

Austerlitz

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Real or made up? Fact or fiction? The ambiguous borderline is what supposedly makes some narratives so fascinating, but also so exasperating. The first person singular is normally associated with the author, giving what he relays authority. Surely he is recalling events that have happened to him, and thus in a wider sense having a universal validity. The settings have the trappings of reality, as have the dates and references. But what about Austerlitz, that mysterious stranger that he encounters fortuitously through his travels? Only the unsophisticated reader may believe he to be real, but the sophisticated reader clearly understand that he is made up, and thus he is at a disadvantage when it comes to really appreciate the tale on its basic most fundamental level.

Who is Austerlitz? This is a question that torments the fictional character to the point of leading him to a collapse. His story can be succinctly summarized. He is brought up by a childless, unloving, religious couple in Wales (of all places). Being sent away to school is thus a liberation to him, not a trauma as for most children his age. As he gets older he is informed by his headmaster that the name by which he is known is not his real name, and this name - Austerlitz, means nothing to him. As Fate will have it, shortly thereafter he encounter the battle at Austerlitz through the lively narratives of his history teacher, allowing the author another welcome digression for his tale. He takes off for university, befriends a younger boy and his family, is introduced to a charmed existence by the Welsh coast, and yet another digression on botany and zoologi is offered the narrator. Then there are flashbacks, imaginary enocunters, and a visit to Prague in order to seek out his roots. That quest is succesful, succesful in the way it is only possible in fiction. He does find an old friend of his parents, while of the parents he will only learn fragments and of their mysterious disappearance. They are Jews of course, and Austerlitz is placed in the role of the hapless survivor, cut off from his roots by genocidal events. Does he remember anything of his remote past? Is that past only a fiction, yet it is somehow documented. Yes, even traces of a forgotten language - Czech rises to his consciousness. And his flawless French, is that a legacy of his childhood days when he was tutored in that language? One is naturally invited to ask whether our childhood memories are indeed only fictions, created by tales we are told so often that they are weaved into our minds as lessons learnt by heart and elaborated, posturing as real memories? His mother was taken away, and he travels to the remnants of Theresienstadt in Bohemia, meant to be a model ghetto for privileged Jews, something to show to the world. Privileged or not, in that one square kilometer of space, 60'000 individuals were squeezed. Mortality rates were high, and in the end, almost all of them suffered deportation to the East. Maybe a deliverance, or so they sought, but in reality, as we all know, anonymous extinction. A movie was made of Theresienstadt. 'Die Stadt die Hitler die Juden geschenkt hatte'. It was all show, an elaborate charade, to fool international opinion, as well as domestic one. Austerlitz finally is able to watch the movie, desperately looking for a face, the face of what could have been his mother. And

also to get a feel for what it was to live there in that 'Stadt' in that 'Ghetto', which now takes on such a chimeral existence, as if merely fictional. Is the extermination a fiction? To claim so is to break the law in many Western countries, yet in its distant unreality, supported only by such elusive traces we ordinarily only associate with archeological digs of the distant past, it has all the characteristics of a dream, a night-mare, whose actual facts may be made up, but whose very terror is all too real. There are more flash-backs. A visit to Marienbad in the early seventies with a young beautiful French woman, a lover? To assume otherwise would be a bit perverse. Yet the encounter with Marienbad oppresses him, and he cannot understand why, nor can his beautiful companion. And their extended stay leads to estrangement and the loss of her. Only later when Austerlitz connects with his Czech past is he instructed. He once went there as a small child experiencing a blissful vacation before the onset of catastrophe.

Seebald is German, but has been an English resident since early manhood. It is tempting to classify him as a post-war German, innocent of the atrocities of the Nazi period, yet an unwitting sharer in the collective German guilt. How to expiate a guilt of which you are innocent, a guilt that permeates your very identity and which you cannot rid yourself of without shedding this identity. Germany has in fact faced up to its past, unlike many other nations embroiled in crime, and the younger generation caught in a vice. So what can a German like Sebald do? Revisit the crimes of his parents, imaginatively enter the lives of those who were doomed to extinction. The horror of it was so great that for many years it had to be denied, it was just too awful to fathom. In the 60's and 70's awareness was slowly being acknowledged, the enormity of it only gradually coming to sight as one was distanced from it by time, just as a big sphere seen up close, is mostly hidden by itself from view. Concomitant with a sympathetic appreciation of the Jewish disaster developed an idealization of victimhood, and with that a perverse envy of the same. It was as if the world was divided into Jews and Gentiles, and crime was an arrow going from the latter to the former. Being in one camp you were invariably a perpetrator, a passive one if not active, evil by default, and in the other camp a victim and thus ensured of goodness and innocence. No wonder that a competition later ensued, one ethnic group after another making claims to victimhood, as a means of deliverance. If you are a victim, if only by proxy, at least you are absolved from 20th century guilt.

Such things may be considered abstract, yet they have tangible consequences, such as the State of Israel, once seen as a Zionist dream, after the war, something that owed its legitimacy to the Holocaust, and hence by implication, anyone who questioned that legitimacy, automatically questioned the Holocaust.

Nevertheless Sebald writes in German. His German is what gives legitimacy to his project. It is not quite like Proust, but the sentences are like waves lapping on the shore, never ending, always repeating, making up a seamless whole, undivided by paragraphs and chapters, all flowing into each other, like a dream, with no structure but the surge of association.