Melancholy Inscriptions

Memory, Place, and Temporality in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

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Literary and architectural investigations into the cultural and historical associations attached to particular places play a significant role in the work of German writer W.G. Sebald. In *Austerlitz*, Sebald's final prose fiction, his eponymous character spends much of his adult life conducting typological research for an unfinished treatise on 'the architectural style of the capitalist era'.[1] Sebald deploys this incomplete architectural investigation as a narrative device to depict how the evocation of memory attached to specific places can reveal other inscriptions that habitually remain hidden from even the most attentive viewer within everyday spatial practice and its narrative equivalents. *Austerlitz* is a historian of architecture haunted by cryptic gaps and absences in his own history. These ellipses intensify around particular buildings and places that seem to him permeated with a melancholic ambi-

ence whose source initially remains obscured and occulted. For Sebald, the evasive 'dark centre' of memory around which the majority of his texts orbit is the German past between 1925 and 1950. He observes that the 'swirling movement of history moved towards that point', a point of catastrophic violence that includes the Holocaust and the destruction of large parts of German towns and cities by aerial bombardments in the Second World War.[2] The psychological difficulties experienced by the German people in acknowledging the traumatic repercussions of this 'point' has been the explicit subject of several of Sebald's essays as well as an implied presence in his longer works.[3] Melancholy becomes a key term and also a mode of inquiry in Sebald's critical assessment of the involuntary lack of mourning in Germany during the latter half of the twentieth century.

The collective repression and inability to mourn that Sebald, as an essayist, identifies on a national scale, resurfaces in a more individualized form in *Austerlitz*. The recovery of *Austerlitz's* transnational past as a child refugee from the *Kindertransport* begins at Liverpool Street Station, a location *Austerlitz* is compelled to revisit and where he witnesses spectral manifestations of the coexistence of the past and the present.[4] 'Places might be melancholy through association, where a site's history of tragic events can elicit feelings of sorrow. Or the melancholy may be induced by the more intangible qualities of a place', observes Jackie Bowring in *A Field Guide to Melancholy*, a phenomena that reveals how the figure of melancholy exceeds the categorical boundaries of its scientific classification as a psychological condition or affective disposition located in an individual.[5] By contrasting the delayed recognition that *Austerlitz* experiences at Liverpool Street Station with his reaction to the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, another significant London landmark in the text, it becomes possible to demonstrate how Sebald uses the evocation of place-based histories and memories to reveal melancholy inscriptions that remain hidden, repressed, *encrypted*. The process of identifying and deciphering these inscriptions, and the act of tracing how both the tone and the topic of Sebald's work are

frequently inscribed by melancholy, offer productive critical ground for excavating the submerged associations among memory, place and temporality that swirl through the text. In a world dominated by spectacular demands for happiness and the elimination of sadness, the expanded field of melancholy surveyed by Sebald presents future architectural investigations with a nuanced methodology for researching both the positive and negative aspects of the sorrowful ambience produced by specific places.

Austerlitz is a discursive text full of multi-layered repetitions. For long unparagraphed sections the unnamed narrator repeats the digressive reminiscences relayed to him by Jacques *Austerlitz*. These recollections are studded with further narratives and narrators. Through this framework, Sebald begins to intimate the fragmentation of *Austerlitz's* character, but also establishes a set of temporal conditions in which repetition undermines chronological progression. The narrator has several encounters with *Austerlitz*, initially by chance in Belgium in 1967, and then more frequently in London until 1975. Dining together in a restaurant at Antwerp Railway Station, *Austerlitz* notes the central position occupied by the clock above the passengers. He tells the narrator that it was only in the nineteenth century that time began to reign supreme over its contemporary deities such as 'industry, transport, trade and capital'. He observes that the advent of railway timetables led to the synchronization of clocks as time became standardized. But he also comments that 'to this day there is something . . . illusory about the relationship of time and space as we experience it in travelling'.[6]

More than 20 years after their last encounter, the narrator meets *Austerlitz* again by chance, and again in the vicinity of a railway station – at the saloon bar of the Great Eastern Hotel on Liverpool Street. *Austerlitz* picks up the conversation as if no time had elapsed since their previous meeting and gives the narrator a lengthy account of his childhood growing up in a remote village in Wales. *Austerlitz* explains that his proper name was hidden

from him until his fifteenth year when he discovered that he had been fostered as a young child in the summer of 1939. The following day *Austerlitz* and the narrator walk from Liverpool Street through the Docklands to the Royal Observatory. Here, *Austerlitz* extemporizes what the narrator describes as 'a disquisition of some length on time'. Standing on the prime meridian that divides the globe into Eastern and Western Hemispheres and that serves as the official reference line for standardized global time, *Austerlitz* announces that time 'was by far the most artificial of all our inventions'.[7] Rather than a linear chronology, *Austerlitz* posits a multi-temporal perspective where past, present and future events coexist.

Returning to Liverpool Street, *Austerlitz* continues with his own story, explaining that on one of his repeat visits to the station he had accessed an abandoned space that he had never entered before. Crossing, theatrically, behind a 'heavy curtain' that veiled the entrance to the former Ladies Waiting Room, 'I felt, said *Austerlitz*, like an actor'.[8] On the other side of the partition he slowly recognizes himself as a young child who sat on a bench in this same waiting room after being evacuated from Prague. The narrative structure of listening and repeating enables Sebald to address his main subject indirectly. Past events are recomposed through the figure of *Austerlitz*, who has spent his life repressing the trauma surrounding his separation from his Jewish parents just before the start of the Second World War, a forced abandonment that saved him from the Nazi concentration camps in which his mother was imprisoned and murdered and into which his father disappeared. Unable to cope with the discontinuity or loss, *Austerlitz* identifies that he unconsciously adopted a mode of trying 'to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to my unknown past'.[9] But his narrative – and the uncaptioned illustrations and photographs that accompany the text (these images are a characteristic of Sebald's prose works) – reveal that these buried elements have persistently filtered back into his life in encrypted forms.

After the belated moment of recognition in the Ladies Waiting Room, *Austerlitz* becomes overwhelmed by feelings of temporal disorientation and despair. He suffers a mental and physical breakdown. Significantly, *Austerlitz*'s breakdown occurs when he attempts to shape his historical research on architecture and capitalism into a book, which he describes as his 'constantly postponed' project.[10] (*Austerlitz's* deferred magnum opus echoes Walter Benjamin's unfinished Arcades Project.) To complete his task, *Austerlitz* would have to confront the gaps in his knowledge that match the gaps in his life. He confesses that 'as far as I was concerned the world ended in the late nineteenth century'.[11] He has 'always avoided learning anything at all about German topography, German history or modern German life'.[12]

As *Austerlitz* and the narrator shift London locations, moving from Liverpool Street Station to the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, Sebald's text gathers correspondences with other philosophical and political critiques of time and history. While inside the Royal Observatory, *Austerlitz* raises a series of questions that resonate throughout the novel:

Why do we show the hours of light and darkness in the same circle? Why does time stand eternally still and motionless in one place, and rush headlong by in another? Could we not claim, said *Austerlitz*, that time itself has been non-concurrent over the centuries and the millennia? It is not so long ago, after all, that it began spreading out over everything. And is not human life in many parts of the earth governed to this day less by time than by the weather, and thus by an unquantifiable dimension which disregards linear regularity, does not progress constantly forward but moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption, recurs in ever-changing form, and evolves in no one knows what direction?[13]

Furthermore, *Austerlitz* argues, indirectly disclosing the consonances between the global dominance of time and capitalism, even 'in a metropolis

ruled by time like London' it is possible to be outside of time. It is a state that includes the dead and the dying, and those cut off from the past and future by what he describes as 'a certain degree of personal misfortune'. *Austerlitz* has never subscribed to the materiality of regulated public time embodied by clocks or (even worse) wristwatches:

> *A clock has always struck me as something ridiculous, a thoroughly mendacious object, perhaps because I have always resisted the power of time out of some internal compulsion which I myself have never understood, keeping myself apart from so-called current events in the hope, as I now think, said Austerlitz, 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.[14]*

These ideas share interesting correspondences with the chaotic temporalities theorized by Michel Serres. Serres argues that time does not always flow according to a line or to a plan. It is far more complex, or multiplex, composed of 'a visible disorder' that the classical theory of time cannot contain. 'Time doesn't flow,' says Serres, 'it percolates. This means precisely that it passes and doesn't pass.' It is full of turbulences, counter-currents. For Serres, time can be 'schematized by a kind of crumpling, a multiple, foldable diversity'.[15] The reduction of such multi-temporality to an exclusively linear progression along a continuum gives rise to a limited view of history. It was this dangerously narrow perspective that Walter Benjamin attempted to dismantle at the beginning of the Second World War. Benjamin writes:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight . . . One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experi-

encing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.[16]

Serres touches upon similar territory when discussing the horrified amazement people felt in the 1930s and 1940s at the 'archaic behaviour' of the Nazis issuing from one of the most scientifically and culturally advanced countries in the world. For Serres, 'every historical era is likewise multitemporal, simultaneously drawing from the obsolete, the contemporary, and the futuristic' revealing 'a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats'.[17] Serres distinguishes pleated time from its classical equivalent: pleated time is common both to our inner experiences and our experiences of nature (experiences entwined in Sebald's pleated narratives). Topological rather than geometrical, it is a time that can be folded or crumpled like a handkerchief to superimpose distant points. Serres admits that we need the rigidity of classical time for measurements, but he asks: 'Why extrapolate from it a general theory of time? *People usually confuse time and the measurement of time*, which is a metrical reading on a straight line.'[18] Such confusion diminishes both the creative and destructive potential of those paradoxically evanescent moments where time is arrested, where a nexus of archaic phenomena, elective affinities, coincidental encounters, and chance arrangements lead to profane illuminations. It is through a recognition of these points of pleated time that Sebald's antiquarian interests become more reminiscent of Benjamin's attempts to 'brush history against the grain', revealing the Möbius strip of civilization and barbarism.[19] In *Austerlitz*, such temporalities are repeatedly pleated with melancholy and inscribed in specific places.

To shift focus from temporality to memory, a more psychoanalytical perspective provides further illumination on the protean role of melancholy in *Austerlitz*. In his intricate account of melancholia, Freud traces its cause to an inability to mourn that mutates the painful process of working through

the affects of trauma and loss. Instead of being successfully introjected, the lost object becomes incorporated into the psyche and produces manic-depressive symptoms.[20] According to psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, Freud's conception of melancholia involves 'archaic unconscious representations that are unable to reach consciousness'. Scrutinizing Freud's essay on 'Mourning and Melancholia', Abraham and Torok are struck by the 'recurrent image of an open wound'. For them, this image precisely represents 'the wound the melancholic attempts to hide, wall in, and encrypt'.[21] Promoted as a theory of readability for attaining legibility from illegibility and signification from silences, the psychoanalytical insights that circulate around Abraham and Torok's reading of Freud have applications that purposefully drift beyond the domain of the clinic. Their concept of cryptonymy refers to the identification of the return of a repressed element in the lacunae of language, an element that remains concealed yet reveals itself through its coded absence in a chain of signification. Cryptonymy, they argue, requires a crypt. The encrypted element originates in a failure to mourn in which the unprocessed loss becomes entombed within the self, buried alive, forming a crypt: a kind of pleated fold or enclave that encapsulates the trauma and keeps it from resurfacing as a memory. However, as *Austerlitz*'s narrative demonstrates, the crypt leaks, the secret is secreted. The reference to the encrypted status of archaic unconscious representations within the structure of melancholia suggests that the phenomenological impact of particular places has the capacity to prompt these melancholy inscriptions to emerge from – or, more accurately, *on* or *in* – their hiding place.

'Something like his proper name is what his cryptonyms kept secret. Cryptonymy is said first of his proper name.'[22] These words are from Jacques Derrida's introduction to Abraham and Torok's reading of Freud's analysis of the patient known as The Wolf Man. Refracted through this chain of associations and applied to *Austerlitz*, these words propose an opening for locating the repressive prop that propels Sebald's narrative (whose proper-

ties involve the problem of aligning the proper name to the proper order). After a lengthy silence, *Austerlitz* confesses to the narrator:

> *Since my childhood and youth, he finally began, looking at me again, I have never known who I really was. From where I stand now, of course, I can see that my name alone, and the fact that it was kept from me until my fifteenth year, ought to have put me on the track of my origins, but it has become clear to me of late why an agency greater or superior to my own capacity for thought, which circumspectly directs operations somewhere in my brain, has always preserved me from my own secret, systematically preventing me from drawing the obvious conclusions and embarking on the inquiries they would have suggested to me. It hasn't been easy to make my way out of my own inhibitions, and it will not be easy now to put the story into anything like proper order.[23]*

Successive revelations begin to illuminate the traumatic personal history that *Austerlitz* has industriously concealed within himself and from himself (marking a fundamental dissolution of interiority and exteriority as well as comically referencing Sebald's agency as the author who 'directs operations'). Within the wider context of Sebald's corpus, the applicability of Abraham and Torok's terms to *Austerlitz's* narrative can be expanded to encompass the collective crypt secretly erected in the psychical life of post-war Germany: the crypt that Sebald's work seeks to detect and dismantle.[24] But it is notable that even when the encrypted origins of *Austerlitz's* traumatic childhood are identified and the melancholy inscriptions generated by specific places are made legible, a lingering sense of unease persists:

> *It was obviously of little use that I had discovered the sources of my distress and, looking back over all the past years, could now see myself with the utmost clarity as that child suddenly cast out of his familiar surroundings: reason was powerless against the sense of rejection and annihilation which I had always suppressed, and which was now breaking through the walls of its confinement.[25]*

As this image intimates, although the psychic structure that entombed the loss experienced during his childhood has become porous, *Austerlitz's* habitual sense of being 'clouded by unrelieved despair' remains intact.[26] Moreover, he suffers from the painful retrograde emotions that now infect his already saturnine temperament. While *Austerlitz* continues to suffer, Sebald shows us that in order to initiate an act of mourning it is necessary to engage with the secret sources of that suffering. However, as indicated by the constant postponement of completing his architectural research, for *Austerlitz* the possibility of gaining a sense of closure from recollecting his loss and working through the stages of his grief is counteracted by a tendency to evade such finitude. By resisting closure and clinging to the irresolvable, the melancholic risks settling into inertia and inaction. Yet Sebald's densely immersive representation of melancholy resists viewing such a way of being in the world as an exclusively medical abnormality and so deviates from the structure of mourning and melancholia proposed by Freud. Decoding the encrypted inscriptions of melancholy becomes less aligned with curing a patient and more applicable as a model for new practices of reading and constructing place.

As a text poised on the threshold between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, *Austerlitz* folds contrasting emblems of London together. The Royal Observatory represents the city as an important command and control hub in the evolution of a global network serving the free movement of capital. While Liverpool Street Station represents the city as another kind of hub welcoming the free movement of people, not only those escaping violent oppression and war, but also immigrants like Sebald whose work illustrates the potentially catastrophic consequences of forgetting our history, of closing our borders, of sealing ourselves – and our accompanying experience of grief, loss and sorrow – into a crypt. The vision of the melancholic repeatedly reminds us to pay attention to 'the tradition of the oppressed' that Benjamin so powerfully evoked (in the restless months before his tragic death while trying to escape Nazi oppression). We are

also reminded of the contemporary relevance of Benjamin's analysis that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is the rule and not the exception and that we must attain a conception of place as well as history that is in keeping with this melancholy insight. Finally, we are reminded that literary and architectural investigations into place have the capacity to excavate and decode the melancholy inscriptions of these emergency conditions should the clandestine manipulations of the dominant economic order or our growing cultural amnesia provisionally render them inaccessible to our consciousness and to our conscience.

1. W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London, 2001), 44. *Austerlitz* is Sebald's final work although several other publications have emerged since his death in a car crash in December of 2001, the same year that *Austerlitz* was first published.
2. W.G. Sebald and Gordon Turner, 'Introduction and Transcript of an interview given by Max Sebald', in: Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (eds.), *W.G. Sebald, History – Memory – Truth* (Berlin, 2006), 28.
3. See W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London, 2003). See also the essays collected in W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London, 2005).
4. The emergence of the 'spectral' as a contemporary cultural trope is provocatively elaborated in Roger Luckhurst, 'The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the "Spectral Turn"', *Textual Practice,* 16 (2002), 527-546. Regarding the spectral recovery of past erasures at Liverpool Street station, Luckhurst argues that *Austerlitz* 'hinges on a moment that has become typical – even stereotypical' (page 528). On Sebald, melancholy, and 'spectral materialism', see Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago and London, 2006).
5. Jackie Bowring, *A Field Guide to Melancholy* (Harpenden, 2008), 66.
6. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, op. cit. (note 1), 14.
7. Ibid., 141.
8. Ibid., 189.
9. Ibid., 197

10. Ibid.,170.

11. Ibid., 197.

12. Ibid., 313.

13. Ibid., 142-143.

14. Ibid., 143-144.

15. Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. by Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor, 1995), 57-58, 59.

16. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in: Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds. and trans.), *Selected Writings: Volume 4 1938-1940* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2006), 392.

17. Serres with Latour, *Conversations*, op. cit. (note 15), 60.

18. Ibid., 60-61.

19. Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', op. cit. (note 16), 392.

20. ee Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in: James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London, 1974), Vol. 14, 237-60.

21. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, 'Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation', in: Nicolas Rand (ed. and trans.), *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago and London, 1994), 135.

22. Jacques Derrida, 'Foreword: Fors: The Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok', trans. by Barbara Johnson, in: Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy, trans. by Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis, 1986), xlv.

23. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, op. cit. (note 1), 60-61.

24. See Gabriele Schwab, 'Writing against Memory and Forgetting', *Literature and Medicine*, 25 (2006), 101. In her astute analysis of the violent forces that haunt historical transmission, Schwab's essay resonates with Sebald's conception of the past and offers another valuable port of entry for understanding *Austerlitz* (a text that she briefly considers). Schwab also explores correspondences between the formation of the Ghetto and the formation of the crypt.

25. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, op. cit. (note 1), 322.

26. Ibid., 178.