

# A Narrative Reconsidered: The Psychoanalytic Method in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

By Robert C. Abrams

## Abstract

In this article, several of the key controversies around W.G. Sebald's novel, *Austerlitz*, are noted, including questions about its uncertain position between fiction and fact, and ethical concerns about Sebald's alleged appropriation of Holocaust-related material not his own. Arguing that previous criticism has failed to appreciate how the narrative structures of psychoanalysis might apply, the author concludes that *Austerlitz* is indeed a valid fictional account, a life narrative that is painstakingly assembled from the chief character's *de facto* psychoanalytic experience within the novel. Consistent with the views of Spence (279-297), the therapeutic power of the psychoanalytic method in *Austerlitz* relies more on the creation of a subjective personal narrative than on a historically faithful reconstruction of the protagonist's life. Both approaches to the development of a life narrative are represented in the novel, but for Austerlitz, a man who had experienced the loss of the two most important persons in his life at the age of 4, a straightforward excavation of facts would alone be insufficient to promote healing. So in the end, it is the subjective truth, elaborated in a self-organizing and coherent narrative, that makes the critical contribution to easing the nearly unimaginable suffering of a Holocaust victim traumatized by early separation.

## Introduction

In the preface to a study of the work of W.G. Sebald, Carole Angier writes that the author, a non-Jew, "was the German writer who most deeply took on the burden of German responsibility for the Holocaust" (8). Nevertheless, Sebald's seminal work, *Austerlitz*, has proven exceptionally difficult to categorize, drawing abundant praise since it first appeared in 2001, but also sowing academic debate about its uncertain position between fiction and fact. Andy Beckett, for example, writing in *The Guardian*, questions "the precise ratio of fiction to non-fiction" in the novel (Beckett online). The Sebald scholar Uwe Schütte views *Austerlitz* as neither fiction nor non-fiction, but as a "long prose elegy," an altogether different kind of entity (88). Most recently, Judith Shulevitz, referring to the author's signature juxtaposition of fiction with documents and photographs, has objected to his "refusal to respect the line between fact and fiction . . .," adding that Sebald's "adroitly artless synthesis of fable, history, photography, and artifact is still jarring" (100-111). One problem of Sebald criticism thus becomes: Why, after twenty years of critical writing, is Sebald's innovative narrative technique in *Austerlitz* still considered "jarring"?

There is also a more substantive concern. With the implication that Sebald had been duplicitous about his sources, appropriating stories of Jewish Holocaust victims and exploiting

suffering not his own in order to create a fictional portrait, the controversy around *Austerlitz* appears to persevere over content as well as form. First, regarding form: What exactly is to be made of the book's idiosyncratic construction, in which long meandering sentences, interspersed with various kinds of illustrative material, progress "as a series of epiphanies"? (Beckett online). Then, about content: How should the fundamental legitimacy and ownership of Sebald's material be viewed?

In the present article I propose a new approach to understanding both the stylistic innovations and narrative authenticity of *Austerlitz*, a perspective in which the novel is read as a fictional but valid replication of the psychoanalytic method. I further suggest that critics continue to argue over the fiction/fact dichotomy, not only because of the underlying, unresolved ethical questions, but because criticism, to date, has failed to provide a model to appreciate the aims and distinctive narrative structures of psychoanalysis.

Donald P. Spence (279-297), a literary scholar and lay psychoanalyst, contends that precise historical reconstruction of the facts of a person's life is unlikely to be fully achieved for any patient undergoing psychoanalytic treatment, and that, moving beyond Freud, the development of a coherent, subjective personal narrative therefore becomes central to the psychoanalytic method. Even if an accurate restoration of memories were possible, the analyst, too, is not immune from selective bias in helping a patient to establish a factual account. That Austerlitz's separation from his mother and nanny occurred at a very early age renders many explicit memories inaccessible and further highlights the importance of the subjective life narrative to his therapeutic outcome.

Among the many benefits and pleasures of reading *Austerlitz*, one is led to consider the potential implications of creating personal narratives adapted to the developing field of trauma-informed care. What special parameters must be considered, what techniques used, in treating individuals like Austerlitz, who have experienced traumatic events or suffered losses at early, even pre-verbal, stages of their development?

The heart of Sebald's novel is the story of Jacques Austerlitz, who as a boy of 4 was suddenly and painfully separated from his mother and much-loved nanny. He traveled via the *Kindertransport*, a special last-minute train arranged in 1939 to save Jewish children in Nazi-occupied countries from the gathering Holocaust, leaving from his native Prague and arriving in England. There, at the Liverpool train station, he heard a strange language and was met and taken to Wales to live with people who were even stranger, an eccentric and hitherto childless minister and his wife. This couple, an affectively blunted husband and psychotically depressed wife, had volunteered to accept a Jewish refugee child largely to help them heal their own grievous emotional wounds, or at least reach into and possibly find some long-hidden reserves of warmth themselves. As his memories of home receded, the young Jacques, who came to think himself as the Welsh-born Dayfydd Elias, miraculously managed to adapt to the new environment. He was successful academically and popular with his peers, shielded from the full impact of a toxic home environment by being sent away to a boarding school when his foster parents inevitably imploded.

Having learned the bare outline of his origins as an adolescent, by the time the adult Austerlitz set out, determined to uncover the repressed memories of his early childhood, doing so had become vital to his survival, not a matter of curiosity or choice. He had by then become alarmingly symptomatic, realizing that:

...this self-censorship of my mind, the constant suppression of the memories surfacing in me...demanded ever greater efforts and finally, and unavoidably, led to the almost total paralysis of my linguistic fantasies, the destruction of all my notes and sketches, my endless nocturnal peregrinations through London, and the hallucinations which plagued me.... (Sebald 140).

Austerlitz was already well into middle age when, overhearing a radio program on the *Kindertransport* while browsing in a London bookstore, a primal early memory was stirred. Whatever inner adjustments that had to be made, were made, and he began his decisive journey of self-discovery, itself a frequently used allusion to psychoanalysis (Dimitrijevic 501-506).

Austerlitz at this stage appears to meet the key requirements, as outlined by Moore and Fine (52), for a patient to initiate a psychoanalytic treatment. First, he has endured sufficient suffering and emotional disability to warrant an extensive and time-consuming psychotherapy. Then, Austerlitz is strongly motivated to seek relief from his distress. He is also prepared to speak about his life and private states of mind, freely and openly, with minimal withholding. In addition to these criteria, Austerlitz must be able to tolerate speaking to a listener who is largely silent and does not structure or direct him, leaving him to produce his own “free associations,” a hallmark of psychoanalytic treatment. Over time, he will retrieve the most consequential repressed memories of his early childhood, not necessarily as they actually occurred, but as he experienced them; and these memories will, in turn, be reorganized and assimilated into a more cohesive whole. However, as will be seen, the narrator, Austerlitz’s listener in the novel, is not prepared undertake a central task of the psychoanalyst, that is, to elicit and analyze the transference, Austerlitz’s evolving view of him. This would have involved the interpretation of Austerlitz’s assumptions about him as reflections of his own early relationships, followed by elucidation of how this distorted view of the analyst carries over to his life outside of the “treatment” (Laplanche and Pontalis 455-464).

### **The “psychoanalysis” begins**

As the book opens there emerges a mysterious individual, a person who will be Austerlitz’s literary mouthpiece, the book’s narrator, and throughout this essay regarded as a *de facto* psychoanalyst. This listener-narrator will be observant, alert to details, non-verbally sympathetic but sparing in his comments and interjections. That the narrator nevertheless has a well-defined personality, however removed, also suggests the role and position of psychoanalyst, a figure who is technically neutral but not necessarily bland. But lacking any physical description of the narrator, the reader might imagine him also to be unseen by Austerlitz, who would then be in a position equivalent to that of a patient lying recumbent on the psychoanalytic couch, observed from above. In the event, Austerlitz’s story will be told to the reader by this nameless narrator through the device of purportedly verbatim quotes.

However, the opening of the book reveals nothing about the direction of the analyst's future transference misperceptions, only that the narrator is a person he appears to trust implicitly.

On the other hand, the early section of the novel, consisting of an account of the first meeting between the two protagonists in Antwerp's *Centraal Station*, does suggest conflicts that the narrator himself is likely to confront. Even before his first encounter with Austerlitz, the narrator notes that he had felt inexplicably but decidedly unwell upon his arrival in Antwerp and indeed throughout his visit there. In his first glance at Austerlitz in the half-light of evening in the station, he takes in, as if with an inner eye, the image of an oddly-dressed, utterly preoccupied man. His apprehension about the future of this relationship is readily apparent; it is a stranger's first impression of a man who has been crushingly injured. The narrator feels anxious, uneasy in both mind and body, aware that he has the power to harm as well as to heal. He also anticipates that he will experience guilt, recalling in a footnote how, after he had visited Lucerne, a city whose train station had been the original model for the station in Antwerp, he had felt strangely responsible for the fire that subsequently destroyed that structure (Sebald 11). Perhaps this disquieting premonition of guilt can be seen as both a potential source of distortion for the narrator and a reflection of Sebald's own culpability as a non-Jewish German, the son of a former Wehrmacht soldier, in writing about the Holocaust.

At this point, although nothing has been explicitly spelled out or agreed, it is clear that the two principal characters of the story are about to embark on an investigation into Austerlitz's long-repressed past, a defining psychoanalytic experience. They meet in the *Salle des Pas Perdus*—The Hall of Lost Steps—a memorial to those who have been lost in an earlier war and a not-so-oblique reference to the still unknown fate of Austerlitz's real parents. The cashier at the station café calls to mind, for the narrator, “the goddess of time past” (Sebald 8). Austerlitz is, in the narrator's personal associations and reflections, imprisoned in a state of twilight limbo, like the “sorrowful” captive animals in the Nocturama displays he describes (7).

But whatever the content of the narrator's thoughts as he encounters Austerlitz, he is largely silent, so it is mainly through these asides that the reader appreciates the depth of his empathy and understands the purpose of verbally abstinent analytic attention. The narrator's associations to his own visit to Lucerne or to the cashier at the station café are both examples of what Spence terms “active listening,” in which attention is directed to the meaning of the impressions that spontaneously enter his mind. It is a process of listening or observing on multiple levels, similar to the close reading of a poem, with particular emphasis on the significance of seemingly unrelated thoughts or images (Spence 112-113). As described by Spence, this special dimension of listening is germane not only to psychoanalysis proper but may also prove broadly relevant to newer trauma-centered therapies.

For Austerlitz himself, there is even more abundant introductory detail in the opening pages of the book that will prove predictive with time. For the present, Austerlitz's defenses are clearly visible. In what the reader will soon learn is this man's inordinately obsessional style, Austerlitz, who had become a professor of architectural history, begins to hold forth on the logic of the architectural motif of the *Centraal Station*, describing how its details placed this landmark structure squarely in the historical epoch of its original design. As the discussions,

better described as monologues, proceed, Austerlitz also seems to be engrossed by the minutiae of fortifications and defenses in military planning, bolstered by historical references emphasizing their inadequacy. Of course, it is understood that the inadequate defenses are, metaphorically, Austerlitz's own. With almost no conventional openings to initiate a conversation with a person he barely knows, Austerlitz might stand out as pedantic, tangential and impersonal, were it not for the fact that, under the thinnest of disguises, he is speaking about himself. Aside from this unintentionally exposed content, the lack of ordinary greetings and partings in the exchanges between Austerlitz and the narrator, their abrupt starts and stops, would be an arrangement accepted by and familiar to any former or present analyst.

Austerlitz is in fact rather guileless, seemingly unaware that he is revealing aspects of himself in his lengthy asides on architecture and nineteenth-century European history. Perhaps clued by his own uneasiness, the narrator straight away senses the pervasive discomfort that afflicts Austerlitz and develops an astute theory of its origin: "...he could never quite shake off thoughts of the agony of leave-taking and the fear of foreign places" (14). Shortly afterward, speaking in English, a language in which Austerlitz was less fluent, the narrator observes: "I was strangely touched to notice in him an insecurity...expressing itself in a slight speech impediment and occasional fits of stammering...." (32). His would-be psychoanalyst understands that in any language, Austerlitz would become palpably unnerved whenever the conversation touched on his most sensitive memories.

### **The "psychoanalysis" pauses, then advances**

From here the analytic work proceeds apace, but not until years after the initial meetings, a long hiatus during which the two men were not in contact. But happening upon the narrator again by chance in London (if unconscious processes ever allow the possibility of truly coincidental encounters), Austerlitz takes up the themes of his earlier conversation as if there had been no interruption at all. The account of his life is resumed by Austerlitz, to the extent that he knows it at this stage, told directly to his friend in the same format as before. Again, the pattern of instantaneously picking up where one has left off, after absences or vacations or detours, recalls the artificial interruption of narratives created by the routine starting and stopping of psychoanalytic hours.

The piecemeal personal history provided by Austerlitz further calls to mind the uneven pace and non-linear content of psychoanalysis. In a roughly chronological but circuitous way, still stopping frequently to deliver professorial discourses on peripherally-related topics, Austerlitz follows an interior logic that is not yet decipherable. However, over time he gradually reprises the long-repressed events of his early life and restores them to conscious awareness. Using the equivalent of associative memory in psychoanalysis, he advances in fits and starts, occasionally with notable flashes of insight or discovery. For example, describing his return to the train station in Liverpool where he had been taken upon his arrival in England more than fifty years earlier, he is beset by an overwhelming emotional memory:

...for the first time as far back as I can remember I recollected myself as a small child, at the moment when I realized that it must have been to this same waiting room I had come on my arrival in England over half a century ago...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 . . . a terrible weariness came over me at the idea that I had never really been alive, or was only now being born, almost on the eve of my death (137).

What he did not have words to express as a child eludes him still; he is grappling in the present to describe inchoate states of feeling as they had originally been experienced by a terrified boy not yet 5 years old.

### **Stylistic considerations**

As is well known, extravagantly long sentences can be found in *Austerlitz*-- sometimes a page in length, in a few places more than that, many of them of great beauty and intensity (Angier 434). There are multiple conceivable justifications for the use of this remarkable literary device. One possible explanation for the extended sequences of clauses and sub-clauses, whether or not the author had this purpose in mind, could be that they mimic the stream-of-consciousness associations that characterize the psychoanalytic method. Sebald's expansive, Joycean, reminiscence-laden prose is actually a very fitting background for psychoanalysis, where free association generates its own rhythm. For Austerlitz, the consuming emotional valence attached to repressed memories often forces them to spring up urgently into consciousness, becoming incompatible with pauses and punctuation.

Like many analysts, Austerlitz offers up a vast quantity of seemingly extraneous detail that undoubtedly has relevance, but many of the connections are never fully unveiled. This feature may be another source of dissatisfaction and misunderstanding for some readers of Sebald's work. But a reeling-out of apparently unrelated memories can be natural to the psychoanalytic process, even if the meaning of those memories remains obscure when the treatment is incomplete in some areas and strands of conflict persist unanalyzed.

There is nothing efficient about psychoanalysis. Austerlitz is gaining insight, but fairly far along into the process he reverts, one might say regresses, to his transparently allegorical approach. Here Sebald allows his character to use a detailed description of the Liverpool station, as it had appeared before being rebuilt in the late 1980s, to reveal the melancholy of his adult disposition: "Even on sunny days only a faint grayness, scarcely illuminated at all by the globes to the station lights, came through the glass roof over the main hall. . ." (128).

### **The "psychoanalysis" matures and concludes**

To the world, the fully grown Jacques presents a dark and off-putting personality, but he is now beginning to trace its roots in ever-greater detail. In an effort that is parallel to his psychological work with the narrator, and presumably stimulated by it, he is simultaneously engaged in investigating the fate of his parents. (He is never able to find anything more than traces of his father, but in time he uncovers in appalling detail the forced transport to concentration camps that led to his mother's death). The narrative of his life is thus being compiled from dual sources—intrapsychic and external.

Even before the “analysis,” Austerlitz had been able to turn the aesthetically beautiful site of his wrenching loss—the train station—into an abiding sublimatory passion, a rarified expertise in the architectural history of monumental public spaces. Photographs have a special importance for him as well, perhaps because, by their nature, they do not obscure or deceive; that they are in black and white is of a piece with the colorless emotional poverty of Austerlitz’s life. But now, the meaning of his solitary pursuits and infatuations is being revealed.

Although he is subject to periodic shocks of emotion over the course of an emerging life history, Austerlitz rarely if ever achieves anything like a true abreaction, or anything resembling a full or satisfying emotional release. His ubiquitous obsessionality never entirely leaves him, as is demonstrated when he returns to the scene of his early childhood in Prague. Although Austerlitz describes himself as deeply moved at his long-awaited reunion with Vera, his mother’s close friend and his own beloved nanny before his wrenching departure to Wales, there is a muted quality in his response to what the reader knows is the most emotionally charged moment of the novel. He is at least able to recall, to emotionally relive, some of what had had fascinated him as a child, including several specific visual, auditory and olfactory sensations. But at this singular moment he is as lyrical and exultant as he will ever be:

And the sweet fragrance wafting up from the walled garden, the waxing mood already in the sky above the rooftops, the sound of church bells ringing down in the city, and the yellow façade of the tailor’s house with its green balcony where Moravec, who as Vera told me had died long ago, frequently used to be seen in his time, swinging his heavy iron filled with red-hot coals through the air, these and other images, said Austerlitz, ranged themselves side by side, so that deeply buried and locked away within me as they had been, they now came luminously back to my mind as I looked out of the window (156).

There is still a world of difference between his reaction and Vera’s crescendo of delight at his unexpected reappearance as an adult. Her response is on a very different emotional plane than Austerlitz’s, more open and heightened, as she exclaims: “*Dis, est-ce que c’est vraiment toi, Jacques?*” (153). The reflexive linguistic shift from Czech to the familiar form of French recalls the closeness they once had, when she had been the nanny of a happy, engaging 4-year-old boy who had been named by his mother, an admirer of all things French, after the composer Jacques Offenbach (154).

As the novel nears its end, it tempting to view the conclusion of *Austerlitz* as the facsimile of a psychoanalytic termination. If one accepts that premise, what occurs in the book’s final section has special significance. In a sequence that underscores the limits of the psychoanalytic method, Austerlitz invites the narrator to stay at his London house when in England and hands him the key—but crucially, it is implied that these visits were intended to take place when Austerlitz would not be there himself. In the multiply-determined act of gifting the key to the narrator while separating from him, Austerlitz is acknowledging the “key” that had reopened his life, returning it to mark the end of his psychological journey. In this single ambivalent, ambiguous gesture there is a chilling element of distancing from his friend as well as an appreciation of his wisdom and diligence.

Thus, at the termination of “treatment,” Austerlitz is able to express gratitude for the enormity of the gifts he has received, but only in his tentative, measured way. At this juncture, Austerlitz’s emotional pitch is, as it has always been, distant and benumbed, with only as much rigidly controlled feeling as he is able to muster. At the very moment he hands over the key to his London home, Austerlitz also calls attention to the collection there of photographs that he said would one day be all that was left of his life, as well as to the adjoining crumbling cemetery and its aging groundskeeper; and so his associations with therapeutic termination are overshadowed by thoughts and images of his own demise. It is as if he must leave the narrator before the narrator leaves him.

Austerlitz’s seeming indifference to the narrator-- the person with whom he has shared such intimate memories and emotions, the person who has been a steadfast facilitator of his emergence of his life story-- demonstrates the indelible nature of his psychological scars. From his painful history Austerlitz envisions, and will likely participate in creating, a future of separations and aloneness. To the degree possible, he is secured against these outcomes by intellectualization and emotional withdrawal, defenses that at the same time inhibit his enjoyment of life. Viewed from within the conceit of a psychoanalytic model, he has come far, but not quite far enough. Now, whatever has happened in the past, whatever he will cause to occur in the future, the *de facto* psychoanalysis has concluded. Recognizing the gravity of this milestone, Austerlitz feels that there is nothing left for him to do but await death, possibly an eerie allusion to the fate of his also-Jewish namesake, Jacques Offenbach, who died just after the completion of his major operatic work, *The Tales of Hoffman* (Harding 200-274).

In most psychoanalyses, the work devolves largely upon the patient, in this case Austerlitz himself. However, this not being a fully *bona fide* psychoanalysis, several important elements are missing. There is no attempt to interpret Austerlitz’s expectations of a dismal future, his defensive avoidance, or his conviction that he is fated to be alone, as repercussions of the childhood events that shaped his life. The narrator does nothing to help Austerlitz bridge the newly-restored emotional memories of his early childhood with his beliefs and behavior in the present. Even more to the point, the narrator does not interpret Austerlitz’s expectation of abandonment by his friend-analyst and his decision to part from him before he himself is rejected, as consequences of his childhood separation from his mother and nanny. Perhaps the long interval between his first and subsequent meetings with the narrator also reflects Austerlitz’s anxieties about abandonment. But because of the narrator’s silence on these matters, what has transpired is only half of an analysis: clarification without interpretation.

The meaning of the positive aspects of the transference is left unexamined as well. To Austerlitz, the narrator is more than a neutral observer of the emergence of his personal history; he is a trustworthy and constant friend, a collaborator, and a wise, interested presence. The narrator’s conduct can be contrasted with that of Austerlitz’s own father, who, while planning to reunite with his family, left for Paris in 1939 on the last plane out of Prague before Czechoslovakia had been absorbed by the Reich, and then disappeared forever; and also unlike that of his mother, who, loving as she was and devastated at the separation from her only child, had, as far as a very young Jacques could understand, inexplicably forsaken or rejected him. The only exception in Austerlitz’s first years of life had been his nanny, Vera, the person



closest to him at that time, a generously affectionate figure who adored him and who, not being Jewish, was less associated in his mind with the calamity that befell him.

### **Aftermath**

In the years remaining to him, Austerlitz will be able to carry on somewhat less miserably than before. Emerging from a pitch of suffering almost unimaginable (Schütte 93), he has acquired a modicum of self-knowledge that might provide a countervailing force against his compulsion to foresee desertion and desolation. Not every fragment of internal conflict has been uncovered and explained, but Austerlitz has by now become a whole, if flawed person. However, as the unsatisfying final encounter with the narrator-friend-analyst illustrates, Austerlitz will remain permanently damaged, his emotional range forever restricted, by what he had experienced as a traumatic abandonment in early childhood. It could not be known whether he would have emerged less seriously symptomatic had he by luck or chance been assigned a different set of adoptive parents, ones better able to appreciate the emotional needs of a child in young Jacques's circumstances, or had been separated from his mother and nanny at an older, less developmentally vulnerable age; to his credit, Sebald does not speculate on these hypothetical outcomes. In the novel's closing pages, as Austerlitz pointedly evades an opportunity for meaningful connection with another person, it is evident that he will live out his final years as a respected connoisseur of art and architecture, but also as a diminished spirit, existing at a distance from the world of feeling, recoiling from the possibilities of love and loss.

That is exactly how most psychoanalyses conclude—with the analysand having achieved a certain level of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and a coherent life, if not radical change. In such a life, one's past is owned, having been recognized to a large degree as unavoidable. History cannot be rewritten, but for a meaningfully integrated life, it does need to be written. Trauma interrupts the writing; psychoanalysis permits its completion.

Donald Spence asserts that the central task of psychoanalysis is to provide space and conditions for the analysand to develop a complete, truthful narrative of his life; however, as noted at the beginning of this essay, Spence also emphasized that subjective narrative truth does not necessarily equate with historical truth, or the facts of what actually happened to a person in the past (Spence 279-297). Spence embraces the blurring of fact and fiction because it is through the narrative that the patient can make sense of his life story. In therapeutic narrative truth, the value is in the telling, in finding words for a credible personal account that privileges coherence above the fiction/fact dichotomy. Thus, the peculiar, rambling, digressive narrative structure of Austerlitz becomes increasingly coherent as Jacques Austerlitz himself completes, to the extent he can, his life story.

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**Robert C. Abrams, MD, is Professor of Psychiatry in the Division of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York. At Weill Cornell he maintains a clinical practice devoted to psychiatric conditions in older adult patients, and at the affiliated medical college he is engaged in research in old-age depression, psychoses and dementia, as well as elder abuse. Since 2016 Dr. Abrams has been a frequent contributor of film reviews and other essays to the Arts and Media blog of the British Medical Journal/Medical Humanities. He is also the author of *Staring Night: Queen Victoria's Late-Life Depression*, published by Psychoanalytic Books, Inc., New York, 2020. His Field Notes essay "Father and Daughter": Loss and Longing in a Short Animation" appeared in the Fall 2021 *Intima*.**