The Bricolage of Words and Images: W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

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The name W. G. 塞巴尔德 (the Chinese transliteration of W. G. Sebald) was unknown to most Chinese readers until 2010, when *Austerlitz*, his final work, became available in Chinese Mandarin.[1] This is nothing new; even in the author's native Germany, his name remained unnoticed until the late 1990s. Today, however, his writings are highly renowned—particularly in the UK, the US, and France—endorsed by Susan Sontag, and once tipped as a future winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Winfried Georg Sebald was born in Wertach, Germany, and grew up in the shadow of his father's reticence to speak about the war. Moving to

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1. *Austerlitz* was translated into Mandarin by Diao Chengjun and was published by China Yilin Press in 2010.

the UK in 1966, he began teaching modern German literature at the University of East Anglia in the early 1970s. Sebald took to writing fiction at a quite later stage of his life. Barely a decade would go by before the world heard the news of the author's sudden death in a car accident near Norwich on December 14, 2001. However brief his career in fiction was, he was nevertheless very productive—producing many well-received texts in that period of time. Among these are *After Nature: An Elementary Poem* (*Nach der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht*, 1988), *Vertigo* (*Schwindel: Gefühle*, 1990), *The Emigrants: Four Long Stories* (*Die Ausgewanderten: Vier lange Erzählungen*, 1992), *The Rings of Saturn: An English Pilgrimage* (*Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt*, 1995). *Austerlitz* (2001) is one of Sebald's final works and literally his last novel, earning him the Bremen Literature Prize and the National Book Critics Award of 2002.

The title of the novel has more profound implications beyond the name of the protagonist, a professor of architectural history at an unnamed arts college in London. Austerlitz is also the name for the town in Moravia where the French Grand Army of Napoleon Bonaparte scored its most famous victory in 1805. "Austerlitz" also appears on countless monuments and public sites across France, including the Paris railway station, Gare d'Austerlitz. All these connotations converge in 1942, when the station was transformed into a warehouse for the vast trove of goods violently extracted from the city's Jews. In this respect, "Austerlitz" conveys the historical violence perpetuated against the Jewish people. Sebald reveals this violence through the narrator's recounting of the story of the titular protagonist, who learns for the first time as an adolescent that he was adopted. Decades go by before he finally embarks on a long and painful quest in search of his real identity.

Flipping through the book, one would be impressed by a fair amount of black and white photographs interspersed into the text. This is typical of Sebald's narrative style on display in many of his previous works. Sebald makes explicit reference to this in one of the rare discussions on his approach to writing:

> A family album is a great treasure house full of various information. One family photo can replace many words on the paper. Klaus Theweleit and Alexander Kluge's works that feature the interaction between image and text have both broadened my horizon. The mutual influence between image and text further inspired my writing practices: Because of the participation of images, the text is given a richer and more exuberant texture. My technique is based

on a concept of what Claude Lévi-Strauss called "bricolage." It truly represents a primal and primordial way of how our brain processes information, [because] memories are often involuntarily retrieved by objects and reminders that randomly appear in front of us. It is in this way that they help piece information together. (Löffler 1997: 136)

These "objects," according to Sebald, are mainly photographs, drawings, postcards, and tickets. Like Walter Benjamin, Sebald compiles these historical artifacts through bricolage. Rather than sticking to the conventional photographic techniques that place an emphasis on the macrocosmic, Sebald zooms in on marginalized characters whose attire often hearkens back to the 1920s and 1930s. His architectural photos are equally antiquated and anonymous. In many ways, these images are seemingly amateurishly focused and framed, sometimes overexposed and underexposed. However, professionalism is not what Sebald is after, since his photos are never intended to serve an aesthetic purpose. This lack of professionalism imbues his narrative of trauma with a degree of historical authenticity.

Sebald inserts a remarkable ninety-one images in *Austerlitz*, more than any of his other works. Seventy-nine of these are photos, and the rest are architectural drawings or individual sketches. In addition to the sheer number of images, a considerable amount of textual space is devoted to describing these photos, including numerous conversations between Austerlitz and the narrator regarding the physical process of photographic printing. The mechanism of photography therefore represents Austerlitz's recollection process. It becomes an important medium that the character relies upon in order to recollect the details of his traumatic childhood.

The critical role of photography in resurrecting Austerlitz's memory comes up early in the novel, when Austerlitz directly compares the process of his remembrance of the past with that of film development. The narrator meets Austerlitz for the first time in a railway station, as the latter is taking "several pictures of the mirrors, which were now quite dark" (Sebald 2001: 7). The station appears to Austerlitz as an unfathomable "darkroom" (77) reminiscent of the abyss of his memory, which he is unable to reach. As their friendship deepens, the narrator tells the reader that he began to understand better Austerlitz's obsession with photography, just as the title character shares with him the recent revelations. "In my photographic work I was always especially entranced, said Austerlitz, by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try

to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long" (77). Through this comparison, Austerlitz demonstrates to the narrator that his memories are as fleeting as the image on the printed paper. Likewise, even though photography can capture the fleeting moment of a single action, it cannot maintain that moment forever. Austerlitz's unique perspective on photography therefore challenges the conventional belief that photographic images stay forever.

Austerlitz's perspective on the potentials and limitations of photography as a modern medium embodies his own understanding of the traumas of his life. Shipped from Prague to England in the winter of 1939 by his mother, who does not survive the Nazi genocide, Austerlitz's desire to reconstruct his identity is hindered by his inability to remember—seeking in photography a way to escape his trauma. Yet, by decree of fate, photography is also the medium that resolves the conflict of remembering and forgetting at the center of the title character's struggle.

Sigmund Freud takes up this struggle directly in *Moses and Monotheism*. Specifically, Freud argues that the trauma experienced between the age of two and four can reverberate throughout the entire lifetime of the subject. Moreover, specific trauma often causes either positive or negative response in the victim. Positive response to a certain trauma is sometimes called "reverberation," "traumatic fixation," or "compulsive repetition." That is, subjects subconsciously relive the trauma through dissociating from the current experience and believing himself or herself still in that very traumatic moment. Negative response refers to a subject's rejection to recall a specific traumatic event. This is mainly a defensive posture on the part of the subject seeking to reduce the ongoing impact of the trauma. Subjects would often suppress these traumatic memories to latency by either avoiding the reminders of the past or displaying negative feelings. The two responses occasionally affect one another, with the possibility of one dominating the other (Freud 1938). These symptoms manifest in Austerlitz's obsession with photography: photographing the present is a farce intended to shield him from coming into contact with the past. The shattered architecture in his photos (such as fortresses and courthouses) reveals the violence of the war and its impact on the photographer subconsciously revisiting his trauma. Nevertheless, the role of photography is not entirely negative, as it ultimately proves to become a means through which Austerlitz reconciles with the past.

In the novel, Austerlitz expresses intense fascination toward images of decay and desolation in his own works: "From the outset my main con-

cern was the shape and the self-contained nature of discrete things, the curve of banisters on a staircase, the molding of a stone arch over a gateway, the tangled precision of the blades in a tussock of dried grass. I took hundreds of such photographs at Stower Grange, most of them in square format, but it never seemed to me right to turn the viewfinder of my camera on people" (Sebald 2001: 77). This technique resonates with Roland Barthes's theory on photography. In *Camera Lucida* (2010), Barthes argues that the moment captured on a photo often speaks to the photographer's idiosyncratic rendering of his subjects. These randomly captured shots inadvertently deliver messages from "the unconscious"—the photographer's psychological construction of the "now and then" and "here and there." Sebald aligns four photographs next to Austerlitz's own discussion of photography (2001: 77), reifying the solitary interspace the photographer inhabits. Framed in square, they show magnified parts of architectures and sceneries, giving off a sense of bleakness and displacement. For Austerlitz, photography is an effective medium of catharsis rather than a tool to help him remember.

Austerlitz's own "family" album—photos of the house of his only childhood friend, Gerald—fits snugly into his pocket such that he is able to carry these postcard-sized memories everywhere he goes. However, he does not actually possess a photo of his adoptive parents, a Calvinist preacher named Elias and his distant wife. The only exception is two photos of the preacher's hometown, which had been flooded after the building of a dam. One of them shows a desolate country road, with shabby houses on each side. The other captures a "girl sitting in a chair in the garden with her little dog on her lap" (52–53). Both the desolation of the street and the vintage look from the girl are now all "submerged in that dark water" (52–53). The surreal description allows a richer texture of Austerlitz's "nostalgia poetica." By using bricolage, the verbal expression with visual sensibility, Sebald masterfully represents the intricate mechanism of the trauma. Hence, sharing the same camera lens with the protagonist, one is able to immerse in the moment of feeling homeless and timeless as the victim expresses a sense of loss.

As a professional architectural historian, Austerlitz pays closer attention to buildings when he takes photographs. Architecture is the major theme in his photographic works. This is borne by the fact that out of seventy-nine photos Sebald uses in the entire story, forty-two are about architecture. Also worth noting is that these photos present a fragmented rather than complete view of the entire building (e.g., the windows inside

a railway station, the mosaic adorning the entrance of a house, or the protective fence surrounding Fort Breendonk). They reveal the psychological makeup of a protagonist whose interpretation of the world is based on spatial rather than temporal dimensions. Such a cognitive perception is typical in patients with traumatic experiences, according to Cathy Caruth, who specializes in the representations of trauma in literature. Caruth argues that traumatic experiences distort our notions of temporality. Time ceases to advance for the subject, and it can be experienced by the subject in a nonlinear way such that it allows the victim to relive the trauma. Subsequently, the victim's inability to feel time moving forward, according to Caruth, can be viewed as a defense mechanism that constantly keeps in check a larger impact from a future trauma (2000). As the plot advances, the narrator recounts that "it does not seem to me, Austerlitz added, that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like" (Sebald 2001: 185). This means Austerlitz has a different way of experiencing time. He views time in spatial terms, experiencing prior moments in time in a synchronic rather than diachronic way. By interpreting time as juxtaposed spatial segments, Austerlitz is inspired to internalize the trauma he has experienced and reconstruct his identity accordingly.

Austerlitz's method of piecing together memories through recategorizing the photos he has into a spatial rather than temporal order reifies what I call a retroactive act of bricolage, an innovative way to reconstruct the protagonist's own narrative. Inspired by the art of photography, he seems to find a psychological equilibrium between his defense mechanism (i.e., selective amnesia) and his desire to recover and rediscover his own identity. For Austerlitz, these photos are not simply architectural presentations, they are a crucial medium that can invite the ghosts of his past into the present. "He sometimes sat here for hours, laying these photographs or others from his collection the wrong way up . . . one by one, he turned them over . . . arranging them in an order depending on their family resemblances, or withdrawing them from the game until either there was nothing left but the gray tabletop, or he felt exhausted by the constant effort of thinking and remembering and had to rest on the ottoman" (119). Although his photos seem to be arranged randomly, they do follow a logical order based on "family resemblance" among a diverse range of things that appear random and static yet produce meanings once mixed together.

A first glance at these photos suggests nothing except that the arrangement seems very haphazard and disconnected, given their differences in size and subject content. Most of these photos stand on their own, with some appearing in multiples. Notably, ten photos grouped together occupy two pages of the entire novel, among which six photos take up a page and a half, the remaining four crammed together in order to fill the bottom of the second page. A close reading of these photos reveals they are not arranged randomly. For example, the largest group of photos—the architecture—is arranged by the order of "family resemblance." Austerlitz is a well-trained architectural historian who can effortlessly identify a photo's history and context. By arranging these photos together, the entire group reflects a common feature: violence. Specifically, one sub-category relates to state-sanctioned violence exemplified in Fort Breendonk, the Brussels Palais de Justice, and the national library in the French capital. Another subcategory focuses on several railway stations, which function for the protagonist as historical sites inscribed with both individual and collective trauma. Most significantly, the train station is where Austerlitz waves farewell to his mother and heralds a new beginning for him upon his arrival in England as well. Another subcategory highlights the similarity in the star pattern of certain defense fortifications and the ghettos, recalling the Star of David and Austerlitz's lost Jewish origins. Finally, the train station is a place marked by a historical calamity of epic proportions, a starting point for the destruction of an entire race.

Near the conclusion of the novel, Austerlitz bequeaths his collection of photographs to the narrator, indicating not only that he is no longer victimized by the past but also that the narrator will serve as a witness to history. Sixty years after the massacre of the Jews, we cannot help worrying about these lingering memories of violence, as memories themselves are as susceptible to corruption as the bodies of those witnesses to the atrocities. By adopting the bricolage of text and images, Sebald successfully introduces to the reader a way of remembering the collective trauma through his unique narrative—a narrative capable of retaining the Jewish tragedy to profound extremes in our memories.

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