives and those of the participants in the practice” (2004: 195). To create this account, one needs to do more than “piece together what one already *knows*” (Wittgenstein, 1993: 121). The “connecting links” that Wittgenstein insists on must necessarily lie outside of the facts. As Schalkwyk notes, “we could never convey the spirit of a practice in Wittgenstein’s sense without introducing such further descriptions” (2004: 199). However, “it is *how* we introduce such further descriptions that changes what we already know, rather than the fact that we introduce them” (2004: 199; original emphasis). It is important to note that the operative word here is *description*, not explanation. The additional descriptions that we introduce should not attempt to change the meaning of the facts themselves, but make their connection clear, both to each other and our own lives. Thus, the task of the historical representation is not only to arrange the facts, but to create these connecting links.

#### **1.4 Sebald and Wittgenstein: convergences**

Wittgenstein’s remarks on Frazer go some way towards validating Sebald’s conception of the value of the literary representation of history. Wittgenstein argues, in effect, that our need of history is sometimes greater than (or at least different to) what can be satisfied by purely factual accounts which attempt to “explain” history by causal or other arguments. For

Wittgenstein, such accounts can be useful, but they cannot always help us; sometimes, what we need to understand is our own relation to history. This need is created by the deep and profound impressions that some historical facts or events make on us; these impressions are what we need to understand. Such an argument is very relevant to Sebald, who felt that he needed to investigate the history and literature of the aerial bombings because of the “shadow” that they cast over his life (Sebald, 2004: 71). Sebald’s need to investigate the aerial bombings is akin to the need that Wittgenstein argues we feel in connection to ancient magic and ritual; both historical subjects have a deep personal resonance, and their investigation must take this into account.

Can we not say that it is in the fulfilment of this need that literature maintains, or should maintain, a living connection with the past, and restore it “over and above the mere recital of facts and over and above scholarship” (Sebald, 2006: 215)? For Sebald, understanding the “meaning” of the air raids consists in understanding how those events still affect the present, and in understanding his own relation to them. He criticises post war German literature for failing to facilitate this understanding. Similarly, Wittgenstein criticises Frazer’s work for failing to facilitate our understanding of our own relationship to ancient magical ritual. While Frazer’s work is not “literature” per se, it is a written representation of history. As such, it is clear that Wittgenstein and Sebald share a similar conception of the aim of historical representation, an aim which Sebald thinks is achievable by literature.

Though there are differences, Sebald and Wittgenstein’s conceptions of the correct form of historical representation share many similarities, even if they are not identical (one might say that they share family resemblances). Both think that one should “do justice to the facts” by relying on documentary evidence. In terms of going over and above the facts, both advocate the attainment (or creation) of a perspective which would allow one to see various connections. Wittgenstein calls this a “perspicuous representation”; Sebald calls it a “synoptic view.” While these two ideas are not entirely similar (Wittgenstein’s model does not make allowance for different historical perspectives, as Sebald’s does), they aim to draw the same kind of connections: between the historical facts themselves; between the historical data and the “forms of life” of those involved (in Sebald’s case, this is evidenced by his interest in the psychological states of the victims of the air war); between the past and the present; and between the historical data and the impressions that they make on us. For Sebald, as for

Wittgenstein, these connections are not necessarily understandable as causal relationships, and need to be presented in a different way. Presumably, Sebald thinks that literature can create such a presentation, and that literature can create the needed “connecting links,” which lie outside the facts.

But how is literature to do this? How might a synoptic view or perspicuous representation be created in a literary work? In the next chapter, I show that Sebald’s *Austerlitz* suggests some answers to these questions. I will argue that Sebald’s fictional account of Jacques Austerlitz’s investigation of his past both argues for the necessity of a Sebaldian/Wittgensteinian representation of history, and shows how this might be achieved. However, *Austerlitz* is not simply a literary application of the ideas described in this chapter. In the next chapter, I will also argue that the novel complicates the idea of the synoptic view or perspicuous representation, and shows this view to be unattainable, at least in the case of the character Austerlitz.

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## CHAPTER 2:

# AUSTERLITZ'S INVESTIGATION OF HISTORY

These are different kinds of history lessons. They're not in the history books.

– W.G. Sebald, in an interview with Joseph Cuomo

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### 2.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, I outlined Sebald's argument that literature can maintain a living connection with the past by showing its connection to the present and the personal, thus restoring it over and above the mere recital of facts and scholarship. I explored Sebald's various recommendations for how this may be achieved, and showed that these recommendations amount to what might be called a "Sebaldian" model of literary historical representation. Furthermore, I argued that Sebald's model can be validated and supplemented by Wittgenstein's critique of Frazer's *Golden Bough*. In this chapter, I address the question: to what extent has Sebald realised his ideas of historical representation in *Austerlitz*, one of his own literary works?

As a starting point, I want to highlight some of the broad ways in which the novel conforms to Sebald's view of literary historical representation. Most obviously, we can note that *Austerlitz* deals with a number of actual historical events and themes, many of which are recurrent concerns in Sebald's fiction, such as European colonialism and its consequences, the histories of cities such as Paris, London and Prague, and the history of European warfare. The most important historical subject in the novel is, of course, the Holocaust. Sebald felt a great sense of responsibility to write about this event, both as a German and as a member of the human race. In "Constructs of Mourning," an essay dealing with Germany's inability to mourn its victims, he attacks the German literature of the post-war period for showing "hardly any insight into ideas of collective guilt and the need to describe the wrong that had

been done” “to others among us” (2006: 104; 105). In an interview, Sebald said that he had “always felt that it was necessary above all to write about the history of persecution, of vilification of minorities, the attempt, well-nigh achieved, to eradicate a whole people” (Sebald cited in Silverblatt, 2001: 80). *Austerlitz* does not merely treat the Holocaust in general terms, but focuses on some of its specific events and sites, such as the *Kindertransport*, the Terezín ghetto, and the persecution of Jews in Paris under the Vichy government.

In dealing with these historical specifics, Sebald includes many pieces of what can loosely be called documentary evidence, a feature which he praises in the work of writers such as Fichte and Kluge. *Austerlitz* contains a wealth of documentary visual material, such as photographs, maps, reproduced written documents and film stills. The novel also cites and quotes from several texts, including some which deal with the Holocaust, such as Jean Améry’s *At the Mind’s Limits* (1980) and H.G. Adler’s *Theresienstadt 1941–1945* (1955).

However, *Austerlitz* is by no means a work of pure documentary, or even one which respects the boundaries between fact and fiction. In “W.G Sebald and the Condition of Exile,” Philip Schlesinger notes that the German edition of *Austerlitz* is subtitled “*Bericht*, a ‘report,’” which “implies a factual status rather than a fictional one” (2004: 54). Despite this, Sebald freely combines documentary evidence with fictional material, and presents the whole as a work which “is plainly to be read first and foremost as a novel” (Schlesinger, 2004: 54). The character Austerlitz is, in Sebald’s own words, based on “two or three, or perhaps three-and-a-half, real persons,” whose stories were combined and then rendered into a fictional character (Jaggi, 2001: online). Similarly, the narrator of the novel is based on Sebald, the author; Swales notes that the narratorial “persona clearly overlaps with the author,” and that “details of the narrated life often tally with the note on the author” in the English edition of *Austerlitz* (2005: 82). However, Sebald himself said in an interview that “the similarities between myself and the narrator are by no means one-to-one” (Baker, 2001: online). Furthermore, as J.J. Long has noted in “History, Narrative, and Photography in W. G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten*,” Sebald’s insertion of documents such as photographs into his novels both “invites and thwarts attempts to separate fact from fiction,” since there is no guarantee of their authenticity or exact relation to the things described in the text (2003: 117-118).

In its combination of factual and fictional material, *Austerlitz* presents a synoptic view of history, where “the imaginary and fictional [...] contributes to and extends the real and historical” (Presner, 2004: 351). Sebald connects various elements of history, both real and imagined, and furthermore shows history from various perspectives, both personal and temporal. We see the past through the eyes of Austerlitz and the narrator, as well as a number of secondary characters such as Věra Ryšanová and Marie de Vernuil, and the authors of the various texts incorporated into the novel. These characters do not recount their thoughts and experiences from a single temporal position, but shuttle back and forth between descriptions of events, their memories of these events, and their present situations.

It is through these personal views of history that the novel attempts to restore the past. *Austerlitz* is primarily about personal relationships with history, and how these relationships can be explored and understood. In this sense, it is a work which attempts to give what Wittgenstein would call a “deep” account of history. The novel is fundamentally concerned with connecting history to the present, and with connecting it to our own thoughts and feelings. This concern is expressed in various passages, and is often voiced by the characters themselves. Whether it is Austerlitz’s thoughts about “the marks of pain which [...] trace countless fine lines throughout history,” or the narrator’s lament that “the history of countless objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on,” all the characters have a subjective, deeply personal need to investigate and understand the past (2001: 16; 31). This need itself forms the driving force behind the actual plot of the novel, which is presented in the form of an historical investigation, or rather two historical investigations: those of Austerlitz and of the nameless narrator.

For the narrator, investigating history takes the form of listening to and then writing Austerlitz’s story, and in some instances doing further research into the subjects that Austerlitz mentions, such as visiting the Breendonk fortress. The narrator’s exact personal motivations are difficult to determine, and are rendered uncertain by the very first sentence of the novel:

In the second half of the 1960s I travelled repeatedly from England to Belgium, partly for study purposes, *partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me...*

(Sebald, 2001: 1; my emphasis)

The novel sets up a friendship between the narrator and Austerlitz, even if, as Swales notes, it is a rather reserved one (2005: 85). At the end of the novel, Austerlitz gives the narrator the key to his house, and tells him to “study the black and white photographs which, one day, would be all that was left of his life,” which suggests that Austerlitz is leaving his life story completely in the narrator’s hands (Sebald, 2001: 408). The narrator’s responsibility towards Austerlitz’s story is subtly and sometimes obliquely suggested in various passages, and is intensified by the similarities between the narrator and Sebald, the author. One could argue that, like Sebald, the German narrator feels a sense of responsibility and guilt towards Austerlitz, a Jewish victim of Nazi Germany. The narrator does not exonerate himself of Germany’s past, noting that he had “lived among” the types of Germans who had killed and tortured for the SS until his “twentieth year” (Sebald, 2001: 29). This sense of guilt is obliquely reflected in the book’s only footnote, which concerns the narrator’s irrational feeling of self-blame for a fire in Lucerne in the 1970’s (2001: 10-12).

It is, however, through Jacques Austerlitz’s story that the novel clearly and intensively explores the need for a personal and “deep” investigation and understanding of history. Austerlitz’s whole life has, in a sense, been determined by his early past, and he is bound to investigate that past for urgently personal reasons. It is through Austerlitz’s recounting of his investigation that the novel shows us both the importance of a personal, “living” connection with the past, and how such a connection might be achieved. However, *Austerlitz* also shows us the difficulties inherent in an attempt to create such a connection, and what the consequences of failure in this enterprise are.

In this chapter, I will explore Austerlitz’s attempt to investigate and understand his personal history. I will argue that that his investigation, and his representation of it through his verbal account, assume a form which is remarkably similar to that advocated by Sebald and Wittgenstein. I will show that Austerlitz’s investigation is primarily concerned with creating connections: between the facts of his personal history, between the facts and the “form of life” in which they have meaning, between his past and his present, and between his past and his own feelings about it. Above all, I will argue that Austerlitz’s aim is to tie all his findings together into a synoptic view or perspicuous representation of his past. However, it is in this last aim that his investigation fails. As I will show, Austerlitz cannot create a fixed, single interpretation of his life story, in which all his findings stand in a clear relation to each other;

instead, he is left with a personal history which is fragmented and fundamentally unsatisfying. In the next chapter, I will argue that it is precisely through the novel's illumination of the impossibility of a synoptic view of history that it maintains a truly living connection with the past.

## **2.2 Austerlitz's investigation: an outline**

What is the purpose of Austerlitz's investigation of his past? We can say that Austerlitz's primary aim is to solve the problem he poses at the start of his narrative: "Since my childhood and youth [...] I have never known who I really was" (Sebald, 2001: 60). However, this raises a further question: what would it mean for him to know who he really is? Austerlitz's investigation is, to a large extent, focused on his early childhood, particularly the first four and a half years of his life, which he spent in Prague. Subsequent to settling in Wales, Austerlitz "suppressed" his memories of that time, and throughout his life practised an unconscious "self-censorship" of his mind which "preserved" him from his own "secret" (Sebald, 2001: 198; 60). This self-censorship is maintained until late in middle age, when Austerlitz experiences a series of revelations which convince him to investigate his "true origins" (2001: 177). To this end, he travels to Prague and then across Europe in an attempt to find out about his early childhood.

However, it is clear that Austerlitz's enquiry into "who he really is" is not limited to investigating his early childhood. It is motivated by additional personal needs, and attempts to meet those needs. Austerlitz feels that his past, and his ignorance of that past, have had severe repercussions on his life. He is haunted by fragmented and incomprehensible memories, and has inexplicable associations with certain places and things. These unconscious remnants of his past have a debilitating effect on his adult self, and his investigation attempts to discover their meaning, both to reduce their destructive power and to use them in his search for who he really is. Furthermore, Austerlitz also has a deep and permanent feeling of non-belonging in society and human existence in general, which he directly attributes to his lost past. His investigation attempts to establish where he comes from, and thereby to overcome his state of displacement. Lastly, Austerlitz's investigation is

not only into his own past, but into that of his parents. For Austerlitz to know who he is, he must also know who his parents were, and what happened to them.

In the following sections, I will explore Austerlitz's attempts to answer each of the above-mentioned personal needs, and show how his investigation relates to the Sealdian/Wittgensteinian model of historical understanding and representation outlined in the previous chapter. To recapitulate, this model recommends an understanding of history which is based, in Wittgenstein's words, on "seeing connections." We can define four kinds of connections which are relevant to Austerlitz's investigation:

Firstly, one needs to draw connections between the various historical facts under consideration. It is important to note that in Austerlitz's case, the pieces of historical data that need to be brought into connection consist of more than what would normally be called "facts." Schlesinger notes that Austerlitz, as a professional historian, uses methods of investigation which "derive from his university culture," such as "interviewing, doing fieldwork, finding documentation, delving into archives" (2004: 54). However, Austerlitz is also forced to contend with data that fall outside of standard research procedure, such as unverifiable memories (his own and those of others) and emotions. In many instances, these non-factual materials assume the status of facts, since they are often all that he has to work with. To understand his past, Austerlitz has to draw all of his discoveries, both factual and non-factual, into connection.

Secondly, one needs to see how the historical facts connect to the wider historical context, or "form of life," in which they have meaning. In Wittgenstein's critique of Frazer, he recommends that one sees the facts of the magical rituals within the context of the form of life of the participants. For Austerlitz this means something slightly different. In his historical investigation, the facts cannot be separated from their surrounding form of life, because he is in fact investigating forms of life themselves, such as those of pre-war Prague and Terezín ghetto life.

Thirdly, one needs to see the connections between the historical data and one's present feelings and thoughts. For Austerlitz, this is the overriding concern of his investigation. Austerlitz needs to understand how he relates to his past, and work through the lifelong consequences of that past, as well as his ignorance and suppression of it.

Lastly, one needs to connect all of the above to form a synoptic view or perspicuous representation of the past. In Austerlitz's case, we can say that this is precisely the point of his investigation, *and* his recounting of that investigation. When Austerlitz begins his narrative by saying that he has never known who he really is, he also says that "it will not be easy now to put the story into anything like proper order" (Sebald, 2001: 61). One can read this remark as an indication that Austerlitz is trying to create a personal narrative in which the various elements of his life follow each other logically and sequentially. However, there is evidence to suggest that Austerlitz's desired understanding of his past is not linear in a causal or temporal sense, but rather a view in which all of the elements can be seen simultaneously. This desire is suggested in his remarks on the nature of time, which are scattered throughout the book. In one such remark, Austerlitz expresses a wish to be "outside time," hoping

that time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously, in which case none of what history tells us would be true, past events have not yet occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment when we think of them

(Sebald, 2001: 144)

This remark suggests that Austerlitz's desired understanding of history cannot be achieved by constructing a linear narrative, but rather through attaining a synoptic, perspicuous view.

In what follows, I will discuss Austerlitz's attempts to form these connections through his investigation of history. Because this investigation does not have a single purpose, but rather attempts to meet various needs, I have divided my discussion into four sections, each of which considers one of Austerlitz's needs, and his attempts to meet it. They are, in order: his need to understand the strange intellectual and emotional associations he has with certain things in the past; his need to find out about his early childhood, which is closely tied to his need to overcome his sense of displacement; his need to establish a connection between himself and his dead parents; and his need to tie all of his discoveries together into a synoptic view, or perspicuous representation.

## 2.3 History and personal meaning

In his critique of Frazer, Wittgenstein asks, “how is it that in general human sacrifice is so deep and sinister?”, and comes to the conclusion that “it is *we* who ascribe” these qualities onto the history of human sacrifice from “inner experience”: “through the thoughts of man and his past, through all the strange things I see, and have seen and heard about, in myself and in others” (1993: 147; 151). In other words, the meaning that we give to certain things in the world, particularly historical facts, is often determined by our own intellectual and emotional connotative associations with those things.

Throughout his life, Austerlitz is both interested in and disturbed by the meanings that he ascribes to things, particularly places and buildings, from inner experience. In his investigation of his personal history, the deciphering of his ascription of meaning from personal experience becomes one of his main aims. I will examine this process, and its importance, by focusing on Austerlitz’s personal interest in architectural sites.

Austerlitz’s interest in the personal meaning of phenomena is particularly evident in his project of architectural history, which has a similar form to Wittgenstein’s recommended model of historical representation. He studies the “family likeness”<sup>1</sup> between the buildings of the late Nineteenth Century, noting shared formal features such as their “tendency towards monumentalism” (Sebald, 2001: 43). Like Wittgenstein, Austerlitz also tries to see the buildings within the context of their surrounding form of life. For example, he discusses Antwerp’s Centraal Station within the context of the Belgians’ national optimism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and includes several everyday details of its construction, such as the sufferings of those who made the mirrors in the waiting-room (2001: 9-10; 14-15).

Aside from these considerations, Austerlitz is particularly interested in “ideas” which are “not of architectural history proper” (2001: 16). The narrator writes that “the passing on of his knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life” (2001: 14). In approaching his historical metaphysic, Austerlitz is very much concerned with the way that we relate to architectural sites, both

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<sup>1</sup> In “Against the Power of Time: The Poetics of suspension in W.G. Sebald’s ‘Austerlitz,’” Amir Eshel states that, in the German edition of *Austerlitz*, Sebald “specifically and in an unquestionable reference to Wittgenstein uses the term *Familienähnlichkeiten*,” meaning “family resemblances” and that the English translation’s use of the term “family likenesses” “misses the reference” to Wittgenstein (2003: 84).

intellectually and emotionally. His discourses on architecture are often constructed to lead to the following type of observation:

Someone [...] ought to draw up a catalogue of types of buildings, listed in order of size, and it would be immediately obvious that domestic buildings of *less* than normal size [...] are those that offer us at least a semblance of peace, whereas no one in his right mind could truthfully say that he liked a vast edifice such as the Palace of Justice.  
(2001: 23)

Despite his interest in the way that we relate to architectural sites, Austerlitz's historical project fails, in part, because he does not (or cannot) comprehend and examine *his own* relation to these sites. As Bauer notes, "Austerlitz exposes the entwinement of architecture and national and imperial power politics and the tragic arrogance guiding human civilisation, but at the beginning of the novel he lacks yet any concrete insight into the entwinement of his own past with these vestiges of power" (2006: 244). In his study of railway stations, for example, Austerlitz "could never quite shake off thoughts of the agony of leave-taking and the fear of foreign places" (Sebald, 2001: 16). Later, he speaks of his "obsession with railway stations," especially those in Paris, which "he regarded as places marked by both blissful happiness and profound misfortune," and in which "he had quite often found himself in the grip of dangerous and entirely incomprehensible currents of emotion" (2001: 45). In fact, he suspects that he has pursued his broad study of architectural history because "he was still obeying an impulse which he himself, to this day, did not really understand, but which was somehow linked to his early fascination with the idea of a network such as that of the entire railway system" (2001: 44-45).

Of course, as the novel progresses, we learn that Austerlitz's "obsession" with railway stations has its roots in his early past. As a child, he travelled by railway from Prague to the Hook of Holland, and went by ferry to Britain, where his exile began. His new family met him at London's Liverpool Street Station, and it is this station which plays the decisive role in forcing him to confront and investigate his past. After destroying his life's work, Austerlitz suffers from insomnia, and takes to wandering around London at night. During these walks he is "always irresistibly drawn back" to Liverpool Street Station (2001: 180). Even before his wanderings, Austerlitz is familiar with the history of the site. He knows that it has housed a park, a priory, a cemetery, and a hospital for the insane, and wonders whether "the pain and

suffering accumulated on this site over the centuries had ever really ebbed away,” or whether it might still be felt as one moves through the station (2001: 183). In 1984, when the former burial ground was excavated, he went there “quite often” and took photographs of the dead, “partly because of my interest in architectural history and partly for other reasons which I could not explain to myself at the time” (2001: 184).

Later in his life, these reasons make him follow a porter at the station into the disused Ladies’ Waiting-Room, an action which he “cannot explain” “to this day”: “we take almost all the decisive steps in our lives as a result of slight inner adjustments of which we are barely aware” (2001: 189). In the Waiting Room, “scraps of memory” come to him, and he has a fantastic vision of himself, at four and a half years old, standing in the middle of a vast new station rising out of the old one. It is this vision which allows him to begin the process of allowing the “emergence of memory,” against which he had put up resistance for most of his life, and which forces him to start investigating his past (2001: 301).

Austerlitz’s memory-vision at Liverpool Street Station, and its role as the catalyst of his personal historical investigation, demonstrates the importance of understanding how we ascribe meaning to history and historical data from inner experience. Austerlitz can only begin his investigation once he understands why he has certain associations with the station. Conversely, it is his wilful avoidance of this understanding, both of his associations with the station and with other architectural sites, which makes him destroy his life’s work. After his vision, Austerlitz realises that his preoccupation with his architectural history, “that accumulation of knowledge which [he] had pursued for decades,” had “served as a substitute or compensatory memory,” a means of “avoiding everything which related in any way” to his “unknown past” (2001: 197). By focusing on the general history of architectural sites, Austerlitz was able to avoid recognising his own relation to them, a relation which in fact determined his interest in their history.

Thus, Austerlitz’s investigation of his past begins, in a sense, with his recognition that the profound and often unconscious meanings he ascribes to certain things originate from his personal past experience. This recognition also enables him to confront many of the debilitating experiences he had as an adult, experiences which arose from his suppression of his past. A central example is his visit to Marienbad with Marie de Verneuil in 1972. Despite Marie’s attempts to “liberate” him from his “self-inflicted isolation,” Austerlitz feels “an

abysmal sense of distress” at Marienbad, which he “could not explain,” either to himself or to her (2001: 290; 297; 299). He feels surrounded by “mysterious signs and portents,” “as if the silent façades of the buildings knew something ominous about” him, and constantly senses an invisible person (perhaps his younger self) walking beside him (2001: 304; 298). During the course of his investigation, Austerlitz learns that he had visited Marienbad with his family in 1938. The visit with Marie, he says, “may have weakened the resistance” he had put up to the “emergence of memory” (2001: 301). In this way, Austerlitz comes to understand the profound and disturbing meanings he had ascribed to the site of Marienbad in 1972, and to make sense of his experience with Marie.

We can see, then, that Austerlitz’s attempt to understand how he ascribes meaning to things from inner experience forms a crucial part of his personal investigation of history. By pursuing this understanding, Austerlitz draws connections between his present existence and his past experiences and memories, and between his historical findings and his own thoughts and feelings about them, connections which, according to Wittgenstein, give a historical “picture” its “depth” (1993: 143). As such, this part of Austerlitz’s investigation is an important aspect of his endeavour to find out who he really is, since it contributes to his understanding of how his early past has shaped his life. In the next section, I explore Austerlitz’s search for that early past.

## **2.4 Home, language, childhood and a form of life**

*Austerlitz*, McCulloh writes, “is in large measure a detective story – a story about a vague, forgotten crime hidden by the pall of intervening years” (2003: 115). He states that “the case of Austerlitz is the case of larceny,” and that “what was taken” from Austerlitz by the Nazis were “his first four and a half years of his childhood in Prague” (2003: 110; 108). To solve his case, Austerlitz travels to Prague, and attempts a “reconstruction of the past” through historical investigation (2003: 108).

In Prague, Austerlitz locates and travels to his childhood home, and there meets Věra Ryšánová, his former nurserymaid. Věra comes to play an important role in his search for

who he “really was,” as she is able to provide a wealth of information about his childhood. She tells him about his parents, his education, the circumstances of his leaving Prague, and his childhood personality. Crucially, Věra is also able to give Austerlitz an idea of the habits, cultural attachments and social circumstances of himself and his family; in short, of their form of life. It is this aspect of Austerlitz’s investigation that I will focus on in the present section. As I will show, Austerlitz’s search for his childhood in Prague is an attempt to overcome two closely related personal problems in his adult life: his feeling of displacement and homelessness, and his discomfort with language. By showing the connection between a form of life, language, and a sense of belonging or security, *Austerlitz* demonstrates the importance that the investigation of a form of life has for historical understanding.

Austerlitz has always had a feeling of displacement and non-belonging. Although he is not “homeless” in the literal sense (he has British citizenship and owns an apartment), Austerlitz is acutely aware of not feeling at home anywhere. While growing up in Wales, he had to “face the knowledge, new every day” that he was “not at home but very far away” (Sebald, 2001: 62). Describing his “nervous breakdown” in 1992, Austerlitz says:

I came to realise then how isolated I had always been, among the Welsh as much as among the English and French. It never occurred to me to wonder about my true origins, nor did I ever feel that I belonged to a certain social class, professional group, or religious confession. I was as ill at ease among artists and intellectuals as in bourgeois life, and it was a very long time since I had felt able to make personal relationships.

(Sebald, 2001: 177)

As this statement implies, Austerlitz connects these feelings of isolation and non-belonging to his never having wondered about his “true origins.” For Austerlitz, not knowing who he is, which relates to not knowing where he comes from, is part of his always having “felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I was not there at all” (2001: 261). As such, we can understand his investigation into his past as an attempt to overcome his feeling of homelessness.

At this point I would like to introduce the writing of Jean Améry, another exile and victim of Nazi Germany. Améry is an important figure in *Austerlitz*, and his work is explicitly referred to by the narrator. In “Heimat and Calamity,” Markus Zisselsberger writes that it is “perhaps no coincidence” that Jean Améry and Jacques Austerlitz share the same initials, and that

Améry's "life and work are referenced and, in a sense, commemorated in the novel" (2007: 9). Améry was an important figure to Sebald, the literary critic; Sebald's essay "Against the Irreversible" (2004) is a passionate defence of Améry's writing.

Like Austerlitz, Améry was exiled (though in different circumstances) from his native land by the Nazis. In the chapter "How Much Home Does a Person Need?" in *At the Mind's Limits* (1980), Améry describes the effect that his exile had on his sense of self. For Améry, the condition of exile was a state of permanent homelessness. This state did not become less painful over time; on the contrary, in a metaphor that corresponds well to Austerlitz's case, he writes that the exile "has had to learn that it was not a wound that was inflicted upon him, one that will scar over with the ticking of time, but rather that he is suffering from an insidious disease that is growing worse with the years" (1980: 57). This is because "there is no 'new home'" to be found in the country of exile:

Home is the land of one's childhood and youth. Whoever has lost it remains lost himself, even if he has learned not to stumble about in the foreign country as if he were drunk, but rather to tread the ground with some fearlessness.

(1980: 48)

For Améry, the "home" of one's childhood and youth is not simply a physical location, but a complex configuration of place, culture, society, habits and signs: in short, a form of life. It is this configuration that makes us who we are:

Only those signals that we absorbed very early, that we learned to interpret at the same time as we were gaining possession of our external world, became constitutional elements and constants of our personality. Just as one learns one's mother tongue without knowing its grammar, one experiences one's native surroundings. Mother tongue and native world grow with us, grow into us, and thus become the familiarity that guarantees us security.

(1980: 48)

Here, Améry is expressing a very Wittgensteinian conviction: that our form of life determines how we think.<sup>2</sup> In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein calls the form of life into which we are born the

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<sup>2</sup> It is also interesting to note that Améry's view of language-acquisition is very similar to Wittgenstein's. "Wittgenstein reminds us," Schalkwyk writes in *Literature and the Touch of the Real*,

“inherited background” against which all our judgements are made, and which determines our understanding of the world (1974: §94).

Améry’s thoughts have clear relevance to Austerlitz’s case. Like Améry, Austerlitz is suffering from the “insidious disease” of exile, having lost his home and feeling lost himself. Following Améry and Wittgenstein, we can suppose that Austerlitz’s family home in Prague was where he absorbed the early signals that became the constitutional elements and constants of his personality, and which introduced the inherited background against which he was supposed to make sense of the world. It was the loss of this home which, perhaps, contributed to Austerlitz’s lifelong feeling of homelessness, and it is this early home which he is trying to regain when he visits Prague as part of his investigation.

The importance of Austerlitz’s visit to his early home, and his investigation of the form of life of his childhood, becomes clear when we consider Austerlitz’s troubled relationship with *language*. During one of their first meetings, the narrator notices Austerlitz’s discomfort when speaking English, which shows 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 his skin” (2001: 42).

Later in his life, Austerlitz’s discomfort with language turns to outright mistrust, and eventually leads to what he calls the “almost total paralysis of my linguistic faculties” (Sebal, 2001: 198). This paralysis occurs after his retirement, when he attempts to write his massive treatise on architectural history. Despite his initial enthusiasm, the more he works on this project, “the more pitiful did the results seem,” and he is “increasingly overcome by a sense of aversion and distaste” at the prospect of reading and assembling his notes (2001: 171). He soon comes to see everything he writes as “fundamentally flawed,” and each laboriously produced sentence is ruined by the “awkward falsity” of his constructions and the “inadequacy” of his words (2001: 172). This self-doubt eventually prevents him from “ventur[ing] on the first step,” as “the endless possibilities of language” become “a conglomeration of the most inane phrases” (2001: 172; 173). He ceases to see connections

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that we are initiated into language-games. We use words in particular ways as a matter of course, through social training. [...] Linguistic conventions are thus grounded in verbal agreement but in nonverbal behaviour and practice.

(2004b: 124)

between letters, words, phrases or sentences, and eventually comes to view language as “a kind of unhealthy growth issuing from our ignorance, something which we use, in the same way as many sea plants and animals use their tentacles, to grope blindly through the darkness enveloping us,” and thinks that any attempt to “convey a sense of purposeful intelligence” through the use of language is “an entirely arbitrary or deluded enterprise” (2001: 175).

Describing his state at this time, he uses the following simile:

If language may be regarded as an old city full of streets and squares, nooks and crannies, with some quarters dating from far back in time while others have been torn down, cleaned up and rebuilt, and with suburbs reaching further and further into the surrounding country, then I was like a man who has been abroad a long time and cannot find his way through this urban sprawl any more...<sup>3</sup>

(Sebald, 2001: 175)

This simile suggests that Austerlitz is not “at home” in language, and that this state of homelessness is what causes him to distrust it. With reference to Wittgenstein and Améry, I would argue that Austerlitz’s displacement in language is directly related to his sense of not being at home in a form of life. For Wittgenstein, the use and understanding of language is fundamentally grounded in the form of life which gives it meaning; as he writes in the *Philosophical Investigations*, “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (1958: §19). Language, Schalkwyk writes, is made possible by “a material and a public context that does not surround it so much as inhabit it,” and using language means being able “to make a variety of complicated, overlapping connections with concepts that are intrinsically interwoven into patterns of life and culture” (2004b: 120; 130). As Wittgenstein writes in *Zettel*, “only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning” (1967: §173).

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<sup>3</sup> Here we see another instance of Sebald’s direct use of Wittgenstein’s words. Austerlitz’s comparison of language to a city is undoubtedly derived from a remark in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this is surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.

(Wittgenstein, 1958: 18)

I will discuss the relevance of Wittgenstein’s remark to *Austerlitz* in the next chapter.

“Every language,” Améry writes in a clear echo of Wittgenstein, “is part of a total reality to which one must have a well-founded right of ownership if one is to enter the area of that language with a good conscience and confident step” (1980: 53-54). As is clear from the preceding discussion, the exiled Austerlitz does not feel a well-founded sense of ownership towards any “total reality,” or form of life. Following Améry, I would argue that this lack of ownership and security in a form of life is the partial cause of Austerlitz’s sense of being lost, or homeless, in the city of language. However, it is not the only cause, for his linguistic difficulties are also due to another factor: his loss of Czech, his first language, which McCulloh calls “one’s most intimate and defining possession” (2003: 108). In fact, McCulloh suggests that “Austerlitz’s linguistic paralysis seems the delayed result of the abrupt severance of his primal connection with his native tongue,” which occurred when he was exiled to Britain, and perforce stopped speaking Czech (2003: 124).

This “primal connection” is restored, to a certain extent, through Austerlitz’s visit to Prague. During one of their conversations, Věra “quite involuntarily” starts speaking Czech, and Austerlitz states that he “now understood almost everything that Věra said, like a deaf man whose hearing has been miraculously restored” (Sebald, 2001: 219). I do not wish to speculate about the exact psychological mechanism which triggers this recovery. However, we can note that it only happens when he is in his childhood apartment block, surrounded by familiar streets, and speaking to an intimate acquaintance from his past. Before this, Austerlitz “had not for one moment thought that Czech could mean anything” to him, even when he heard other people speaking it (2001: 219). In other words, Czech only has meaning when Austerlitz encounters it in a context approximating the form of life of his childhood. In turn, Austerlitz’s recovery of Czech allows him to access various aspects of his early life. At the point where he understands Věra’s conversation in Czech, Austerlitz “begins to recall episodes and people on his own” (McCulloh, 2003: 124). Czech words such as *veverka* [squirrel] prompt memories and associations, which in turn illuminate parts of his early life (Sebald, 2001: 286-7). When Austerlitz remembers the “dying away” of his “native tongue,” he laments the loss of the words he had forgotten, “and all that went with them”: the associative, extra-linguistic connotations of the words (2001: 195). By recovering Czech, he also recovers, to a certain extent, the form of life which surrounds and inhabits it.

Austerlitz's shifting relationship with language, which "underscores the centrality of language for identity," also underscores the importance of his investigation of the form of life of his early childhood (McCulloh, 2003: 124). In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein asserts that "*the limits of my language mean the limits of my world*" (1961:5.6; original emphasis). Although Wittgenstein is referring to limits of philosophical understanding, his remark is pertinent to Austerlitz's case. Following Wittgenstein's position, as formulated by Grayling, that "what can be *said* is the same as what can be *thought*," I would argue that Austerlitz's disgust with language during his "nervous breakdown" is equal to a disgust with the limits of his thought and understanding, or his "world" (1996: 14; original emphasis). Austerlitz rejects language because he is, in a sense, rejecting his limited, wilfully ignorant and suppressive understanding of the world, himself and his past. However, since he cannot think outside of language, and since he is making sense of his life and himself by verbally recounting his story to the narrator of the novel, he needs somehow to *push back the limits* of his language, and therefore of his world. This can only happen, however, if he addresses the causes of his troubled relationship with language, one of which is his insecurity and lack of belonging in a form of life.

This is what he attempts to do in Prague. During his time there, he not only talks to Věra, but visits various sites of childhood significance, such as the park where he was taken for walks and the theatre where his mother performed (Sebal, 2001: 227-231). Whether Austerlitz can actually fully recover his early form of life is another matter; later in this chapter, I will argue that this is impossible. Nevertheless, Austerlitz's visit to Prague does result in the partial restoration of his first language, and consequently of many of the things "that went with" the words of that language, such as his associations with certain words. In this sense, the recovery of Czech allows for a restoration of his past; by pushing back the limits of his language, he pushes back the limits of his world. However, as I have argued, this linguistic recovery can only happen within the form of life (or an approximation of it) in which the language has its home. In this way, *Austerlitz* shows us the importance of a form of life for historical investigation and understanding.

## 2.5 The search for his parents

Austerlitz does not only undertake his expedition to Prague to recover his childhood, but also to search for his “lost parents” (Sebald, 2001: 217). Through Věra, Austerlitz learns about his parents’ personalities, their personal histories and their lives during his childhood. He also hears of their suffering under the Nazi occupation, their subsequent fates, and the probability of their deaths. However, Austerlitz is not only interested in the facts of their lives. He wants to make them present to himself, to somehow bring them back to life, or at least to establish an emotional connection with them. Austerlitz’s investigation of his parents’ history forms an essential part of his search for who he really is. In this section, I will show how this investigation assumes a connective form similar to that proposed by Wittgenstein and Sebald in their critical works. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on Austerlitz’s search for his mother.

Beyond Věra’s recounting of his mother’s history, Austerlitz’s search for her begins with his visit to the town of Terezín, which housed the ghetto where she was interned and very possibly died. Austerlitz visits this site for various reasons. On the one hand, he is looking for historical facts, and for traces of his mother. On the other hand, he is also looking for something profound and indefinable. This desire is suggested by his examination of the various objects in the window display of the Antikos Bazar in Terezín. Austerlitz feels “as if one of [the objects] or their relationship with each other must provide an unequivocal answer to the many questions that I found it impossible to ask in my mind” (2001: 275). These questions are all “metaphysical,” in Sebald’s sense: “What was the meaning of the festive white tablecloth?”; “What secret lay behind the three brass rings?”; “What [...] might be the significance of the river?” (2001: 275; 276). These are all “questions that the historian is not permitted to ask,” and they are perhaps unanswerable (Sebald cited in Lubow, 2007: 165).

Austerlitz has a similar experience in the Terezín ghetto museum. Here, he is forcefully confronted with the “incontrovertible proof” of the Holocaust, “having for the first time acquired some idea of the history of the persecution which my avoidance had kept from me for so long” (2001: 279; 278). He studies maps, the personal belongings of the victims, documents, photos, and “endless rows of numbers and figures” (2001: 280). However, as Bigsby writes in *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: The Chain of Memory*, “even

true documents remain remote from personal experience,” and “for all the information gathered there he is no closer to the knowledge he seeks” (2006: 76). Austerlitz says that

I understood it all now, and yet I did not understand it, for every detail that was revealed to me as I went through the museum from room to room and back again, ignorant as I feared I had been through my own fault, far exceeded my comprehension.

(Sebald, 2001: 279)

It seems that Austerlitz is in need of a “metaphysical” understanding of the history of the ghetto, one that goes “over and above the mere recital of facts.” This understanding begins to take shape when, a year after he returns to England, he studies Adler’s *Theresienstadt 1941–1945*, a book which gives him “an insight into matters I could never have imagined when I myself visited the fortified town” (2001: 330). In a single long sentence, covering eleven pages of the novel in the English translation, Austerlitz gives a summary of the book. What is remarkable about this summary is its synoptic view of the ghetto’s history; in fact, it is formally similar in many ways to Sebald’s description of the firebombing of Hamburg in “Air War and Literature.” Austerlitz describes both the overall organisation of and the rationale behind the ghetto, and focuses on specific, telling details. He gives the average population statistics of the ghetto, and notes the former professions, average ages, and general physical condition of the inhabitants (2001: 331; 335-336). In this description, he gives us a fair idea of the form of life, such as it was, of the inhabitants, noting their working habits and mental condition (2001: 334-6). He focuses on two important events, namely the census of 10 November 1943 and the production of the film *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* (2001: 338-42). In his presentation of the facts, Austerlitz draws several formal connections between them. For example, evidence of the Nazi’s mania for order and efficiency is seen in various aspects of the ghetto’s organisation, “from the use of whole troops of workers in building the branch railway line from Bohuševce to the fort, to the one man whose job it was to keep the clock mechanism in the closed Catholic church in order” (2001: 337).<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, Adler’s book enables Austerlitz to connect the history of the ghetto to his wider field of knowledge, particularly architectural history. Inserted into his summary is a map of

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<sup>4</sup> Kilbourn suggests that Austerlitz’s dense 11-page sentence is itself “unconsciously” parodying “the insanely bureaucratic discourse of the regime in question” (2004: 149).

Terezín, a town surrounded by star-shaped fortifications (2001: 328-329). Austerlitz notes that whenever he thinks of the Terezín ghetto museum, he sees “the framed ground-plan of the star-shaped fortifications” built for her Imperial Highness Maria Theresia, “the model of a world made by reason and regulated in all its conceivable aspects” (2001: 280). This association is reinforced by Adler’s book, which depicts the ghetto as being “built on an organisational plan regulating all functions and responsibilities,” run by SS men with a “crazed administrative zeal” (2001: 337). The association of the town’s fortress shape with its internal workings connects to Austerlitz’s general thoughts about fortress architecture, expressed during his first discussions with the narrator in the 1960’s. During one discussion, Austerlitz states that the star shape of certain fortresses “immediately strikes the layman as an emblem both of absolute power and the ingenuity the engineers put into the service of that power” (2001: 19). The connotative relevance of this statement to the Terezín ghetto, designed with ingenuity and run by men absolutely in the service of power, is obvious. By making these kinds of associations, Austerlitz is able to integrate his knowledge of the ghetto into his wider understanding of the world. Conversely, his earlier knowledge is also expanded, since his “rather abstract” thoughts on fortification, as expressed at the start of the book, are now given a “highly personal meaning” (McCulloh, 2003: 130).

Austerlitz’s study of Adler’s work is clearly a central component of his investigation into the fate of his mother. It gives him some understanding of what life was like for her in the ghetto and allows him to understand the ghetto itself, an understanding which comes to form a part of his world-view. However, this understanding is not enough. His investigation of the ghetto’s history is meant somehow to establish a connection between his mother and his present life. Despite his visit to Terezín and his study of Adler’s work, Austerlitz finds himself “unable to cast my mind back to the ghetto and picture my mother Agáta there at the time” (Sebald, 2001: 342). In this sense, his “picture” of the ghetto is missing its “depth”; that which “brings this picture into connection with our own feelings and thoughts” (Wittgenstein, 1993: 143). For this reason, Austerlitz desperately searches for the film the Nazi’s shot in Terezín for propaganda purposes, imagining “recognising Agáta, beyond any possibility of a doubt,” “stepping out of the frame and passing over into me” (2001: 342; 343). Austerlitz does find the film, although Agáta is not in it; however, Věra manages to locate a photo of her, taken before she was deported (2001: 353-354).

Despite all of these discoveries and connections, Austerlitz does not establish the desired link with his mother. As McCulloh notes, Austerlitz's "impossible mission," to put back together her identity, fails not so much because of the "elusiveness" of that identity, but because of "the irretrievability of her person" (2003: 125; 124). Austerlitz's search for his mother demonstrates one of the limitations of even the most thorough, personal investigation of history. She represents a central gap in his investigation, one which cannot be filled despite his best efforts. I will explore the consequence of these and other absences in the next section.

## 2.6 "I don't know [...] what all this means"

As the discussion in this chapter shows, *Austerlitz* demonstrates both the necessity for and an attempted implementation of the Sebaldian/Wittgensteinian model of historical investigation and understanding. Austerlitz's endeavour to find out who he really is involves a discovery of historical data, and attempts to make various kinds of connections. In his search for his younger self and for his parents, he connects facts to each other, and investigates the forms of life which surround them. Throughout his investigation, he explores his present relationship to the past by making his investigation answer his present needs, and by attempting to understand how he ascribes meaning to various things, both past and present, from personal experience. As such, Austerlitz's investigation of his past is, in a sense, a literary demonstration of Sebald's (and, by extension, Wittgenstein's) recommendations for historical investigation and understanding.

However, a central question remains: To what extent does Austerlitz manage to meet the aim of his investigation and find out who he really is? As I have argued in this chapter, finding out who he is is not a matter of establishing his "identity" (whatever that might mean), but of creating all of the connections described above, and of putting his story into "anything like proper order" (Sebald, 2001: 61). As I suggested earlier, this order is not necessarily a linear narrative, but rather a synoptic view in which he can see all the elements of himself and of his past simultaneously, and in which all of the connections are clear; in short, a Wittgensteinian perspicuous representation. It is such an understanding of his past which finally seems to elude Austerlitz. Despite his best efforts to find connections, Austerlitz's personal history

remains fragmented and unintegrated. We might compare his attempt to understand his past to his interaction with his collection of photographs, which forms a vital part of his investigation:

Austerlitz told me that he sometimes sat here for hours, laying out these photographs or others from his collection the wrong way up, as if playing a game of patience, and that then, one by one, he turned them over, always with a new sense of surprise at what he saw, pushing the pictures back and forth and over each other, arranging them in an order depending on their family resemblances, or withdrawing them from the game until either there was nothing left but the grey table top, or he felt exhausted by the constant effort of thinking and remembering and had to rest on the ottoman.

(Sebald, 2001: 167-168)

Like these photographs, the individual pieces of Austerlitz's investigation do not, in the end, come together to form a cohesive, synoptic view of his past, despite his attempts to connect them. During his last meeting with the narrator, Austerlitz sums up his experiences by saying "I don't know [...] what all this means, [...] so I am going to continue looking for my father, and for Marie de Verneuil as well" (Sebald, 2001: 408). This is the last we hear from him, and the implication is that Austerlitz's search will never end, and that he will never truly "know what all this means".

For the rest of this chapter, I will address the question: why does Austerlitz fail to attain the desired synoptic view of who he really is? I will argue that Austerlitz's failure is the result of two central obstacles. On the one hand, his investigation constantly encounters absences of facts, meanings and understanding, gaps which cannot be filled. On the other hand, however, his investigation also generates excesses of meaning, which lead to a bewildering number and variety of possible connections. As we will see, this excess of meaning questions the very possibility of a synoptic view of history.

The most obvious gap in Austerlitz's investigation into his past is the central absence of certain crucial pieces of historical data. On quite a few occasions, Austerlitz is forced to end his inquiry into a certain matter when his research material runs out. This is most obviously the case with his search for traces of his parents. His inquiry into his mother's history effectively ends in Terezín, since he has no way of knowing whether she died there or was moved to a death camp. Similarly, his search for his father takes him as far as Paris, his last

known location. In this case, there is no-one like Věra to give him information. At the end of his story, Austerlitz hears that his father was deported from Paris to the camp at Gurs, a place which he “must now seek out” (2001: 404). It is very possible that, as with his search for his mother in Terezín, he will find no traces of his father.

Aside from this lack of external material, Austerlitz’s investigation is also impeded by a lack of necessary internal evidence. At frequent points, he is unable to create an emotional and intellectual connection between his present self and the historical material that his search uncovers. This is most forcefully illustrated by his encounter with a photograph taken six months before his exile and showing him dressed as a page boy. When Věra shows him the photo, Austerlitz is not “moved or distressed” but “speechless and uncomprehending, incapable of any lucid thought” (2001: 260). He is able to picture the scene of the photo, but despite his best efforts he cannot “recollect” himself “in the part” (2001: 259). Later, he studies the photograph, examining “every detail under a magnifying glass without once finding the slightest clue” (2001: 260). In “Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*,” Carolin Dutlinger states that the photograph has an “irredeemably past character” which “radically separates it from the viewer and his present context” (2004: 165). The separation is so radical that Austerlitz is unable to form a deep connection between his past and his present; he finds no inner experience from which to ascribe meaning to the photo. The same can be said with regard to his relationship with his mother; despite investigating her history, and obtaining a photograph of her, Austerlitz cannot form a personal connection.

However, Austerlitz’s investigation is not only limited by absences of external and internal evidence, but by its very medium of representation: language. At one point, Austerlitz is unable to describe his experience because of the inherent limitations of language itself. Speaking of the vision of his younger self being collected by his adoptive parents in Liverpool Street Station, Austerlitz states: “I felt something rending within me, and a sense of shame and sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, *something inexpressible because we have no words for it*” (Sebald, 2001: 193-194; my emphasis). Bauer notes that the German version of the emphasised phrase is more faithfully translated as “what we cannot speak about because there are no words for it” (2006: 250). This, Bauer claims, is an allusion to and reformulation of the last remark of the *Tractatus*: “What we cannot speak about we must

consign to silence” (Wittgenstein, 1961: §7). Bauer writes that “this reformulation frees Wittgenstein’s sentence from its metaphysical implication and moral imperative and puts the silence squarely in the court of language and its inability to apprehend the horrors of the human psyche” (2006: 250).<sup>5</sup>

We can note that Sebald was firmly aware of this limitation of language. In “Against the Irreversible,” he comments on Améry’s acknowledgement that language cannot convey his experience of torture. Améry writes that “qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable [...] they mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate” (1980: 33). Améry ends his account of his experience of the strappado, a method of torture which consists in tying the victim’s hands behind his back and then hoisting his arms above his head until they spring from their sockets, by writing: “Torture, from Latin *torquere*, to twist. What visual instruction in etymology!” (1980: 32-33). In his essay, Sebald responds:

Amery resorts to irony where otherwise his voice would be bound to falter. *He knows that he is operating at the limits of what language can convey.*

(2004: 156; my emphasis)

Although Austerlitz does not endure the kind of physical pain that Améry underwent, his attempts to describe his mental and emotional suffering also sometimes operate at the limits of language. In *The Language of Silence*, Ernestine Schlant makes a comment on *The Emigrants* which could very well be said of *Austerlitz*: “In Sebald’s book, the victims speak, and they fall silent when the limits of what can be said have been reached” (1999: 234). This inescapable silence presents another obstacle to Austerlitz’s attainment of a synoptic view of the past, since it points to the existence of inaccessible (because they are outside of the limits of language) areas of experience.

Earlier in this chapter I illustrated the importance of Austerlitz’s investigation of his early form of life. I argued that the loss of this form of life was the partial cause for his state of displacement, and that he also needed to recover it in order to make sense of his early past.

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<sup>5</sup> Sebald also reformulated Wittgenstein’s remark in *The Emigrants*. Speaking of his childhood as a threatened Jew in Nazi Germany, Max Ferber tells how he and his parents tried to live their lives as they did before their persecution, and notes that “of those things we could not speak we simply said nothing” (Sebald, 1996: 183). Schlant writes that “this sentence seems an echo” of Wittgenstein’s remark (1999: 260).

However, it is doubtful whether the form of life of Austerlitz's pre-war Prague *can* ever be regained. After all, the "return" that he makes to Prague is not a return to his childhood; his parents, along with many of the city's inhabitants of the time (not to mention its Jews), are dead, and it is almost sixty years after he first left. A form of life is, by definition, a *living* collection of people, practices, beliefs and tradition. What Austerlitz regains in Prague is, rather, a *memory* of a form of life, which is not the same thing. Here, we can again turn to Améry, who writes that, for the exile, "there is no return, because the re-entrance into a place is never also a recovery of lost time" (1980: 42). Commenting on Améry, Sebald writes that "The destruction of someone's native land is as one with that person's destruction" (2004b: 164-5). In a similar vein, and illustrative of Austerlitz's adult condition, Wittgenstein writes in *Culture and Value* that

Tradition is not something that someone can pick up, it's not a thread, that someone can pick up, if & when he chooses; any more than you can choose your ancestors.  
Someone who has no tradition and would like to have it, is like an unhappy lover.

(1998: 86)

It is clear that Austerlitz's desire to have a synoptic view of his past is made unattainable by the many gaps he encounters during his investigation. However, in some instances Austerlitz is not thwarted by an absence of meaning, but by an *excess* of it, by the existence of too many possible meanings and connections. A telling example is his troubled relationship with his name, a prominent matter in his recounting of his past. When he begins his story, he states that he could remember almost nothing of his early days in Wales, "except how it hurt to be suddenly called by a new name" (Sebald, 2001: 61).<sup>6</sup> In *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: The Chain of Memory*, Bigsby states that the change of name is a turning point for Austerlitz, who is "one person until the age of fifteen, when his name is revealed to him by a

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding the importance of one's name, Wittgenstein writes the following in the "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*":

Why shouldn't it be possible for a person to regard his name as sacred? It is certainly, on the one hand, the most important instrument which is given to him, and, on the other, like a piece of jewelry [sic] hung around his neck at birth.

(1993: 125-127)

schoolteacher, and another after that” (2006: 73). Describing the revelation of his name, Austerlitz states that:

At first, what disconcerted me most was that I could connect no ideas at all with the word Austerlitz. If my new name had been Morgan or Jones, I could have related it to reality. I even knew the name Jacques from a French nursery rhyme. But I had never heard of an Austerlitz before, and from the first I was convinced that no one else bore that name [...] anywhere else in the world. [...] I couldn't work out the spelling, and read the strange term which sounded to me like some password three or four times, syllable by syllable, before I looked up and said: Excuse me, sir, but what does it mean?

(Sebald, 2001: 94; 96)

It is not surprising that Austerlitz cannot immediately attach meaning to his name. “Austerlitz,” both as a word and as a name, has been inserted from one form of life (his childhood in Prague) into another (his life in Wales), where it is entirely alien. This is why a name like Morgan or Jones would indeed have been relatable to reality, since they are common in the form of life in which Austerlitz now exists.

Of course, Austerlitz eventually learns from Věra that his surname comes from his mother, Agáta Austerlitzová, and that she named him after Jacques Offenbach (2001: 218). However, this discovery of the “source” of the name, and the reconnection with the form of life in which it has meaning, does not bring Austerlitz any closer to the “meaning” of the name. Bauer notes that “despite its relative uncommonness, the name Austerlitz already opens up a web of possibilities and heterogeneous references” (2006: 235). From the time it is revealed, Austerlitz connects it to a variety of people, places and events. He notes that some of his namesakes include Fred Astaire (who changed his surname from Austerlitz), a circumciser in Kafka's diaries, and an Italian criminal (Sebald, 2001: 95-96). His most immediate connection, suggested by the headmaster who reveals his name, is with the battle of Austerlitz, one of Napoleon's great victories, which he studies at school soon afterwards. Influenced by André Hillary, his brilliant history teacher, Austerlitz develops the idea that he is “linked in some mysterious way to the glorious people of France” (2001: 102). However, his subsequent historical investigation destabilises even this “meaning” of his name. While searching for his father in Paris, Austerlitz learns about some of the wartime actions of the “glorious people of France,” who had helped the Germans to persecute the Jews under the

Vichy government (2001: 358-359). In Paris, Austerlitz sees his name everywhere, and it assumes a bewildering variety of connotations. He remembers accompanying Marie to a circus situated between the Gare d'Austerlitz and the Quai d'Austerlitz. The loot warehouse which stood on the current site of the Grand Bibliothèque, situated close the site where the circus was held, was known to the prisoners who worked there as Les Galeries d'Austerlitz because it housed "everything our civilisation had produced, whether for the embellishment of life or merely for everyday use" (2001: 402-3). The Gare d'Austerlitz itself has many associations for Austerlitz, and "has always seemed the most mysterious of the railway terminals of Paris" (2001: 406). In his student days he wrote an essay on it, and he recalls that he always "felt an uneasiness induced by the hall" behind its facade, which gave him the impression "of being on the scene of some unexpiated crime" (2001: 407). Before setting off to Gurs, Austerlitz visits the Gare d'Austerlitz, and feels a "premonition" that he is "coming closer to his father" (2001: 405).

It is because of all these associations that, as A.S. Byatt writes in her review of *Austerlitz*, "Austerlitz's discovered name is simultaneously overdetermined and meaningless" (2001: online). Austerlitz fails to discover the "meaning" of his name, a fundamental part of who he really is, because it has too many possible meanings, rather than none at all. As Bauer writes, "the ruminations about his name indicate the impossibility of finding a stable identity" (2006: 235). Austerlitz's impossible search for the meaning of his name points to the impossibility of ever gaining a synoptic view of his past, or ending his investigation. There are too many possible connections to make, and the connections and possible meanings change as his investigation progresses. McCulloh argues that the "cumulative effect" of Austerlitz's investigation is "not resolution," because it "can only lead into a further regress of words and images" (2003: 137). Byatt's final verdict on the novel reads as follows:

Too many connections in an unthinkable connected world. And a central absence of unspeakable things. This is Sebald's extraordinary construction.

(2001: online)

Thus, *Austerlitz* is a text that problematises the idea of the Sebaldian "synoptic view," or the Wittgensteinian "perspicuous representation." Austerlitz, who is in great need of the kind of personal understanding of history that Sebald and Wittgenstein recommend, cannot attain the

synoptic view which is necessary for this understanding. What, then, are we meant to make of the novel's attempt to maintain a living connection with the past? Is Sebald saying that it is impossible for someone like Austerlitz, who has been robbed of his "essential personhood," to establish such a connection? Or is Sebald challenging his own (and, by implication, Wittgenstein's) recommendations for the understanding and representation of history? In the next chapter, I will argue that the novel's demonstration of the impossibility of a synoptic view of history is precisely what makes it a literary text which maintains a living connection with the past. By drawing an analogy between Austerlitz's investigation of his past, Sebald's representation of that investigation, and Wittgenstein's philosophical attempt to understand the whole of language in his later work, I will show that, in *Austerlitz*, Sebald encourages his readers to participate in a living, never-ending investigation of history.

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## CHAPTER 3:

# HISTORICAL EXPLORATION AS AN ENDLESS JOURNEY

The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Philosophy”

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### 3.1 Introduction

Two of Sebald’s novels contain expressions of what J.J Long and Anne Whitehead, in their introduction to *W.G. Sebald – A Critical Companion*, call “a recurrent topos” of his writing: “the desire for a stable perspective or vantage point from which the object, be it a landscape or a historical event, can be reliably represented, even if the possibility of such a vantage point is ultimately recognised as an illusion” (2004: 5). In *The Rings of Saturn* (1998), the narrator visits the Mauritshuis in The Hague, where he studies Jacob van Ruisdael’s painting *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Fields*, which he describes as follows:

The flatland stretching towards Haarlem is seen from above, from a vantage point generally identified as the dunes, though the sense of a birds-eye view is so strong that the dunes would have to be veritable hills or even modest mountains. The truth is of course that Ruisdael did not take up a position on the dunes in order to paint; his vantage point was an imaginary position some distance above the earth. Only in this way could he *see it all together* [...]

(1998: 83; my emphasis)

In *Austerlitz* we encounter this assumption of an imaginary elevated perspective again, though with an historical event rather than a landscape as the object of the gaze, in the history lessons of André Hillary. Hillary’s specialist subject is the life of Napoleon, which he brings “vividly to life,”

partly by recounting the course of events, often passing from plain narrative to dramatic descriptions and then on to a kind of impromptu performance distributed among several different roles, from one to another of which he switched back and forth with astonishing virtuosity, and partly by studying the gambits of Napoleon and his opponents with the cold intelligence of a non-partisan strategist, *surveying the entire landscape of those years from above with an eagle eye*, as he once and not without pride remarked.

(2001: 98; my emphasis)

However, Hillary realises that his eagle-eyed surveillance does not prove adequate to understanding or representing the full scope of historical events. His recounting of the battle of Austerlitz, his “undoubted *pièce de résistance*,” uses all of the narratorial and descriptive devices described above (2001: 99). Even so, Austerlitz notes that

Hillary could talk for hours about the second of December 1805 [the date of the battle of Austerlitz], but none the less it would take an endless length of time to describe the events of such a day properly, in some inconceivably complex form recording who had perished, who survived, and exactly where and how, or simply saying what the battlefield was like at nightfall, with the screams and groans of the wounded and dying. In the end all anyone could ever do was sum up the unknown factors in the ridiculous phrase, ‘The fortunes of battle swayed this way and that’, or some similarly feeble and useless cliché.

(2001: 100-101)

Hillary’s concerns about the representation of historical events are shared by the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*. When the narrator visits the site of the battle of Waterloo, he enters the Waterloo Panorama, and is confronted with an exhibition which attempts visually to represent the entire battle from an elevated perspective. In the Panorama, the viewer stands on a “raised platform” in the middle of an “immense round rotunda” which contains a wax recreation of the battle, which is in turn surrounded by a mural (2001: 124). For the narrator, “it is like being at the centre of events” (2001: 125). However, the narrator is disturbed by the Panorama, and expresses his concerns:

This then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was. The desolate field extends all around where once fifty thousand soldiers and ten thousand horses met their end within a few hours. The night after the battle, the air must have been filled with

death rattles and groans. Now there is nothing but the silent brown soil. Whatever became of the corpses and mortal remains? Are they buried under the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that our ultimate vantage point? Does one really need have the much-vaunted historical overview from such a position?

(1998: 125)

I have quoted these passages because they suggest Sebald's awareness of a central problem in his literary project of maintaining a living connection with the past. In his remarks on Ruisdael, the narrator admits that it is sometimes necessary to assume an imaginary, elevated perspective of an object in order to "see it all together." As I argued in the first chapter, Sebald recommends that the details of a historical event must all be "seen together" in a synoptic view if one is to understand it. The synoptic view of history connects historical facts, and views them through the various perspectives of the historical and present-day observers. This is exactly what Hillary's recounting of the battle of Austerlitz does; it records various details, views the battle from the perspective of the various participants, uses diverse strategies of narration and description, and ties all of these elements together by surveying the whole of the battle with an "eagle eye". Nevertheless, Hillary's description is inadequate, since even the synoptic, elevated perspective is not able to account for all of the historical details. In the end, the synoptic view of history must resort to feeble clichés and set-pieces when it attempts to describe the totality of an event. This problem is given an ethical dimension in *The Rings of Saturn*. The narrator finds the synoptic, elevated perspective offered by the Waterloo Panorama unacceptable, since it forces us to discount all the elements which cannot be included in its representation of the event, as well as the traces it left behind. In the end, one can only attain an elevated perspective by standing on a "mountain of death."

*Austerlitz* further complicates and problematises the idea of a synoptic view. Jacques Austerlitz needs to see how all the elements of his past, and his understanding of and feeling towards those elements, connect to each other. Such a synoptic view of his past is the only way in which he can put his story "into anything like proper order" and find out who he "really" is (2001: 61; 60). As we have seen, however, it is impossible for Austerlitz to do this. His investigation of his past frequently encounters gaps, absences of evidence and understanding, which are impossible to fill. Conversely, his investigation also generates an

excess of meaning, suggests too many possible connections, and proves to be never-ending. This excess challenges the very idea of a synoptic view of history, since it suggests that such a view is impossible: if there are so many possible connections, how can we ever see all of them together?

How *should* we view history, then, if the synoptic view is both inadequate and impossible? In this chapter, I will address this question by arguing that, in *Austerlitz*, Sebald has created a literary work which, while showing the desirability of a synoptic view of history, represents the past from a situated, exploratory perspective. To illustrate Sebald's method, I will examine the resonances between Austerlitz's investigation of his past, the novel's representation of history, and Wittgenstein's (failed and consciously abandoned) attempt, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, to attain an elevated, all-seeing, perspicuous view of the whole of language. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues that to understand the workings of language, we must "command a clear view" of the whole of language and the immense background against which it has its meaning. Such a view can only be attained from an elevated perspective, where we rise above the ordinary workings of language and see it aright. However, Wittgenstein failed ever to attain such an understanding or perspective, for a variety of reasons. As I will show, this failure challenges the very idea of a perspicuous representation of history, which Wittgenstein argues for in his "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough." I will argue that Wittgenstein's failure, and the form which his *Investigations* actually took, give us an analogy through which to understand the failure of Austerlitz's investigation, and the form which the novel takes as a whole.

For the sake of clarity, I will first give a brief account of Wittgenstein's attempt to gain a clear view of the whole of language in the *Philosophical Investigations*, the reasons for his failure, and the form which his work eventually took. My discussion will draw heavily on Schalkwyk's comments on this topic.

### 3.2 Language and the impossibility of a perspicuous representation

Throughout the course of his philosophical career, Wittgenstein thought that an understanding of the workings of language was essential to philosophy. In the preface to the *Tractatus* he writes that “the book deals with the problems of philosophy and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are misunderstood is that the logic of our language is misunderstood” (1963: 3). Wittgenstein’s thoughts on the resolution of this misunderstanding underwent many changes as his understanding of language changed. In this chapter, I will consider his later attempt to resolve the misunderstanding of language in the *Philosophical Investigations*. My argument is that the workings of language forced Wittgenstein to adopt a certain form of writing about the subject. As I will show, this form resonates with the form of both Austerlitz’s investigation of history and the form of the novel *Austerlitz*. As such, my interest is in the *form* of the *Investigations*, and not its arguments about language. However, to understand the form, we need to have some idea of these arguments.

“What is fundamental to the *Tractatus*”, according to Grayling, “is the thought that language has an underlying logical structure” (1996: 14). It is this thought which Wittgenstein rejects in his later work. Rather than being a single entity which follows a single logic, language consists of a large amount and variety of what Wittgenstein calls *language-games*. Language-games are what language manifests itself in when we use it; they are the “activities” in which we use language (Grayling, 1996: 71). These language-games do not follow a single logic; “there are *countless* kinds,” with “countless different kinds of use” (Wittgenstein, 1958: §23; original emphasis). Language-games are not separate from human activity; their meaning depends on their context of use, and they are in fact activities in themselves. Wittgenstein states that “I shall call the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven, the ‘language-games’” (1958: §7). These activities themselves form part of a larger form of life, which in turn determines their meaning: “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (1958: §19).

This view of language gives Wittgenstein a particular idea of the task of the philosopher. For Wittgenstein, philosophical confusion arises from a misuse of language, which itself arises from a misunderstanding of the heterogeneous and contextual nature of language-games. For example, this misuse often occurs in philosophy’s search for essences:

When philosophers use a word – ‘knowledge,’ ‘being,’ ‘object,’ ‘I,’ ‘proposition,’ ‘name’ – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game in which it has its original home? – What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.

(1958: §116)

As such, the task of the philosopher, according to Norman Melchert in *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, is to “come back to home ground in our ordinary ways of talking [...] not to construct a philosophical theory about a baffling topic. What we need is to clarify the language in which the problem is posed” (1995: 577). This clarification does not come about through theorising, but through *description*. As Wittgenstein states,

We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. [...] The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we already know.

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. [...] It leaves everything as it is.

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.

(1958: §109; §123; §126; original emphasis).

Therefore, Schalkwyk argues in “Wittgenstein’s Imperfect Garden,” philosophy must describe language “in all its dense, intractable, living ‘hurly-burly’” (2004a: 59). To resolve the confusion around language-games, the philosopher must describe the whole of language, and its surrounding forms of life, in all their complexity. To do this, Wittgenstein argues for the necessity of a “perspicuous representation” of language, an argument which is framed similarly in the “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”:

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. – Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions.’

(1958: §122; original emphasis)

According to Schalkwyk, such an “elevated perspective” involves getting “above the hurly-burly of ordinary language-games in order to see and make the necessary therapeutic connections that will free us from the bewitchments induced by our inextricable situatedness in language” (2004a: 60). In other words, we are ordinarily too situated in language to see how it confuses us, and we somehow need to rise above it to see it clearly. The connections that we need to see are those between the language-games, their elements and the “background” which gives them meaning, which Schalkwyk defines as the “vast domain of ‘forms of life’ – the natural, cultural and discursive worlds implicit in everything that may be said in language” (2004a: 70-71).

However, Schalkwyk points out that “despite Wittgenstein’s suggestion that the concept of the perspicuous representation or overview is fundamental, both the shape of the *Investigations* and his account of that shape in its Preface eschew the overview and the map for the journey and the sketch” (2004a: 62). Schalkwyk argues that it is in reality impossible to get a truly perspicuous, elevated view of the whole of language and the forms of life in which it exists. There are two reasons for this impossibility which are important for my argument.

Firstly, Schalkwyk argues that we are too situated in language, and in the “background” which gives it meaning, ever be able to rise above it and gain an elevated perspective. In *Literature and the Touch of the Real*, he writes that Wittgenstein’s “search for a ‘perspicuous representation’ of grammar as a therapeutic end to philosophy, however, betrays the most fundamental insight that such an overview is meant to convey: our inextricable situatedness within language-games, history, and the world” (2004b: 159). As the *Tractatus* states, “*the limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” – we cannot think outside of language, and it is therefore impossible to rise above it and view it from on high (1961: §5.6; original emphasis). Similarly, Wittgenstein’s conviction of the determinate role that a form of life plays in all thought belies the possibility of ever rising above the background against which language has meaning.

Schalkwyk argues that Wittgenstein was (to a certain extent) aware of this problem, and notes the various metaphors of “groundedness” in the *Investigations* (2004a: 61). One such metaphor compares language to a city, which I mentioned in the previous chapter. Also, immediately after his remark on the importance of the perspicuous representation,

Wittgenstein states that “a philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about’” (1958: §123). Schalkwyk relates this statement to another remark, collected in *Culture and Value*, where Wittgenstein gives a metaphorical description of his philosophical method: “I am showing my pupils sections of an immense landscape, which they cannot possibly find their way about” (Wittgenstein, 1998: 64). Schalkwyk argues that “this is a metaphor of groundedness, of being in a landscape rather than above it, of having to make one’s way through it, rather than simply transcending it, even if it is true that one could find one’s way by gaining (how? where?) a total view of the terrain” (2004a: 61).

Secondly, Schalkwyk argues that Wittgenstein’s desired clear view of language is made unattainable by the vast terrain which it must represent. In order to give a truly perspicuous representation of language, one must take into account what Wittgenstein calls “the inexpressible” background “against which whatever I was able to express acquires any meaning” (1998: 23). Schalkwyk argues that Wittgenstein is here referring to “the vast domain of ‘forms of life’” which gives meaning to language (2004a: 70). This background is not inexpressible in the *Tractatus*’ sense of being “unspeakable;” rather, “it is the immense complexity of this background that escapes even the most comprehensive efforts to offer a philosophical *Übersicht* of the broader contexts that allow language to be what it is” (Schalkwyk, 2004a: 70). Wittgenstein’s remark about the inexpressibility of this background “registers a personal sense of bewilderment and limitation,” and shows the impossibility of ever attaining a total vision of the whole of language (Schalkwyk, 2004a: 71).

Thus, Wittgenstein’s thoughts about the diversity, complexity and contextual situatedness of language show that his own desire for an elevated, perspicuous representation is an illusory one. The philosopher who investigates language is inextricably situated within the subject of his investigation; moreover, that subject is so large that he can never see its vast, ever-changing whole. Schalkwyk argues that this necessarily puts the philosopher in a condition of permanent “displacement” (2004a: 62). In order to carry out the philosophical task of linguistic description, “it is [...] the philosopher who has to keep on the move, traversing the landscape” of language “this way and that, in an effort to find his or her way about;” “he becomes an itinerant sketcher, rather than a settled cartographer” (2004a: 63; 62). The philosopher can never find a stationary point from which to view the whole of language; instead, he must constantly move around within it. It is perhaps for this reason that

Wittgenstein, who wrote in “Philosophy” that “the real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to,” was never able to stop philosophising, and that the *Investigations* have the shape they do (1993d: 195). In the Preface to the *Investigations*, he writes that it was his intention to bring all of his remarks “together in a book” where “the thoughts proceed from one subject to another in a natural order and without breaks” (1958: vii). However, he writes that

After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realised that I should never succeed. [...] And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction. – The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings.

The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made. Very many of these were badly drawn or uncharacteristic, marked by all the defects of a weak draughtsman. And when they were rejected a number of tolerable ones were left, which now had to be arranged and sometimes cut down, so that if you looked at them you could get a picture of the landscape. Thus this book is really only an album.

(1958: vii)

One of the most striking things about *Austerlitz* is the formal resemblance it bears to the shape of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, as he describes it above. With its fragmentary form, numerous digressions and short discourses on various subjects, the novel certainly looks an album of literary sketches. Indeed, McCulloh notes that Sebald sometimes refers to his literary productions as “*Aufzeichnungen*,” a verb which translates as “to write down or record, but also to draw;” thus, the word in its noun form means “something like ‘depictions’” (2003: 10). Like the remarks of the *Investigations*, these sketches do not “proceed from one subject to another in a natural order and without breaks” (Wittgenstein, 1958: vii). Instead of a linear structure, the novel’s constant temporal jumps and repetition of themes give it the appearance of travelling across “a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction,” which in the end gives us a “picture of a landscape,” but not the entire landscape (1958: vii). As such, *Austerlitz* certainly does not resemble a synoptic view of history; its shape is much closer, instead, to a number of sketches assembled as the record of a journey.

These formal resemblances are not the only similarities between *Austerlitz* and the *Investigations*. For the rest of this chapter I will show that despite their differing subjects, there are further analogies to be drawn between Sebald and Wittgenstein's works. More than this, I will also argue that *Austerlitz* directly engages with some of the central concepts of the *Investigations*, as they are outlined above. In exploring these analogies and shared concerns, my aim is to show that *Austerlitz*, both through its form and its thematic interests, is a work of literature which maintains a living connection with the past by *rejecting* the synoptic view of history in favour of the journey and the sketch. It is in this argument that the dissertation will reach its conclusion.

### **3.3 *Austerlitz*'s situated, inconclusive exploration of history**

As a starting point, let us take Wittgenstein's description, in the Preface to the *Investigations*, of language as a vast landscape which can never be entirely explored or represented. I would argue that *Austerlitz* demonstrates the same of history and historical understanding, an argument that is already suggested by Austerlitz's investigation of his past. As we saw in the last chapter, Austerlitz's investigation generates an excess of meanings and possible connections which proves to be overwhelming. As the example of his relationship to his name illustrates, he cannot ascribe any definitive "meaning" to some of the facts and associations which his investigation uncovers, since the range of possible meanings and connections is too vast.

In this sense, Austerlitz's investigation closely resembles his project of architectural history. This project, which Austerlitz embarked on because he was "poorly advised," aims to describe an incredibly wide subject: the "whole history of the architecture and civilisation of the bourgeois age" (Sebald, 2001: 197). Even in its early stages the project threatened to become overwhelming. While conducting research in the old Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Austerlitz lost himself in the footnotes to the footnotes of the works he was reading, "in a kind of continual regression experienced in the form of my own marginal remarks and glosses, which increasingly diverged into the most varied and impenetrable of ramifications" (2001: 363). This regression meant that the project "soon outstripped" its original purpose as

a dissertation, and proliferated “into endless preliminary sketches” (2001: 44). After retirement Austerlitz thinks “of collecting my fragmentary studies in a book” which he pictures in different forms: a “systematically descriptive work,” a “series of essays,” and so on (2001: 170). However, he soon becomes disillusioned with his work, and his description of that disillusionment uses many phrases taken (no doubt consciously, if we consider all the other references to Wittgenstein in the novel) from the Preface to the *Investigations*:<sup>1</sup>

Even a first glance at the papers [...] showed that they consisted largely of sketches which now seemed misguided, distorted, and of little use. I began to assemble and recast everything that still passed muster in order to re-create before my own eyes, as if in the pages of an album, the picture of the landscape, now almost immersed in oblivion, through which my journey had taken me.

(2001: 170-171)

Like the *Investigations*, and like his project of architectural history, Austerlitz’s investigation of his past resembles an album of sketches, not a perspicuous representation. Rather than having a synoptic view of who he really is, Austerlitz constantly travels (both figuratively and literally, as his back-and-forth journey through Europe shows) through the landscape of his past, approaching the same points from various directions, making a multitude of connections without ever seeing the whole picture. However, this does not mean that he ever ends his investigation, since the personal needs which drive it are not resolved by the time of his last meeting with the narrator. In fact, his determination to “continue looking for my father, and for Marie de Verneuil as well,” suggests that the search will *never* end (Sebald, 2001: 408). As Bauer writes, *Austerlitz* “is an inversed *Bildungsroman* that leads to perpetual wandering and not to a resolution, the discovery of self, personal growth, or the comfort of home” (2006: 235). In this sense, Austerlitz’s investigation is as incomplete and impossible to complete as Wittgenstein’s.

Nevertheless, it is not only Austerlitz who experiences the exploration and understanding of history as a never-ending journey. I would argue that this is also the experience of the *reader*

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<sup>1</sup> Sebald’s references to Wittgenstein’s philosophy in the context of architecture is particularly apt, since Wittgenstein was himself very interested in architecture, and, during the period 1925-6, he collaborated on the design of a house with Paul Engelmann (see Monk, pages 235-8). Wittgenstein himself saw a link between his work as a philosopher and as an architect. In “Philosophy” he writes that “work on philosophy is – as work on architecture frequently is – actually a kind of work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On the way one sees things” (1993d: 161-3).

of the novel, who confronts a text which generates an immeasurably vast field of meaning. Aside from the multitude of meanings generated by Austerlitz's investigation, Sebald infuses the text with numerous further associations and references. These are not embellishments, but vital components of the novel's generation of meaning. Most obviously, Austerlitz's story is framed as a series of conversations with the narrator, who does not act as an anonymous intermediary, but inserts his own life and thoughts into the story. The narrator's experiences, memories, literary associations and thoughts resonate with those of Austerlitz, and add several layers of meaning to the novel.

A good example of this process is the narrator's description of the Breendonk fortress. By the time the narrator visits the fortress, the reader has already read Austerlitz's denunciation of fortress architecture. The narrator brings his own interpretation into play, describing the fortress as "a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence," something which he cannot recognise as "anything designed by the human mind" (Sebald, 2001: 26; 27-28). He connects the fortress to his own experience, noting that he "could well imagine the sight of the good fathers and dutiful sons" who made up the SS guard stationed at the fortress during the war, for he had lived among them (2001: 29). The interior of the fortress evokes several memories, such as the butcher-shop of his childhood village (2001: 33). Finally, the visit to the fort prompts the narrator to discuss the memoirs of some of the men who had been held prisoner there, such as Gastone Novelli and Jean Améry.

In this way, the narrator's recounting of Austerlitz's story is not limited to that story, but imbues it with further resonant meaning. The role of the narrator as the *writer* of the novel, and the in-text references to his process of writing, also generate further meanings; as Schlant writes, "The narrator describes the circumstances of his own life at the time he becomes interested in the lives of these "others"; he describes the note-taking and the travels necessary for his research, so that the narratives are also works-in-progress constructed in front of the reader" (1999: 225). However, the generation of meaning does not stop there. The text is written in a form that connects its various elements to each other in a multitude of ways, and suggests further resonant meanings. As McCulloh writes, "the narrative progresses from one mental association to another, following threads, skeins of thought, in much the same way that one experiences consciousness itself, but with a remarkable richness born of elaborate intertextuality (and *intratextuality*)" (2003: 3).

A good example of this inter- and intratextual generation of meaning is the novel's activation of a potent set of symbols: railways and railway stations. As we saw in the last chapter, railways and railway stations play a particularly important role in Austerlitz's past. However, *Austerlitz* also contains many other descriptions of railway stations. At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator visits Antwerp's Centraal station and, through a series of complex associations, connects the station to the history of Belgian colonialism, the statues and travellers in the stations to the trapped animals in a nocturama, and the entire European railway system to the spread of capitalism. Of course, as the novel progresses, the various railways and railway stations come to have an even deeper significance, which is tied to Austerlitz's story and to the history of the Holocaust. In an interview, Sebald emphasises the important role of the railway system in the popular imagination of the Holocaust, and how it assumes a powerful symbolic function in documents like Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985) (Watchel, 2007: 53). However, Sebald is careful to emphasise that his references to railways, and his use of all "the other images in the text," are not meant to give them a definitive symbolic meaning:

People always want what seem to them to be symbolic elements in a text to have single meanings. But of course that isn't how symbols work. If they are any good at all they are usually multivalent. [...] The more obvious you make a symbol in a text, the less genuine it becomes [...] You just try and set up certain reverberations in a text and the whole acquires significance that it might not otherwise have.

(Watchel, 2007: 53-4)

If this is true of the function of the symbols within the text, it is also true of how these symbols are interpreted by the readers of the novel. *Austerlitz*'s references to places, events, people, and literary works, not to mention its use of visual images, invite a multitude of different interpretations, associations and connotations. (An example of this process is this dissertation itself, which was born out of Sebald's references to Wittgenstein.) Thus, we can say that *Austerlitz* opens up a field of multiple meanings which, like the Wittgensteinian picture of language and its background, is perhaps infinitely vast. In this sense, *Austerlitz* shows us the vastness of the landscape of history and historical understanding, as the *Investigations* does that of language.

There is, however, a closer relation between *Austerlitz* and the *Investigations*, one which is not a matter of mere analogy. Wittgenstein emphasises our “inextricable situatedness” within history and forms of life (Schalkwyk, 2004b: 159). In its focus on the personal meaning of history, *Austerlitz* represents history and historical meaning in a fundamentally *situated* way. This representation of situatedness takes two forms.

Firstly, the novel emphasises the *situatedness of historical meaning* within a personal context and a form of life. This emphasis is clearly shown in my discussion of Austerlitz’s investigation of the form of life of his early childhood; however, it occurs throughout the novel. Both Austerlitz and the narrator’s ruminations on architectural sites, for example, situate the meaning of these sites within the context of the form of life which gave rise to them, as the narrator does with the Centraal Station in Antwerp. Also, the various historical artefacts, such as the film *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* and Liverpool Street Station, are shown to have meanings which are firmly rooted in personal, situated historical experience. This is not only true of historical artefacts, but of concepts and words as well. For example, when Austerlitz studies Adler’s book, which is written in German, he struggles with many of the words because he cannot imagine the wider context in which these words would have meaning. Some of the German compound-words, “which were obviously being spawned the whole time by the pseudo-technical jargon governing everything in Theresienstadt,” are difficult to translate not only because of Austerlitz’s unfamiliarity with the language, but because “in its almost futuristic deformation of social life the ghetto system had something incomprehensible and unreal about it” (2001: 300; 331). This passage demonstrates the fact that historical meaning is situated in context; without an understanding of the form of life of the ghetto, and of the culture which created the ghetto, the German ghetto-words cannot be understood.

Secondly, *Austerlitz* demonstrates that certain kinds of historical understanding are only possible through a *situated perspective* on history. As we have seen, Austerlitz’s investigation aims at a personal, subjective understanding of his past. His objects of investigation are himself, his own history (and the history of those close to him, like his parents), and his relationship to and understanding of that history. Furthermore, this relationship changes as his investigation progresses; as he learns more, he himself changes, and his understanding of the past changes too. As such, Austerlitz is inextricably situated within the object of his

investigation; he is both the subject doing the investigating and the object of investigation. Thus, the very nature of a personal investigation of history means that such an investigation can only ever be conducted from a situated perspective.

In this way, *Austerlitz* demonstrates the impossibility of ever creating a perspicuous representation of history. The landscape of history and historical understanding is too vast to be adequately represented; and the personal understanding of history, which is what the perspicuous representation aims at, can only ever come about through a situated exploration. However, it is precisely in its acknowledgement of this impossibility, and in its album-like, situated, journeying form that *Austerlitz* attains its status as a work of literature which maintains a living connection with the past. By showing us the immeasurable size of the field of historical meaning, interpretation and understanding, Sebald makes us conscious of the many ways in which history can be interpreted and understood. In a sense, the novel illustrates the immense variety of the “language-games” of historical understanding. Like Kluge’s writings, which Sebald praises in his critical work, *Austerlitz* is “a form of reflection on all these methods of ours for understanding the world” (Sebald, 2006: 99). Furthermore, Sebald makes us conscious of the situatedness of our understanding of history, of how historical meaning, like any other meaning, is rooted in a context that is both personal and based in a form of life. In doing so, *Austerlitz* contributes to what Schalkwyk identifies as an essential philosophical task of literature. Schalkwyk argues that the task of the *Investigations*, the “task of mapping the totality of relationships” between concepts and the background within which they are situated and against which they have meaning,

is constantly being achieved by the manifold of texts we call ‘literature’. Wittgenstein’s crucial philosophical task is carried out in the vast network of the literary, in which the situatedness of concepts in human life and the world is constantly being renewed and retested.  
(2004a: 71)

By this I do not mean that *Austerlitz* maps out the entire array of our ways of understanding history. After all, Schalkwyk notes that “no single work offers a comprehensive survey of the whole of grammar” (2004a: 72). Rather, I would argue that the novel makes the reader conscious of the need to explore these various modes of historical understanding, and the great number of situated contexts in which historical facts, artefacts, concepts and associations have their meaning.

Thus, the necessity of telling the story of Austerlitz lies not only in his status as a victim of history, but in what his experiences can tell us about historical investigation and understanding. Austerlitz's investigation shows us that a synoptic view of history is not possible; however, we are also shown that the pursuit of a personal understanding of history is necessary and unavoidable, and that this pursuit can have no end. In reading *Austerlitz*, we see history through the eyes of someone who must always continue in his exploration of the past. In this representation of history, Sebald suggests a way of overcoming the problem posed by Hillary, which I quoted at the start of this chapter. Instead of attempting to show us the totality of an event, in this case a man's entire life, *Austerlitz* emphasises the immensity of that event, and shows us that it is impossible to see it from an elevated, totalising perspective. However, by showing us the many ways in which Austerlitz, the narrator, and all of the other characters try to understand history, the novel suggests that it is possible to understand the event, even if such an understanding will never be complete. By focusing on specific incidents and creating the possibility of multiple meanings, the novel avoids the clichés and pre-formed images which accompany any attempt to give an unsituated, totalised view of history.

It is therefore the very nature of Sebald's literary project which determines the form of *Austerlitz*. This form is not a synoptic view, which he advocates in his critical writing, but an album of sketches which give an incomplete picture of a vast landscape. Instead of a single, "clear" or "perspicuous" representation of history, Sebald creates a multiplicity of representations which resist definitive interpretation. I would argue, finally, that it is precisely through its rejection of definitive clarity that *Austerlitz* maintains a *living* connection with the past. In the Preface to *At the Mind's Limits*, Améry states that he wrote the book "in the service of an enlightenment" (1980: x). "However," he writes,

enlightenment is not the same as clarification. I had no clarity when I was writing this little book, I do not have it today, and I hope that I never will. Clarification would amount to disposal, settlement of the case, which can then be placed in the files of history. My book is meant to aid in preventing precisely this. For nothing is resolved, no conflict is settled, no remembering has become a mere memory.

(1980: xi)

This is precisely the effect of *Austerlitz*. Although the novel's representation of the past is not confusing or oblique, it does not give us any final clarity on the historical concepts, events and objects it discusses. Swales writes that Sebald's prose "resists [...] conclusiveness;" but it is through this resistance that the novel prevents a disposal or settlement of the case, the very thing Améry warns us against (2005: 86). By showing the exploration of history to be an unending process, Sebald ensures that there is no final resolution, and that the remembrance of history does not become a mere memory. It is in this way that *Austerlitz* maintains a living connection with the past.

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## CONCLUSION

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As this dissertation has shown, *Austerlitz* is a text which maintains a connection with the past by forcing us to remember it, *and* by investigating and questioning our relationship with, and ways of understanding, history. Through telling the fictional story of Jacques Austerlitz, whose life is inseparable from certain events of modern European history, particularly the Holocaust, Sebald encourages us to remember those events. At the same time, Austerlitz's troubled relationship with his past, the strategies he employs to understand it, and the obstacles he encounters on the way, demonstrate the complexity of historical meaning and understanding. In this way, the novel acts as a self-reflexive "act of restitution," simultaneously emphasising the importance of historical remembrance while questioning its very possibility. In the end, however, *Austerlitz* presents something of a solution to its own problems in its advocacy and implementation of a situated, endless exploration of history.

As we have seen, Wittgenstein's philosophy is crucial to an understanding of Sebald's method. Wittgenstein's "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" are useful for clarifying Sebald's critical writing on the literary representation of history, and for analysing his implementation of the principles expressed in his critical work in his own literature. However, *Austerlitz* goes further than this, since it engages with some central aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and, perhaps more importantly, with many of the problems which Wittgenstein experienced as a *writer* of philosophy. This should not be surprising; as McCulloh notes, Sebald "regarded the struggle to write as precisely that – a struggle, a toilsome act, a labor of great difficulty, one which, moreover, mostly goes wrong;" for this reason, he was interested in writers who "perceive their work as inherently imperfect, as a work in progress" – Wittgenstein, of course, was such a writer (2003: 140). As I have shown, Sebald engages with some of the core formal difficulties which Wittgenstein experienced as a writer, and shows how these problems are relevant to his own project of literary historical representation. In this way, Sebald is not only "fascinated" with Wittgenstein's biography and philosophy, but with his writing as well.

Sebald's engagement with Wittgenstein is suggested and made interpretively possible by his explicit and intertextual references to Wittgenstein's biography, philosophy and writing. In a review of Sebald's works, André Aciman disparagingly refers to Sebald's "intertextual cross-references to keep students and critics at bay for another forty years" (1998: online). Rather than keeping us at bay, I would argue that these references serve as vital tools for interpreting Sebald's complex literature; instead of obfuscating, they help us to understand his works in a meaningful and clear way. Furthermore, Sebald's intelligent engagement with the authors to whom he refers acts as a safeguard against reductive theorising. Instead of merely "applying" a theory (or theoretical position) to a novel such as *Austerlitz*, we are encouraged to consider the complex ways in which Sebald has *himself* engaged with the various authors and texts he has referenced, quoted and evoked. Wittgenstein is only one such author; there are many others (Jean Améry, Dan Jacobson, Joseph Conrad, Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Browne, and so on), in addition to the many artists, composers and filmmakers cited in his books, still to consider.

Conversely, Sebald's work can also be useful as an interpretive tool for understanding certain aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy. In recent years, many philosophers and literary critics have explored the relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy to literary criticism, and vice versa, despite Wittgenstein's outright rejection of aesthetic theorising. In the Introduction to *The Literary Wittgenstein*, a collection of essays which explores these connections, Wolfgang Huemer notes that "Wittgenstein's writings contain much that can improve our theoretical understanding of literature, but also, that questions that are discussed in contemporary literary theory and even the close reading of particular literary texts can deepen our understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy" (2003: 11-12). Indeed, literature demonstrates and explores many of the central preoccupations of Wittgenstein's (mostly later) language philosophy, such as the conventions and limits of grammatical rules, the contextual meaning of concepts within language-games and forms of life, and the function of words and sentences in ordinary, as opposed to "philosophical," language (see Huemer, 2003: 1-6).

As this dissertation has shown, however, Sebald's literary work *Austerlitz* not only contributes to our understanding of Wittgenstein's language philosophy (particularly in its exploration of the relationship between language and a form of life), but also his philosophy of historical representation, *and* various formal and stylistic aspects of his writing. In fact, I

would argue that *Austerlitz* is, in a sense, a work which shows what a realisation of Wittgenstein's "perspicuous representation" of history would look like, while simultaneously problematising this very notion, and, by engaging with many of the difficulties which Wittgenstein experienced in writing the *Philosophical Investigations*, providing a solution to these problems. In this way, *Austerlitz* demonstrates the value of literature for understanding Wittgenstein's philosophy of historical representation. Since Wittgenstein's remarks on this topic touch some of the central problems of historical representation, *Austerlitz* therefore stands as concrete proof of the value, or the rather necessity, of literature's engagement with history. Through his sophisticated engagement with the "disconsolate philosopher," Sebald has created a text which maintains a living connection with the past, and with Wittgenstein as well.

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