

London Review of Books

Sent East

James Wood

In the summer of 1967, a man who remains unnamed but who resembles the author W.G. Sebald is visiting Belgium. At the Centraal Station in Antwerp, he sees a fellow traveller, with fair, curiously wavy hair, who is wearing heavy walking boots, workman's trousers made of blue calico and a well-made but antiquated jacket. He is intently studying the room and taking notes. This is Jacques Austerlitz. The two men fall into conversation, have dinner at the station restaurant and talk into the night. Austerlitz is a voluble scholar – he explicates the slightly grotesque display of colonial confidence represented by Antwerp's Centraal Station, and talks generally about the history of fortification. It is often our mightiest projects, he suggests, which most obviously betray the degree of our insecurity.

Austerlitz and the Sebald-like narrator meet again a few months later, in Brussels; then, later still, on the promenade at Zeebrugge. It emerges that Jacques Austerlitz is a lecturer at an institute of art history in London, and that his scholarship is unconventional. He is obsessed with monumental public buildings, such as law courts and prisons, railway stations and lunatic asylums, and his investigations have swollen beyond any reasonable *raison d'être*, 'proliferating in his hands into endless preliminary sketches for a study, based entirely on his own views, of the family likeness between all these buildings'. For a while, the narrator visits Austerlitz regularly in London, but they fall out of touch until 1996, when they happen to meet again, this time at Liverpool Street Station. Austerlitz explains that only recently has he learned the story of his life, and he needs the kind of listener that the narrator had been in Belgium, 30 years before.

And so Austerlitz begins the story that will gradually occupy the rest of the book: how he was brought up in a small town in Wales by foster parents; how he discovered, as a teenager, that his true name was not Dafydd Elias but Jacques Austerlitz; how he went to Oxford, and then into academic life. Though clearly a refugee, for many years he was unable to discover the precise nature of his exile until he experienced a visionary moment, in the late 1980s, in the Ladies' Waiting Room of Liverpool Street Station. Standing transfixed for perhaps hours, in a

room hitherto unknown to him (and about to be demolished, to enable an expansion of the Victorian station), he feels as if the space contains 'all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained'. He suddenly sees, in his mind's eye, his foster parents, 'but also the boy they had come to meet', and he realises that he must have arrived at this station a half-century ago.

In the spring of 1993, having suffered a nervous breakdown in the meantime, Austerlitz has another visionary experience, this time in a Bloomsbury bookshop. The bookseller is listening to the radio, which features two women discussing the summer of 1939, when, as children, they had come on the ferry *Prague* to England, as part of the Kindertransport: 'Only then did I know beyond any doubt that these fragments of memory were part of my own life as well,' Austerlitz tells the narrator. The mere mention of 'Prague' impels Austerlitz to the Czech capital, where he eventually discovers his old nanny, Vera Rysanova, and uncovers the stories of his parents' abbreviated lives. His father, Maximilian Aychenwald, escaped the Nazis in Prague by leaving for Paris; but, we learn at the end of the book, he was eventually captured and interned in late 1942, in the French camp of Gurs, in the foothills of the Pyrenees. His mother, Agata Austerlitz, stayed on in Prague, insouciantly confident, but was rounded up and sent to the Terezin ghetto (better known by its German name of Theresienstadt) in December 1942. Of the final destination of Maximilian and Agata, we are not told, but infer the worst: Vera tells us only that Agata was 'sent east' from Terezin, in September 1944.

This short recital, poignant though its content is, represents a kind of vandalism to Sebald's novel, and I offer it only in the spirit of orientation. It leaves out, most importantly, all the ways in which Sebald contrives not to offer an ordinary, straightforward recital. For what is so delicate is how Sebald makes Austerlitz's story a broken, recessed enigma, whose meaning the reader must impossibly rescue. Though Austerlitz, and hence the reader, is involved in a journey of detection, the book really represents the deliberate frustration of detection, the perpetuation of an enigma. By the end, we certainly know a great deal about Jacques Austerlitz – about the tragic turns of his life, his family background, about his obsessions and anxieties and breakdowns – but it can't be said that we really know him. A life has been filled in for us, but not a self. He remains as unknowable at the end as he was at the beginning, and indeed seems to leave the book as randomly and as unexpectedly as he entered it.

Sebald deliberately layers his narrative, so that Austerlitz is difficult to get close to. Jacques tells his story to the narrator, who then tells his story to us, thus producing the book's distinctive repetitive tagging, a kind of parody of the source attribution we encounter in a newspaper: almost every page has a 'said Austerlitz' on it, and sometimes the filters of narration are denser still, as in the following phrase, which reports a story of Maximilian's,

via Vera Rysanova, via Austerlitz, and collapses the three names: 'From time to time, so Vera recollected, said Austerlitz, Maximilian would tell the tale of how once, after a trade-union meeting in Teplitz in the early summer of 1933 ...' Sebald borrowed this habit of repetitive attribution from Thomas Bernhard, who also influenced Sebald's diction of extremism. Almost every sentence in this book is a cunning combination of the quiet and the loud: 'As usual when I go down to London on my own,' the narrator tells us in a fairly typical passage, 'a kind of dull despair stirred within me on that December morning.' When Austerlitz describes how moths die, he says that they will stay where they are, clinging to a wall, never moving 'until the last breath is out of their bodies, and indeed they will remain in the place where they came to grief even after death.' In Bernhard's work, extremity of expression is indistinguishable from comic, ranting rage, and a tendency to circle obsessively around madness and suicide. Sebald takes some of Bernhard's wildness, and estranges it – first, by muffling it in an exquisitely courteous syntax: 'Had I realised at the time that for Austerlitz certain moments had no beginning or end, while on the other hand his whole life had sometimes seemed to him a blank point without duration, I would probably have waited more patiently.' Second, Sebald makes his diction mysterious by a process of deliberate antiquarianism. Note the slightly quaint, Romantic sound of those phrases about the moths: 'until the last breath is out of their bodies ... the place where they came to grief'.

In all his fiction, Sebald works this archaic strain (often reminiscent of the 19th-century Austrian writer Adalbert Stifter) into a new, strange and seemingly impossible composite: a mildly agitated, pensive contemporary Gothic. His characters and narrators are forever finding themselves, like travellers of old, in gloomy, inimical places (East London, Norfolk) where 'not a living soul stirred'. Wherever they go, they are accompanied by apprehensions of uneasiness, dread and menace. In *Austerlitz*, this uneasiness is past-haunted; the text is constantly in communion with the ghosts of the dead. At Liverpool Street Station, Austerlitz feels dread at the thought that the station is built on the site of Bedlam: 'I felt at this time,' he tells the narrator, 'as if the dead were returning from their exile and filling the twilight around me with their strangely slow but incessant to-ing and fro-ing.' In Wales, the young Jacques had occasionally felt the presence of the dead, and Evan the cobbler had told the boy of those dead who had been 'struck down by fate untimely, who knew they had been cheated of what was due to them and tried to return to life'. These ghostly returnees, Evan said, could be seen in the street: 'At first glance they seemed to be normal people, but when you looked more closely their faces would blur or flicker slightly at the edges.' In the curiously empty village of Terezin, not far from Prague, Austerlitz seems to see the old Jewish ghetto, as if the dead were still alive, 'crammed into those buildings and basements and attics, as if they were incessantly going up and down the stairs, looking out of the windows, moving in vast

numbers through the streets and alleys, and even, a silent assembly, filling the entire space occupied by the air, hatched with grey as it was by the fine rain'.

This is both a dream of survival and a dread of it, a haunting. To bring back the dead, those 'struck down by fate untimely' – Jacques's parents, say, or the victims of Theresienstadt – would be a miraculous resurrection, a reversal of history; yet, since this is impossible, the dead can 'return' only as mute witnesses, judging us for our failure to save them. Those resurrected dead at Terezin, standing in 'silent assembly', sound very much like a large court, standing in judgment on us. Perhaps, then, the guilt of survival arises not just from the solitude of success (the 'success' of having been lucky, of having outlived the Nazis), or the irrational horror that one's survival involved someone else's death (an irrationality Primo Levi explores in his work). There is also guilt at the idea that the dead are at our mercy, that we can choose to remember or forget them. This is finely caught in a stray passage by Adorno, in an essay on Mahler written in 1936: 'So our memory is the only help that is left to them [the dead]. They pass away into it, and if every deceased person is like someone who was murdered by the living, so he is also like someone whose life they must save, without knowing whether the effort will succeed.'

Saving the dead – that is the paradoxically impossible project of *Austerlitz*, and it is both Austerlitz's quest, and Sebald's too. The novel is like the antique shop seen by Austerlitz in Terezin; it is full of old things, many of them reproduced in the photographs in the text: buildings, an old rucksack, books and paper records, a desk, a staircase, a messy office, a porcelain statue, gravestones, the roots of trees, a stamp, the drawing of a fortification. The photographs of these old things are themselves old things – the kind of shabby, discarded picture postcards you might find at a weekend flea market, and which Sebald greatly enjoyed collecting. If the photograph is itself an old, dead thing, then what of the people caught – frozen – by it? (Flickering slightly at the edges, as Evan the cobbler describes the dead.) Aren't they also old, dead things? That is why Sebald forces together animate and inanimate objects in his books, and it is why the inanimate objects greatly overwhelm the animate ones in *Austerlitz*. Amid the photographs of buildings and gravestones, it is a shock to come upon a close-up of Wittgenstein's eyes, or a photograph of the rugby team at Jacques's school. The human seems to have been reified by time, and Sebald knowingly reserves an entire page for his shocking photograph of skulls in mud (supposedly skeletons found near Broad Street Station in 1984, during excavations). Towards becoming these old things, these old headstones in mud, we are all travelling. (In the North, a cemetery used to be called a 'boneyard', the phrase somehow conveying the sense of our bones as mere lumber or junk.)

Yet some are travelling faster than others, and with more doomed inevitability, and there is

surely a distinction between, on the one hand, the photograph of Jacques's rugby team, and on the other, the photograph of his mother, or the photograph (itself a still from a film) of the imprisoned inhabitants of Theresienstadt. Barthes says in *Camera Lucida*, a book with which *Austerlitz* is in deep dialogue, that photographs shock us because they so finally represent what has been. We look at most old photographs, and we think: 'That person is going to die, and is in fact now dead.' We shudder over photographs, Barthes writes, as over a catastrophe that has already occurred: 'Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.' This effect is surely heightened when we look at photographs of victims of the Nazis – whether being rounded up, or just walking along a street in a ghetto. In such cases, we think: 'They know they are going to die, and they are certainly already dead, and there is nothing we can do about it.' As the stolid rugby players do not, these victims seem to be looking at us (even when they are not directly looking at the camera), and asking us to do something. This is what gives the photograph of young Jacques a particular intensity. The boy in his party cape, with the wedge of unruly fair hair, looks out at the camera not imploringly but confidently, if a little sceptically. Yet understandably, Austerlitz, looking at this photograph of himself, from a time when he was still in Prague and still had parents and had not yet been put on the train to London, tells the narrator that he feels 'the piercing, inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues, who was waiting in the grey light of dawn on the empty field for me to accept the challenge and avert the misfortune lying ahead of him'. Austerlitz was rescued by the Kindertransport, and so did indeed avert the misfortune lying ahead of him. But he could not avert the misfortune lying ahead of his parents, and so, even in middle age, he is forever frozen in the attitude of that picture, always waiting to avert misfortune. He resembles the little porcelain horseman that he saw in the window of the antique shop in Terezin, a statuette of a man rescuing a young girl, arrested in a 'moment of rescue, perpetuated but forever just occurring'. Is Austerlitz the rescuer, or the one awaiting rescue? Both, surely.

There is, of course, a further dimension to Sebald's use of photographs: they are fictional. In the very area of historical writing and historical memory most pledged to the sanctity of accuracy, of testimony and fatal fact, Sebald launches his audacious campaign: his use of photographs relies on, and plays off, the tradition of verity and reportage. We are lulled into staring at these photographs, and saying to ourselves: 'There is Jacques Austerlitz, dressed in his cape. And there is his mother!' We say this in part because photographs make us want to say it, but also because Sebald mixes these photographs of people with his undeniably accurate and veridical photographs of buildings (for instance, the photograph of the Breendonk fortress, in Belgium, where Jean Améry was tortured by the Nazis, and which the narrator visits, is a photograph of the actual building). On the other hand, we also know,

perhaps unwillingly, that Jacques Austerlitz is a fictional character, and that therefore the photograph of the little boy cannot be a photograph of him.

Sebald's photographs of humans in this book can be said to be fictional twice over: they are photographs of invented characters; and they are often photographs of actual people who once lived but who are now lost to history. Take the photograph of the rugby team, with Austerlitz supposedly sitting on the front row, at the far right. Who are these young men? Where did Sebald get hold of this faded group portrait? And is it likely that any of them are still alive? What is certain is that they have passed into obscurity. We don't look at the portrait and say to ourselves: 'There's the young Winston Churchill, in the middle row.' The faces are unknown, forgotten. They are, precisely, not Wittgenstein's famous eyes. The photograph of the little boy in his cape is even more poignant. I have read reviews of this book that suggest it is a photograph of the young Sebald – such is our desire, I suppose, not to let the little boy pass into orphaned anonymity. But the photograph is not of the young Sebald; I came across it in Sebald's literary archive at Marbach, outside Stuttgart, and discovered just an ordinary photographic postcard, with, on the reverse side, 'Stockport: 30p' written in ink. (Sebald once told me, in an interview, that about 30 per cent of the photographs in *The Emigrants* had an entirely fictitious relationship to their supposed subjects.) The boy's identity has disappeared (as has the woman whose photograph is shown as Agata, the boy's mother), and has disappeared – it might be said – even more thoroughly than Hitler's victims, since they at least belong to blessed memory, and their murders cry out for public memorial, while the boy has vanished into the private obscurity and silence that will befall most of us. In Sebald's work, and in this book especially, we experience a vertiginous relationship to a select number of photographs of humans: these pictures are explicitly part of the story that we are reading, which is about saving the dead (the story of Austerlitz); and they are also part of a larger story that is not found in the book (or only by implication), which is also about saving the dead. These people stare at us, as if imploring us to rescue them from the banal amnesia of existence. But if Austerlitz certainly cannot save his dead parents, we certainly cannot save the little boy. To 'save' him would mean saving every person who dies, would mean saving everyone who has ever died in obscurity. This, I think, is the double meaning of Sebald's words about the boy: it is Austerlitz, but it is also the boy from Stockport (as it were) who stares out asking us to 'avert the misfortune' of his demise, which of course we cannot do.

If the little boy is lost to us, so is Jacques Austerlitz. Like his photograph, he has also become a thing, and this is surely part of the enigma of his curious last name. He has a Jewish last name, which can be found in Czech and Austrian records; Austerlitz correctly tells us that

Fred Astaire's father was born with the surname Austerlitz ('Fritz' Austerlitz was born in Austria, and had converted from Judaism to Catholicism). But Austerlitz is not primarily the name of a person but of a famous battle, and a well-known Paris train station. The name is unfortunate for Jacques, because its historical resonance continually pulls us away from his Jewishness (from his individuality) and towards a world-historical reference that has nothing much to do with him. Imagine a novel in which almost every page featured the phrase, 'Waterloo said', or 'Agincourt said'. Sebald plays with this oddity most obviously in the passage when the young Austerlitz first finds out his true surname, at school. 'What does it mean?' Jacques asks, and the headmaster tells him that it is a small place in Moravia, site of a famous battle. During the next school year, the battle of Austerlitz is discussed, and turns out to be one of the set pieces of Mr Hilary, the romantic history teacher who makes such an impression on the young Jacques. 'Hilary told us, said Austerlitz, how at seven in the morning the peaks of the highest hills emerged from the mist ... The Russian and Austrian troops had come down from the mountainsides like a slow avalanche.' At this moment, when we encounter the familiar 'said Austerlitz', we are briefly unsure if the character or the battle itself is speaking.

Go back, for a minute, to the headmaster's reply, because it is one of the most quietly breathtaking moments in the novel, and can stand as an emblem of Sebald's powers of reticence and understatement. The headmaster, Mr Penrith-Smith (a nice joke, because Penrith-Smith combines both an English place-name, and the most anonymous, least curious surname in English) has told Jacques that he is not called Dafydd Elias but Jacques Austerlitz. Jacques asks, with the enforced politeness of the English schoolboy, 'Excuse me, sir, but what does it mean?' To which Mr Penrith-Smith replies: 'I think you will find it is a small place in Moravia, site of a famous battle, you know.' Jacques asks the question that could be said to be the question of the entire novel, and the headmaster refers him only to the battle of 1805 between the French and the Austrians. Consider everything that is omitted, or repressed, from this reply. The headmaster might have said that Austerlitz is a Jewish name, and that Jacques is a refugee from the Nazis. He might, with the help of Mr Hilary's expertise, have added that Austerlitz, near Brno in what was then Czechoslovakia, once had a thriving Jewish population, and that perhaps Jacques's name derived from that community. He might have mentioned that in 1941 the Germans established the ghetto of Theresienstadt, north of Prague (named after Empress Maria Theresa, who in 1744 issued an edict limiting the number of Jewish families in Moravia), and that the remaining Jews of Austerlitz almost certainly perished there, or later in Auschwitz, where most of the inmates of Theresienstadt were eventually taken. He might have added that Jacques's parents were unlikely to be alive.

But Mr Penrith-Smith says none of this, and Jacques Austerlitz will spend the rest of the novel trying to find his own answer to his own question. Instead, the headmaster's bland reply turns Jacques into the public past, into a date. What does it mean? The answer Jacques receives is, in effect: '1805, that's what it means.' Of all the rescues that the novel proposes, the most difficult may be this one: to restore to Jacques Austerlitz the individuality of his name and experience, to rescue the living privacy of the surname 'Austerlitz' from the dead, irrelevant publicity of the place-name 'Austerlitz'. Jacques should not be a battle, or a railway station, or a thing. Ultimately, we cannot perform this rescue, and the novel does not let us. The private and the public names keep on intertwining, and herein lies the power of the novel's closing pages. We helplessly return to the Gare d'Austerlitz, from where Jacques's father may have left Paris. In the new Bibliothèque Nationale, Jacques learns that the very building rests on the ruins of a huge wartime warehouse, where the Germans 'brought all the loot they had taken from the homes of the Jews of Paris'. It was known as the Austerlitz-Tolbiac storage depot. Everything our civilisation produced was brought here, the library official says, and often pilfered by German officers – ending up in, say, a 'Grunewald villa' in Berlin. This knowledge is like a literalisation of the well-known dictum of Benjamin's, that there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. Standing on the ruins of history, standing both in and on top of history's depository, Austerlitz is joined by his name to these ruins: and again, at the end of the book, as at the beginning, he threatens to become simply part of the rubble of history, a thing, a depository of facts and dates, not a human being. And throughout the novel, present but never spoken, never written – it is the best act of Sebald's withholding – is the other historical name that shadows the name Austerlitz, the name that begins and ends with the same letters, the name which we sometimes misread Austerlitz as, the place that Agata Austerlitz was almost certainly 'sent east' to in 1944, and the place that Maximilian Aychenwald was almost certainly sent to in 1942 from the French camp in Gurs: Auschwitz.

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From Roy Kift

In his gloss on W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, James Wood calls Terezin a village (*LRB*, 6 October). Surely not. It was originally built between 1780 and 1790 as a garrison town for up to 11,000 soldiers to protect Bohemia from a possible invasion by Prussia.

When the Nazis decided to use it as a Jewish ghetto, its eight thousand inhabitants were moved elsewhere to make way for up to 40,000 Jewish prisoners. Although it was never an extermination camp, death rates from hunger and disease were around 4000 a month. Nowadays, apart from a rundown hotel, one or two shops and a café catering for a population of around three thousand, most of whom work outside the town, it is a memorial site with a museum to the 140,000 prisoners taken there between November 1941 and May 1945. As for its being 'curiously empty': eerily yes, but curiously?

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