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Meine Mir Unbekannte Herkunft: German Identity and History in the Works of W. G. Sebald, Botho Strauß and Peter Handke

Submitted for the degree of Ph.D. in the Department of German

by

Helen Cleugh Finch

The University of Dublin, Trinity College

23rd March 2008
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SUMMARY

This thesis analyses the work of W. G. Sebald in comparison with two other major German writers of his generation, Botho Strauß and Peter Handke. It compares Sebald’s novel Austerlitz with Strauß’s novel Der junge Mann and Handke’s novel Die Wiederholung, using the Bildungsroman tradition as a point of departure, and also analyses the crisis of masculinity in Sebald’s earlier works, Nach der Natur, Die Ausgewanderten and Schwindel.Gefühle. Using both genealogical and contemporaneous models of intertextuality, the thesis examines the interrelation of masculine identity and German history in the prose fiction of the three authors. It employs a set of methodologies that draw on theories of discourse analysis, psychoanalysis and intertextuality, tracing patterns of literary inheritance and generational memory. It demonstrates how Sebald’s membership of the 1968 generation informs his political and poetic concerns, and also traces the influence of his contemporary Handke on his work. It shows that the three writers attempt to bridge the historical caesura of the Nazi period by bringing the traditions of German Bildung and Romantic poetics into their poetics. It therefore shows how Sebald’s work both resembles and is influenced by Strauß’s and Handke’s projects of aesthetic nostalgia. It also shows that Sebald is as indebted to a Romantic conception of subjectivity as much as are Handke and Strauß.

The first chapter summarizes points of biographical and poetic similarity between the three authors, and introduces the concept of the ‘Sebaldian uncanny’ as a heuristic category. The second chapter compares Der junge Mann and Austerlitz, and shows how Sebald uses the anti-Bildungsroman form to negotiate the twin imperatives of incest and inheritance. The third chapter investigates the relation between the Doppelgänger motif, homoeroticism and the historical uncanny in Sebald’s works. It also analyses the intimate relationship between the Sebaldian narrator and his Jewish subjects, and demonstrates that this relationship is also informed by generational guilt and homoerotic desire. The fourth chapter addresses Sebald’s critical writings on Handke, and compares Die Wiederholung and Austerlitz to reveal the indebtedness of Sebald’s novel to Handke’s earlier novel. This comparison shows that Sebald’s
writings on Handke demonstrate a longing for a Romantic reconciliation with nature that, in his own writings, he subjects to the dialectic of Enlightenment. The conclusion briefly summarizes the controversial political writings of all three writers.

This thesis demonstrates that Sebald’s ethically scrupulous poetics of memory are constantly ironised and challenged by desires to escape the dialectic of Enlightenment, and with it the burden of generational guilt. These desires are revealed in the form of neo-Romantic poetics, Oedipal and homoerotic desire, identification between the narrator and narrative subject, and attempts at personal as well as historical redemption. The thesis is the first sustained comparison of Sebald’s work to other writers of his generation, and also the first analysis of his engagement with Handke’s work.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been written without the generous support of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, who funded three years of research with a Government of Ireland post-graduate research scholarship. I am also indebted to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for a one-year post-graduate grant, which enabled me to conduct research at the Humboldt University in Berlin. The Trinity Trust has also provided me with funding to present the results of my research at the MLA conference in San Diego in 2003.

I cannot thank my supervisors, Professor Jürgen Barkhoff and Professor Moray McGowan, enough for their astute advice, tireless support and warm encouragement. Special thanks are also due to Professor Eric Denton, of Wheaton College, for leading me in the direction of Handke’s wanderings, to Professor Anne Fuchs, of UCD, for her invaluable comments on the section of Chapter Four which she accepted for publication, and to Professor Hartmut Böhme, of the Humboldt University in Berlin, for welcoming me into his doctoral colloquium.

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1 Introduction

To approach the enigmatic, seductive yet strangely elusive work of Sebald with a set of restrictive research questions in mind is an undertaking that is daunting, but also necessary. As with many other readers of Sebald, I have found it impossible to resist the seduction of Sebald’s labyrinthine prose, to follow the labyrinths in the hope of finding either a minotaur or a lover at the end of an intertextual digression, or of uncovering a hidden rabbit-hole of history. In attempting to be rigorous, I have succumbed over and over again to the desire to digress and reconnect. In my defence I can say only that in his own critical work, Sebald himself espoused a mode of reading that relied neither on a dogmatic adherence to any one theoretical model, nor on a scientific pursuit of arcane sources and linguistic minutiae. In his introduction to Beschreibung des Unglücks, Sebald wrote that he considered his eclectic method to be appropriate to the liminal and pluralistic nature of the Austrian literature he studied:

Das fallweise Verfahren, das je nach den vor ihm auftauchenden Schwierigkeiten ohne viel Skrupel seine analytische Methode wechselt, stimmt selbst zu der vorbedachten Rücksichtslosigkeit, mit der in der österreichischen Literatur traditionelle Grenzlinien etwa zwischen ihrem eigenen Bereich und dem der Wissenschaft übergangen werden.¹

¹ W. G. Sebald: Die Beschreibung des Unglücks. Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994), p. 9. Henceforth referred to in the text as BdU. The editions of book-length texts by W. G. Sebald that I refer to are as follows:


Der Mythus der Zerstörung im Werk Döblins (Stuttgart: Klett, 1980). Henceforth referred to as Döblin.

Nach der Natur. Ein Elementargedicht (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1989). Henceforth referred to as NdN.

Schwindel.Gefühle (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994). Henceforth referred to as SG.

Unheimliche Heimat. Essays zur österreichischen Literatur (Salzburg and Vienna: Residenz Verlag, 1991). Henceforth referred to as UH.

Die Ringe des Saturn (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997). Henceforth referred to as RdS.

Austerlitz (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003). Henceforth referred to as A.

Logis in einem Landhaus (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2000). Henceforth referred to as LL.
I do not claim to be as sensitive and beguiling a reader of literature as Sebald, but hope that my own methodology, which moves between close reading, Freudian analysis, intertextual comparison and at times the dark art of biographical analysis, proves in the same way appropriate to my object.

My thesis goes beyond those contemporary criticisms of Sebald that read him chiefly as a chronicler of the after-effects of the Holocaust, or as an aestheteician of cultural memory or post-memory. I adopt a comparative approach as yet sorely neglected in the secondary literature which demonstrates Sebald’s membership of the 1968 generation, by comparing his work to that of Botho Strauß and Peter Handke. I reveal the common politics and poetics shared by the three authors of the same generation, and show that they share a common concern for remembering a secular system of myth and natural philosophy. All three authors, I argue, re-examine the boundaries of the literary subject, and refuse the cultural imperative to complete the Oedipal process, while at the same time negotiating the fragmentation, loss and guilt caused by the course of twentieth-century history. All three attempt to develop a poetics of memory that tends towards a redemptive end. My analysis focuses on three novels: Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, Strauß’s *Der junge Mann* and Handke’s *Die Wiederholung*. However, whereas *Der junge Mann* and *Die Wiederholung* hold out hope for a secular redemption that unites a mythical pre-history through neo-Romantic poetics, *Austerlitz*, while at times approaching moments of reconciliation, constantly undermines all hopes for redemption through a poetics of historical pessimism and melancholy.

My second chapter compares the different uses of the inheritance of the *Bildungsroman* form in *Austerlitz* and *Der junge Mann*. I show that although both novels deploy a fragmentary form to show the displacement of the subject in post-war Europe, *Der junge Mann* transforms the *Bildungsroman* form to negotiate the poisoned inheritance of the German past. *Austerlitz*, by contrast, not only emphasises the Adornian dialectic of Enlightenment, but also embroils its protagonist in repetitions of incestuous lust and longings for subjective wholeness that disrupt the text’s overall Adornian melancholy. This disruption most often appears as a Romantic

---

*Luftkrieg und Literatur. Mit einem Essay zu Alfred Andersch* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001). Henceforth referred to as L&L.

*Campo Santo*, ed. by Sven Meyer (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2003). Henceforth referred to as CS.
experience of the uncanny. The third chapter, then, explores the uncanniest of Sebald's texts, *Schwindel.Gefühle*, as well as *Austerlitz*, to show how messianism and homoeroticism interact dialectically in an attempt to free both Sebald's literary characters and the Sebaldian narrator from the destructive course of history. My fourth chapter analyses Sebald's readings of Handke, and compares *Austerlitz* to Peter Handke's *Die Wiederholung*. I show how these two novels differently engage with a secular model of redemption, with the lost tradition of *Naturphilosophie*. I also examine the extent to which *Die Wiederholung* shares certain tropes with *Austerlitz*, particularly those of familial loss and homecoming, and how both texts create an utopian function for Germany and Austria's Slavic others, Bohemia and Slovenia. I show that while Sebald precludes the possibility of hope in his own works, he still holds it open in his reading of Handke. In my conclusion, I briefly examine the political interventions of the three authors in the public sphere, and ask to what extent the efforts of the three authors to negotiate redemption of the past in their poetic works is continued or contradicted in their feuilletonistic political publications.

1.1 Situating my work: Current Sebald research

When I commenced my research, the secondary literature on Sebald was mostly restricted to a few essays written in affectionate homage to his work, some volumes of tentative critical essays, some of which assumed that Sebald's work was more documentary than fiction, and many, mostly glowing, book reviews. These focussed mainly on his treatment of memory and the Shoah: a typically enthusiastic review of *Austerlitz* in the *New York Times* claimed, 'Sebald stands with Primo Levi as the prime speaker of the Holocaust and, with him, the prime contradiction of Adorno's dictum that after it, there can be no art'.² Franz Loquai's pioneering volumes, *W. G. Sebald: Far from Home* (1995)³ and *W. G. Sebald* (1997)⁴ were among the first German critical receptions of Sebald's work in his lifetime, containing contributions that essayed interpretations of his work while paying literary homage to it, as did

Mitteilungen über Max, edited by Gerhard Köpf, and the issue of Text und Kritik dedicated to Sebald in 2003 (Heft 158). Iris Radisch’s ungentle reviews of his work in Die Zeit may well have contributed to the initial disdain with which his works were received in the German academic community: reviewing Austerlitz, she condemned the work as ‘schwarzer Kitsch’,

aus dem diese Andenkensammlung kommt. Dass ihr Grundton die Melancholie und ihr Generalschlüssel die Katastrophe ist, mag sich für eine derartige Kollektion zieren. Doch der weit über das bloße Erzählen hinausschießende Anspruch, mittels einer besonderen Kombinatorik realer Versatzstücke die Vergangenheit zu befreien, ist schierer Aberglaube.

In the four years since, which more or less coincides with the period of posthumous reception of Sebald’s works as a – sadly – complete opus, what Anne Fuchs called ‘das Sebald-Faszinosum’ has exploded in academic writing, with scholarly articles and monographs appearing in both English and German. In the English-speaking world, the “W. G. Sebald Memorial Day” – a commorative event held in the Institute of Germanic Studies on 31 January 2003 – whose proceedings were published as The Anatomist of Melancholy. Essays in Memory of W. G. Sebald, both served as a forum for British academics to express their sorrow at the loss of a colleague, and also initiated the posthumous reception of Sebald’s literary and intellectual achievement. In particular, the near-simultaneous appearance of Fuchs’s Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte, J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead’s edited W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion and Susanne Schedel’s Wer weiß, wie es vor Zeiten gewesen ist? Textbeziehungen als Mittel der Geschichtsdarstellung bei W. G. Sebald in late 2004 opened the way to readings of Sebald’s work that are at once more critical and more

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5 Mitteilungen über Max. Marginialien zu W. G. Sebald, ed. by Gerhard Köpf (Oberhausen: Karl Maria Laufen, 1998).
7 Anne Fuchs, Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte, (Cologne: Bohlau, 2004), p. 11.
Introduction

theoretically sophisticated. Sebald has become a canonical author on university courses not only in England, but even in Germany. Currently, new articles on Sebald are appearing monthly, and I have drawn on that work which seems most relevant to my project. I have also not yet consulted Sebald’s _Arbeitsbibliothek_, which is currently being transferred to the _Literaturarchiv_ at Marbach. (His _Nachlaß_ is, for the present, closed to general researchers.) Edited volumes on Sebald are appearing at the rate of three or four a year; recent publications of note include _Sebald. Lektüren_, edited by Loquai and Atze, _W. G. Sebald. Politische Archäologie und melancholische Bastelei_, edited by Michael Niehaus and Claudia Öhlschläger, and _W. G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma_, edited by Scott Denham and McCulloh, and at the current moment, Anne Fuchs and J. J. Long’s volume, _W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History_, is forthcoming.

The lachrymose tone of Sebald’s work was the point of departure for most earlier Sebald criticism. Sebald has been described as ‘intransigent in mourning’; he, his narrators and his subjects are most often described as melancholics. This tradition of Sebald criticism has been developed by Irene Heidelberger-Leonard and Sigrid

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11 In keeping with Sebald’s popularity as a set author, in the previous year, Mark R. McCulloh published _Understanding W. G. Sebald_, a comprehensive volume aimed more at introducing to undergraduate readers to Sebald’s work, and its dense literary and historical background, than at the scholarly community. Mark R McCulloh, _Understanding W. G. Sebald_ (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

12 One omission has been the bilingual conference volume _W. G. Sebald. Mémoire. Transferts. Images / Erinnerung. Übertragungen. Bilder._, ed. by Ruth Vogel-Klein. (Strasbourg: Université Marc Bloch, 2005). This has only recently come to my attention, and, although it contains contributions on memory and intertextuality that are related to my work, mostly deals with issues of intermediality that are not central to my concerns.


16 _W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History_, ed. by Anne Fuchs and J.J. Long. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007). This contains a contribution of my own, based on Chapter Four of the present study.


Loeffler, among others. Indeed, as Eva Juhl suggests, his narrators are also Kristevan abjects, at odds with themselves, self-disgusted. But to describe his work as being concerned purely with the historical and literary past, a backward-looking poetics, is to ignore both the politicized aspects of literature and historiography, and Sebald’s own explicitly political affiliations. Here, I am in sympathy with Peter Morgan, who reads his melancholy as a ‘linke Melancholie,’ a late twentieth-century melancholy that is Romantic in its expression, and is rooted in a German loss of Heimat.

Melancholy is explained by Freud as an inability to complete the process of mourning; and while Sebald is intimately acquainted with Freud’s understanding of melancholy, his Baroque affiliations also draw him to the meaning of melancholy as the Gelehrtenkrankheit, the general affliction of the learned man, who understands the inherent entropy and decay of the natural world, a decay that is accelerated by the destructive progress of human history. The image of Sebald as an afflicted Gelehrter leads, of course, to the rich field of work being done on Sebald and intertextuality. Particularly since a portion of his Arbeitshilothek has become available, articles dealing with the extraordinary breadth and depth of Sebald’s literary influences and allusions have appeared. My work starts from a similar point as Martin Swales’s theoretical reflections on W. G. Sebald: ‘the simple proposition that Sebald, however much he was a European writer, was deeply embedded in the tradition of German prose writing in both its theoretical and its practical forms.’ Notwithstanding the widespread interest in Sebald’s literary Herkunft, to the best of my knowledge, no comparative accounts of Sebald’s relationship to contemporary authors have yet appeared. My discussion of Austerlitz draws in part on Fuchs’s analysis of Sebald’s politics and her research into its intertextual motifs, as well as being close to Jonathan

19 See particularly “‘Melancholie ist eine Form des Widerstands‘. Über das Saturnische bei W. G. Sebald und seine Aufhebung in der Schrift’, Text + Kritik (2003), 158, pp. 103-111.
Long’s reading of Foucauldian influences in Sebald, and Mona Körte’s analysis of identity formation. At all times in my research, the work done by Susanne Schedel in *Wer weiss, wie es vor Zeiten gewesen ist?* has proved an invaluable resource both for Sebald’s intertextual sources and for the wider function of intertextuality in his work. Nonetheless, Schedel’s book, like Fuchs’s, and the other edited volumes on Sebald that have appeared in the course of the past four years, has not yet fully explored the themes in his work common to writers of his generation, nor despite their glancing acknowledgements of the similarity of certain of his concerns to those of other contemporary writers, have they provided any comparative studies of his work with other authors of his generation.

Despite the justified amount of critical attention paid to memory and melancholy in Sebald’s work, it is not purely a chronicle of destruction and loss, nor even of guilt, haunting and wanderings, important though these aspects of his work are. Scrupulous though his work is in mapping loss and psychic deterioration, my analysis shows that Sebald’s work also includes a longing for wholeness, *for a lost Heimat* for the German subject, for a space beyond the ravages of history that is sometimes expressed as a poetic Jerusalem, sometimes as the pre-Oedipal space of union with the mother. This longing serves as an occluded subtext to Sebald’s oeuvre; it is heavily ironized, often avowed and undermined in the same paragraph, but sometimes comes perilously close to the deathly identity that is kitsch. Indeed, Sebald himself writes,

> Die Heimat ist unerreichbar nicht nur wegen der Schwierigkeiten, die sich aus der Konfrontation von Sehnsucht und Ordnung ergeben, sondern auch deshalb, weil sie nichts anderes ist als die Chiffre für ein früheres Leben. Sie hat mit Geschichte, wie Benjamin vermerkte, weniger zu tun als mit Vorgeschichte […] (UH 66)

Fuchs’s treatment of the theme of *Heimat* in Sebald’s work, while invaluable, downplays its utopian in favour of its negative aspect; she links it to the poetics of ruins, another area of Sebald scholarship that plays only a small role in my work.\(^{23}\) However, her development of generational theory in the context of Sebald’s poetics

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has proved invaluable in my comparative reading of Sebald with the two brother writers of his generation, as I discuss in further detail on page 24 below. Equally, as I discuss in more detail in the introduction to Chapter Three, I am indebted particularly to essays written by Marcel Atze, Russel Kilbourn, Gabriella Rovagati and John Zilcosky for my readings of the Doppelgänger and the Kafka figure in Sebald’s work, though my work goes beyond theirs in diagnosing a utopian element to the subtexts of homoerotic and homosocial desire throughout his work.

This project already draws into its scope the legacy of Weimar Germany, of the Romantics and Freud, of theories of memory, post-memory and (a term loathed by Sebald) ‘Holocaust literature,’ of two of the most feted giants of contemporary German literature and one of its newest canonical authors. I therefore have of necessity restricted myself to a focus on Austerlitz and Schwindel.Gefühle, and an approach that focuses on two Bildungsromane by Strauß and by Handke as points of comparison, rather than seeking to add to the mass of research that already exists not only on each author, but also the not inconsiderable research area exploring the similarities between Strauß and Handke themselves.\(^{24}\) I do not engage with the opus of Strauß nor of Handke as a whole, nor do I engage with their theatrical works. Equally, I do not aim to provide a comprehensive biographical reading of Sebald’s works, nor a theory of his uses of (auto)biography. I primarily employ comparative and close reading techniques in my analysis; therefore, although the question of memory is always central when speaking of identity and subjectivity in Sebald, I am content to

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draw eclectically on the work done by others in this area without producing another
theory of Sebald’s mnemonics to add to the growing specialist literature on the
subject. Nor, while the deployment of intermedial intertexts, particularly film and
photographs, in Sebald’s work is an integral part of his poetics, do I analyse the
theoretical implications of Sebald’s intermediality in any great detail. Again, I must
summon my subject himself in my defence; his critical work never aimed at totality or
authority, far more at a crab-like, delicate approach to his subjects that teased out
unexpected connections and tender points. If I can to even the smallest extent emulate
his method, I will consider myself successful.

1.2 Theoretical frameworks
In this section, I briefly introduce the main theoretical frameworks that I use in my
reading of Sebald.

1.2.1 The untimely Bildungsbürger: Sebald and the bourgeois age
In my initial reading of Austerlitz, I use the theoretical frame of the Bildungsroman,
arguing that Sebald is both a critical anatomist of the bourgeois age and a writer who
is culturally nostalgic for it. To use so canonical a literary category as the
Bildungsroman to interrogate Sebald’s fragmentary, generically liminal work, and to
analyse the fate of the bourgeois subject in a literary oeuvre so populated by ghosts
and revenants, might seem entirely perverse, a harking back to a conservative set of
bourgeois categories whose dead hand has no place in a twenty-first century reading
of a ‘post-modern’ writer. Yet in a sense, Sebald’s work is entirely absorbed in the
melancholic dissection and critique of the bourgeois age, its literature and through that
literature, the psychopathology of its subjects. Thus, his first two volumes of essays on
Austrian literature reveal the philosophical and political underpinnings of his later
fiction: Die Beschreibung des Unglücks is a literary psychopathology of the Austrian
bourgeois psyche, while Unheimliche Heimat traces the destruction and repression
caused when the uprooted bourgeois attempts to find a new homeland or reclaim an

25 Arthur Williams is one of many critics to use this possibly misplaced adjective to describe Sebald.
Arthur Williams, ‘The Elusive First Person Plural: Real Absences in Reiner Kunze, Bernd-Dieter Hüge,
and W. G. Sebald’, in ‘Whose story? Continuities in contemporary German-language literature, ed. by
old one of dubious authenticity. Austria, for him, is a litmus paper for the anxieties of modernity, a liminal, fraught, plural place where immigrants use literature to negotiate their place in bourgeois society (BdU 11).

The catastrophic progress of modernity that so preoccupies Sebald’s fiction can be in part described as the attempt of Western bourgeois society to first destroy and then forget its Other. Thus, for example, Sebald’s description of Charles Sealsfield’s attitude to the genocide of Native Americans elegantly satirises the bourgeois hypocrisy that constructs the mass murder of non-Western peoples as part of the inevitable triumph of history, only to sentimentalise the ‘authenticity’ of their culture once it has been destroyed.

Ob der sinnige Betrachter wirklich ‘mit Trauer über die unrettbaren Opfer des fortschreitenden Weltgeistes erfüllt’ war, wird wohl fraglich bleiben, da doch zumeist in einem Atemzug mit der Trauer der ‘Triumph des fortschreitenden Geistes’ annonciert wird. Die verheerenden Auswirkungen solcher Ambivalenz, die das nach innen moralistische, nach außen amoralische bürgerliche Denken im Grunde bis heute bestimmt, lassen sich an einigen Stellen der Sealsfield-Biographie Castles ablesen. [...] Da sich aber Toleranz nur auf diejenigen erstreckt, die sich der bürgerlichen Verbesserung als fähig erweisen, müssen die Indianer, in denen sich das bedrohliche ‘andere’ konstituiert, zwangsläufig ausgemerzt werden. (UH 31)

The ‘others’ created by Western bourgeois society in its mania for order range from cultural others – here, Native Americans, but in the Alpine context that is Sebald’s literary homeland, Jews or Bohemians – to Nature, constructed as the other of European culture. It also appears as the irrational, polymorphously perverse others of the self that must be repressed in the respectable bourgeois psyche. Sebald’s academic writing is at its most biting and most satirical when it delineates the hypocrisies and convoluted traumas revealed in the writings of seemingly respectable authors of the bourgeois and post-bourgeois age – Stifter and Grass – and at its most tender when describing the psychic dissociations of melancholic or ex-centric writers – Kafka, Herbeck and Améry, among many others – under the inexorable pressures of conforming to the bourgeois order, and its attendant brutality towards those whom that order excluded. Thus, writing on Peter Altenberg, he asserts that the Unbehagen – the discontents, with all the Freudian overtones of that word – of the assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie is even stronger than in the Gentile variant.
Hatten jüdische bürgerliche Familien im Assimilationsprozeß einmal die höheren Schichten erreicht, so wirkte sich in ihnen das Unbehagen an der bürgerlichen Lebensführung meist radikaler aus als in der nichtjüdischen Bourgeoisie. (UH 79)

The family is here named as the nexus where the political border between Austrian and Jew, and the psychic border between ego and subconscious meet. It is this fraught conjunction that Sebald traces and retraces in his critical writing, particularly as Jewish-Austrian literature is also itself symptom of the liminal position that assimilated Jews held.

Die von höheren Aspirationen erfüllten Söhne dieser Generation mußten, wenn sie wirklich in ihrem Assimilationsmilieu aufgehen wollten, übers Geschäft hinaus in der Kultur reüssieren, was natürlich, da es am Olymp nur wenige Plätze gibt, zur Entstehung einer der Bourgeoisie parasitär verhafteten Bohème führte. (UH 79)

Literary culture, and indeed the entirety of the self-regarding Bildungsbürgerum, in Sebald’s account, is always compromised precisely because of this parasitical relationship with bourgeois society. Again, writing about Altenberg, Sebald condemns the ‘trahison des clercs’ that makes writers only too ready to sell their souls for bread (UH 22). Sebald also uses the term ‘trahison des clercs’ in relation to Hermann Broch, who denounced kitsch as not only an aesthetic nihilism, but also an ‘ethical defeatism’ that reveals the precariousness of the aesthetic superstructure of bourgeois society, grounded on a devalued economic base (UH 125). Nonetheless, Broch himself, despite his vigorous denunciation of kitsch, Sebald continues, commits the ‘trahison des clercs’ by perpetuating kitsch’s tautologies in his own writing. Broch becomes a literary symptom of the crisis in late bourgeois society:

Broch hatte gewiß recht, als er den Verlust des Sinns für ästhetische Einheiten als zentrales Krisensymptom der ausgehenden bürgerlichen Epoche identifizierte, und wie weitreichend die Implikationen seiner These sind, begreift man genauer vielleicht erst heute [...]. (UH 126)

If Sebald’s work is most celebrated for its engagement with memory and its uncanny offspring – postmemory, cultural memory, visual memory, official remembrance – the losses that create the memory his fiction explores are those created both by the advances made by the bourgeois age – the destruction of traditional communities, of a supposed harmony with nature and of subjective innocence – and by the crisis in and destruction of that age by the progress of history in the twentieth century. Sebald’s
writing, both critical and fictional, is informed throughout by the workings of the dialectic of Enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in a cultural theory informed both by Marxian economics and Freudian psychology, interprets the Nazi dictatorship as the inevitable end product of a technocratic Enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the Enlightenment, by subjugating the realm of the natural and the mythological through a totalitarian rationalism, ensures the return of myth and the destruction of its own rationalist fantasies. Sebald’s debt to Adorno has been widely acknowledged: see particularly his brief but bizarre exchange of letters with Adorno and Marcel Atze and Sven Meyer’s essay on the subject, ‘‘Unsere Korrespondenz.’ Zum Briefwechsel zwischen W. G. Sebald und Theodor W. Adorno’. Sebald’s doctoral thesis, *Der Mythus der Zerstörung im Werk Döblins*, describes the crisis of the bourgeois age in relatively orthodox Marxist terms. Here he argues that rapacious social Darwinism is at the heart of bourgeois society, and congratulates Döblin for incorporating this insight into his fiction, in his novel *Pardon wird nicht gegeben*:

Das Motiv des rücksichtslosen ‘self-interest’ und der mörderischen Konkurrenz, die das Opfer des Gegners der eigenen Lebenssubstanz einverleibt, durchdringt immer wieder die Oberfläche der eigentlichen Erzählung und läßt darauf schließen, daß Döblin im radikalen Sozialdarwinismus ein Zentralstück bürgerlicher Ideologie und eine jener Verhaltensnormen erkannt hat, welche die Inhumanität der von ihm beschriebenen Gesellschaft auch dann noch perpetuierte, als die allgemeine Not der wirtschaftlichen Krise die Menschen aufeinander hätte verweisen müssen. (Döblin, 15)

He even goes so far as to criticise Döblin for failing to incorporate the dialectical methodology of Adorno and Horkheimer into his poetics of nature. Although Sebald


27 Marcel Atze and Sven Meyer, ‘‘Unsere Korrespondenz. Zum Briefwechsel zwischen W. G. Sebald und Theodor W. Adorno’’, in *Sebald. Lektüren*, pp. 17-39. Fuchs also points out that Sebald is indebted to Adorno’s criticism of a theory of authenticity that elides individual experience of difference, which has certain consequences for his biographical project. Thus, she claims, over the course of his creative works, Sebald develops a non-mimetic concept of biography, a self-reflexive one. Fuchs, *Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte*, p. 122.
champions poetics over philosophy, and in much of his criticism develops a fine attention to the particulars of the text, in this early work, traces of an affiliation to the ideology of critical thinking, rather than an avowal of the autonomy of poetic production, remain.\textsuperscript{28}

Graham Jackman’s essay, “‘Gebranntes Kind’? W. G. Sebalds ‘Metaphysik der Geschichte’”\textsuperscript{29} also traces Sebald’s debt to Adorno; it summarises the ways in which Austerlitz uses the hypertrophic architecture of the bourgeois age to demonstrate the ugliness, violence and paranoia that is the inevitable result of the inner logic of rationalism. Jackman argues that in Austerlitz

This dialectic of the Enlightenment and of the technological progress to which it gave birth plays a major part in the acceleration of the processes of decay within nature itself.

Yet at all times, Sebald’s writing is informed by the languorous tone of the nineteenth century, and makes constant and erudite reference to the culture and cultural icons of the high bourgeois age. Iris Radisch, in her caustic review of Austerlitz, suggests that this language is indeed part of Sebald’s historical metaphysic, which wishes to reawaken and reconnect the past to the present. She refers to Sebald’s

historisierende bedächtige Sprache, ein kostbares, der Jahrhundertwende abgelauschtes Idiom, das die Auferstehung der Vergangenheit unmittelbar zu garantieren scheint.\textsuperscript{30}

His literary texts are saturated with cultural nostalgia for the age prior to the first world war, or to be more precise, prior to August 1913, a date which recurs again and again throughout his writings as a moment when the golden age of European bourgeois culture was on the very verge of coming to a catastrophic end.\textsuperscript{31} Sebald’s writings do not only delineate the process of destruction caused, in dialectical fashion,

\textsuperscript{28} See, for example, p. 116 of Döblin, where Sebald chides Döblin for a lack of narrative irony that would allow him to avoid deploying the politically dangerous concept of ‘fate.’


\textsuperscript{30} Radisch, ‘Der Waschbär der falschen Welt’.

\textsuperscript{31} See Schedel, Wer weiß, wie es vor Zeiten gewesen ist?, pp. 161-163, where she analyses the significance of the year 1913 in Sebald’s text by reference to the intertexts 1912+1 by Leonardo Sciasca.
by the reversal of bourgeois Enlightenment into the murderous myth of Nazism, but also, through its aesthetic structures and language, mourn the destruction of bourgeois culture itself. His critical texts also concentrate on this moment where the late bourgeois world finally dissipated, the inter-war or immediately pre-World War One period, in which the intellectual enthusiasm of the Enlightenment had long since been replaced, at least in bourgeois art and literature, by a deep disquiet at the ramifications of modernity, the

\[ \text{neue Zeit, der nicht mehr wie der bürgerliche auf dem Fortschritt, sondern auf der sich perpetuierenden Katastrophe beruht. (Döblin 58)} \]

For Sebald’s Döblin, this disquiet becomes transformed into a messianic apocalypticism that is diametrically opposed to the ideology of the bourgeoisie (Döblin 61). In Adorno’s analysis, though, the apocalypse that ends the bourgeois age once and for all, proves to be realized through the horrors of fascism rather than through the redemption of messianism, and both fascism and utopian messianism appear, at various times, as the inevitable end of the bourgeois age in Sebald’s works.

As with his relationship to the bourgeois age itself, Sebald’s relationship to bourgeois literature and learning is also ambiguous. Both his critical and his linguistic work are shot through with references both to the hypocrisy of the bourgeois fetishisation of high culture, and with intertextual references to that culture itself. As Marcel Atze notes, the obscurity of Sebald’s intertextual representations are often so abstruse that even professional readers and critics cannot be expected to recognise them: this excessive erudition reduces his arcane references to, for example, the Shoah, illegible.\(^\text{32}\) Although I do not develop my own theory of intertextuality in Sebald’s work, I am indebted to those, particularly Atze and Schedel, who have done much of the intertextual research that I draw on.

1.2.2 The Sebaldian uncanny

In my analysis, the theme of the Sebaldian uncanny constantly returns, and with it an understanding of Sebald as a neo-Romantic writer. The uncanny, as we know from Freud’s essay on *Der Sandmann*, is the reappearance of the familiar in a strange form,

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where it does not belong. 33 Freud links it to the fear of castration, the fear that is supposed to fuel the Oedipus complex that forms the bourgeois self. In Sebald’s work, the uncanny takes on a rich set of attributes and political implications. Most evident of these is the irruption of the repressed dark side of history into the amnesiac present, an irruption indicated by a vast array of poetic techniques of intertextuality, networking and intermediality. More specifically, and the point which is most significant to my project, the Sebaldian uncanny is intimately bound up with sexuality and its discontents. Although most authors overlook the function of sexuality in Sebald’s work, a few critics, such as Russel J. A. Kilbourn, John Zilcosky and Gabriella Rovagnati, 34 have noticed that Schwindel.Gefühle, in particular, is in fact saturated with eroticism. I extend the examination of the Sebaldian erotic to Austerlitz as well as to Schwindel.Gefühle. I argue that the Sebaldian uncanny is a moment where the subject is both constituted and deconstructed by a tension between, on the one hand, a longing for non-reproductive or even tabooed sexual practice – homosexuality and incest – and on the other, the implacable progress of history and destruction. Jan Ceuppens’s comment on the presence of the spectre in Sebald’s work provides a useful guide to the world of the Sebaldian uncanny:

The spectre, as we have seen, is that which, in its endless return or repetition, defies the very notion of singularity. [...] Conversely, the angelic or messianic would be that which is absolutely singular, unique, different, but it would, as such, be a promise that could never be attained in its ‘pure’ form. [...] The spectral past is simultaneously that which sets in motion a desire for redemption and that which prevents us from ever reaching it. 35

Homosexual and incestuous desire, I show, offer the Sebaldian subject the temptation of being able to step outside the reproductive logic of the Oedipus complex and, more broadly, of the murderous progress of German and central European history. Incest, I argue in my second chapter, provides the lure of a return to pre-Oedipal subjective fulfilment for Austerlitz. Homosexual desire, I argue in my third chapter, is affectively

34 See the opening section of Chapter Three for a comprehensive list of the relevant critical texts.
laden as the site of political resistance in many of Sebald’s characters, and, moreover, appears as a means for the Sebaldian narrator to escape the Oedipal inheritance of his own German past. It also provides a lure away from the compulsive repetitions of the past that plague the Sebaldian narrator. Homosexual desire appears as a counterpart to the more apocalyptic messianism that is the other means of escape from the implacable logic of history in Sebald’s work. Nonetheless, these illicit sexual desires are riven with guilt, and with poetic as well as historical irony, in particular intertextual ironies. Most especially in Venice, this guilt is figured by the spectre of the Doppelgänger. In my fourth chapter, I show how, through his reading of Handke, Sebald imagines a transformation of these uncanny motifs into redemptive ones. Although he forecloses the possibility of any secular redemption or even hope in his own literary work, intertextually, his positive affirmation of Handke’s Die Wiederholung shows that Sebald allows the possibility of, for example, a utopian brotherly reconciliation that is not haunted by the Doppelgänger, or an intact family where the spectre of the mother does not constantly reappear as both sexual lure or a harbinger of guilt.

1.2.3 Postmemory and generational theory

In reading Sebald’s work, I am also indebted to the generational model of guilt and memory worked out by, among others, Aleida Assmann and Sigrid Weigel, and applied to Sebald’s work by Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove. Under this model, the generation to which Sebald, Handke and Strauß belong – of those who were born to parents who were alive and complicit in the Nazi dictatorship, but who themselves have as good as no direct recollection of the period – is hypostatized as one of the most significant in the discourse of German post-war history. Contemporary theorists such as Dominick LaCapra and Sigrid Weigel, discussing cultural memory, have reformulated a generational model of trauma and history after the caesura of Auschwitz. According to this model, all three writers belong to the ‘second generation’ after the Nazi period, or ‘1968-ers,’ a generation that has been defined in

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36 See here particularly German Life & Letters, special issue: Memory Contests, ed. by Anne Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove, 59:2 (2006) and German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film and Discourse since 1990, ed. by Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove and Georg Grote (Rochester: Camden House, 2006).
popular and academic discourse as one that collectively refused the inheritance of their first-generation ‘perpetrator’ fathers, who were complicit in the Nazi régime. (This model affords an interim position to the earlier generation of German writers, including Böll and Grass, who had come of age during the Third Reich and subsequently rebelled against this socialization and their fathers’ generation.) Throughout the 1960s and 1970s left-wing intellectuals formulated this rebellion in Marxist or psychoanalytic terms: Heinz Bude’s study *Bilanz der Nachfrage*, for example, cites models that range from the Mitscherlich’s oedipal schemata to Kleinian analyses of mass behavioural psychology.37 Disgusted with their socialization in the complacent ‘economic miracle’ period, the 1968 generation also conceived of their rebellion in Marxist terms, and considered both the 1950s obsession with material wealth and the murderous state capitalism of the Nazi period to be manifestations of ‘late capitalism.’ More recent models of generational guilt lean more heavily on discursive analyses, demonstrating the ways in which literature often conceives of Nazi criminality as analogous to an original sin, passed down through the generations to reappear in the form of guilt (*Schuld*) or debts that must be repaid to the children of victims (*Schulden*).38 Generational readings of German society and cultural memory tend to be based on a combination of Freudian and Marxist analysis. Thus, they employ both the Freudian genealogy of the psyche which grounds male individuality in the Oedipus complex, and also a dialectical materialism that maps the Freudian psychic structures of repression, trauma and neurosis onto the course of German history in the phase of late capitalism. This intellectual inheritance reappears time and again in Sebald’s fictional work, which not only reflects the intellectual preoccupations of his generation, but which itself contains recurring Oedipal conflicts, absent fathers, sexualized mothers and subtextual desires to escape the inherited burden of guilt.

Fuchs locates Sebald’s discourse of memory firmly in the context of this same second generation, using the model of postmemory, developed by Marianne Hirsch, to describe the way in which he incorporates material about the Shoah in his fictions. In


a three-generational schema of trauma, the second generation, born after 1945, has no
direct memory of the Shoah itself, and must instead rely on the transmissions of what
Hirsch calls postmemory – a mode of remembering that traverses generations, a
memory that is handed down at second hand, through oral narrative or cultural
productions. She notes that Sebald attaches strict ethical considerations to his
position as a German artist of the second generation who attempts to write about the
generations that preceded him:

Vor diesem Hintergrund kann Sebalds prekäre Position als ein deutscher Autor der
zweiten Generation, der sich immer wieder an der jüdischen Erfahrung der
Verfolgung abarbeitet auf folgende Fragestellung zugespiitzt werden: Wie kann die
Alterität des Anderen zum Ausdruck gebracht werden, ohne dass dabei dessen
(Nicht-) Ort in der Geschichte usurpiert wird?

For Fuchs, Sebald attempts to transmit the traumata of those who have been victims of
the Nazi persecution by means of radically privileging the biography of his subjects,
and by openly acknowledging his own biographical position in the histories that he
presents, without falling into the trap of identifying with the victims, of confusing
biography with autobiography. She notes the constantly mediated and reflected
relationship between narrator and subject, and concludes that, by borrowing
techniques of 'periscopic' narration from Thomas Bernhard and by scrupulous
attention to the details of encounters between Sebaldian narrators and those whose
stories they tell, Sebald manages to avoid usurping the position of his subjects.
However, Fuchs' account does not always take into account the sophisticated manner
in which Sebald's political ethics are constantly in play with the literary games of
authority performed by his narrators and subjects, as shown by the correspondences
between the Sebaldian narrator and Jacques Austerlitz himself.

Sigrid Weigel's work on postmemory also contributes to my analysis; she has shown
the ethical dangers inherent in a model of history that is based on the concepts of
inheritance and trauma, and on Benjamin's insistence that the Nazi period creates an

39 Fuchs, Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte, pp. 27 ff.
40 Fuchs, Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte, p. 28.
absolute caesura between previous concepts of history and the present day. She suggests that such a model can cause a leveling of all kinds of trauma – whereby little distinction is drawn between victim and perpetrator trauma – and an exclusive, phylogenetic notion of guilt. Benjamin’s and Freud’s exploratory insights become dialectically transformed into conservative, rigid constructs, which can serve the political right-wing ressentiment of Strauß as well as more liberally-inclined aesthetic strategies, such as those espoused by Sebald.

Further, the ethical danger of identification, of usurping the position of the victim, is not the only one run by the historical position in which Sebald situates himself through his texts. Weigel warns:

Verbindet sich mit diesem Diskurs der/über Generationen ein Wissen um das Fortwirken des Jüngstvergangenen auch jenseits und unterhalb des Diskurses und des Bewußtseins, so wird die Einsicht in die historische Bedingtheit eigener Gegenwärtigkeit mit der Positionierung als zweite oder dritte Generation zugleich durch mythische Zeitvorstellungen überlagert: (1) dadurch, daß die Zeitrechnung dabei auf ein herausgehobenes Ereignis bezogen ist, das dadurch Ursprungscharakter erhält, und (2) durch die Rückbindung an eine familiale, genealogische Zeitvorstellung.

These dangers – of mythologizing a familial pattern of inheritance (rather than a social one) and of making reference to an imagined time or place of origin, after which history can only be read as the echo of trauma – are explicitly apparent in the way in which Sebald reads Die Wiederholung as a mythical familial quest to retrieve a genetic inheritance and return to a point of genealogical origin. These risks – or patterns – play back into the dynamics of the Bildungsroman, of the dialectic of inheritance and incest.

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41 Sigrid Weigel, 'Téléscoopage im Unbewussten. Zum Verhältnis von Trauma, Geschichtsbegriff und Literatur', in Trauma – Zwischen Psychoanalyse und kulturellem Deutungsmuster, ed. by Elisabeth Bronfen, Birgit R. Erdle and Sigrid Weigel (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999), pp. 51-76.

42 Weigel, 'Téléscoopage im Unbewußen', p. 67.


1.3 Second generation, second thoughts: Sebald in comparative context

This thesis shows that Sebald was not alone among German writers in his cultural nostalgia in the 1980s and 1990s. Most famously, the writers Botho Strauß and Peter Handke had also followed a path from left-wing rebellion to a complex poetics that attempted to transmit and transform motifs from classical and Romantic German literature. My thesis uses theories of the Bildungsroman to interrogate Sebald’s Austerlitz, Strauß’ Der junge Mann and Handke’s Die Wiederholung. In two complementary chapters, I show that an esoteric debt to a classical and Romantic conception of subjectivity, and to traditional ideas of German identity, is present in Sebald as much as in Handke and Strauß, the two more notoriously ‘neo-Romantic’ writers. I argue that the three writers attempt to bridge the historical caesura of the Nazi period by bringing the Gedankengut of German Bildung, myth and the esoteric tradition of Naturphilosophie over into their poetics. The question then arises as to whether this strategy causes a turn to Bildungskonservatismus or right-wing thinking in general, from Strauß’s Anschwellender Bocksgesang essay, to Handke’s controversial defences of Serbia, and Sebald’s Luftkrieg und Literatur essay. I attempt an answer to this question in the conclusion of my thesis.

Although most criticism has regarded Sebald’s work as an exemplary attempt by a German author of the second generation to communicate the pain of Jewish survivors of the Shoah, and hence as a progressive moment in post-war literature, my analysis, by comparing Sebald’s work with his two more notoriously conservative contemporaries, shows the way in which his work both resembles and is influenced by their projects of aesthetic restoration and nostalgia. This is an aspect of his writing that has been largely overlooked by critics, and those that have noticed it strike a suspiciously culturally conservative note, such as Hugo Dittenberger:

Anspielungen auf Bildung sind es, aus Bildung, die vielfäüig die Texte durchziehen und mit anderen Anspielungen und wieder anders zusammenstimmen und einen virtuosen – ‘Subtext’ trifft vielleicht weniger als – Mittext bilden, der die europäische Geschichte und Literaturgeschichte und darin – mit einem besonderen, intimen, fast
mochte ich sagen: innig seufzenden und zürnenden Ton, wie er keinem anderen deutschen Gegenwartsautor zu Gesicht steht – die deutsche aufruft.43

1.3.1 Brother writers

By intertextually locating Sebald in the ominously paternal family that is German literature, I aim to see to what extent his depiction of subjectivity, fraught, haunted and circular though it is, inherits its parameters from the overweening Weimar and Romantic traditions of literature. To find out whether this tradition can in any way still be considered artistically viable for a German-speaking writer in the late twentieth-century, I found it instructive to read Sebald as one of a generation of writers in German who, born towards the very end of the Nazi period, sought in adulthood to reclaim the German language and various traditions of metaphysics, Romantic poetry and indeed intellectual elitism that had been discredited, in much orthodox left-wing opinion, by the courses both of German history and of modernist experimentation. A comparison of Sebald’s work to that of Peter Handke is perhaps long overdue, given that Sebald published a series of essays on his work. To compare his work to Botho Strauß’s, however, may seem more far-fetched. An introduction Sebald wrote to a volume of essays that he edited on German theatre contains a glancing reference to an essay on Strauß, in which he notes Strauß’s use of mythology as ‘structuring devices’, while remarking ascerbically that Strauß ‘may not have remained sufficiently resistant to the temptations of beautifully organized displays of despair which can be as insincere as they are ostentatious.’44 Otherwise, he did not explicitly engage with Strauß’s work, and the two writers, at least in the popular imagination, appear diametrically opposed.45 Certainly around the time of Sebald’s writing life,

45 Glancing references to points of similarity have occasionally been made in the secondary literature: Arthur Williams, for instance, writes of Die Ausgewanderten, ‘This Germany is not so very different from Hülge’s, but here the text also seems to nod in the direction of Botho Strauß as the painter talks of his elegant ‘visitor’ with grey roses on her hat and the trauma of their encumbered native language [...]’: Williams considers that this image contains elements from Strauß’s Rumor. ‘The Elusive First Person Plural’, in ‘Whose Story?’ ed. by Williams, p. 103 and endnote.
Strauß was once more an enfant terrible of German literature, a self-confessed neo-conservative who had become embroiled, in the eyes of many _Feuilleton_ journalists, with dangerously influential right-wing movements, while Sebald was being proclaimed as the new conscience of German literature, a thoroughly politically correct writer. Nonetheless, I show that a common concern with memory and neo-Romanticism informs both their work. This is despite the fact that, in the three novels that I analyse comparatively, the issues at stake in each novel are different. _Austerlitz_ is a memory project, while _Der junge Mann_ is primarily one concerned with aesthetics, and _Die Wiederholung_ with aesthetics, landscape and redemption. Equally, _Austerlitz_ is a novel of the twenty-first century, whereas the other two books were published in the 1980s. Sebald was writing in the full swing of a 'memory boom,' whereas Handke and Strauß's concern with memory was more unfashionable at the time. In addressing the profound commonalities between the novels, I do not wish to downplay their considerable difference in approach and themes.

### 1.3.2 Generational memory: theory, vogue, practice

Sebald entered the world of German letters not as an artist, but as an academic, already a member of the cultural and educational establishment. 'In der germanistischen Zunft debütiert er 1969 als _enfant terrible_,' writes Heidelberger-Leonard, and suggests, somewhat hyperbolically, that he thereby revolutionized the German literary canon.\(^{46}\) She is unusual among critics who more conventionally read Sebald as a writer who is displaced from his intellectual homeland of the nineteenth century. Peter Morgan is another of the few critics who describes Sebald as very much of his time. For him, Sebald is a 'West German intellectual of the student generation'

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who is ‘caught in the ‘consciousness of the ‘second generation’, encapsulated in the problematic phrase ‘die Gnade der späten Geburt’.\textsuperscript{47} He concludes that

the ‘post-war era’ will survive in literature as long as the student generation survives. Sebald’s works evoke melancholy, whereas those of contemporaries among the intellectual ‘new right’, such as Botho Strauss, are provocative and aggressive.\textsuperscript{48}

Morgan’s analysis, which places the void created by Auschwitz at the heart of Sebald’s cultural consciousness, does not address Sebald’s intense engagement with the pre-Nazi \textit{Gedankengut} of European culture, but does identify the common generational experience shared by Sebald and Strauß (who were, indeed, born within six months of each other, in 1944), as by Handke, who was born three years earlier and thus had more direct memory of the immediate post-war years. Irene Heidelberger-Leonard notes that his critical prose moved, over the thirty years that he was writing, from enfant terrible to melancholic.\textsuperscript{49}

Sebald is very aware of the generational model of inherited guilt, although he claimed not to subscribe to it in its entirety.

While Sebald discounts the notion of inherited guilt, he says: ‘If you know in the generation before you that your parents, your uncles and aunts were tacit accomplices, it’s difficult to say you haven’t anything to do with it. I’ve always felt I had to know what happened in detail, and to try to understand why it should have been so.’ He was appalled by a ‘concerted attempt in the first years after the war not to remember anything, for the obvious reason that those in office were implicated’. A sea-change in the late-1960s was spurred by an ‘uprising of the next generation; there was generational war for half a decade that culminated in terrorism in Germany, which was brutally eradicated’.\textsuperscript{50}

The seemingly anachronistic choice of the \textit{Bildungsroman} form can, in this post-war context, be seen for all three authors as a means not only to reconnect to a German-

\textsuperscript{49} Heidelberger-Leonard, ,Melancholie als Widerstand, p. 122.
language literary heritage that was misappropriated by fascist ideology, but also to
employ its Oedipal structure in order to work out the personal and social burden of
inherited guilt. It must, at this point, be remembered that Strauß in particular,
explicitly rejected rigid psychoanalytic schemata that claim a hierarchical dominance
over the primacy of experienced time and the image, at the same time as he rejected
orthodox critical theory. 51 *Der junge Mann* is only ever a highly ironized
*Bildungsroman*. Still, the concerns of incest and inheritance remain key moments in
his prose. In the same essay, *Anschwellender Bocksgesang* in which he dams the
entirety of the German post-war intelligentsia and in particular the liberals of the 1968
generation, Botho Strauß makes of German guilt a genealogical, inherited curse:

> Eine über das Menschenmaß hinausgehende Schuld wird nicht durch moralische
Schaam oder staatsbürgerliche Gedenkstunden über ein paar Generationen ‘abgearbeitet’. Sie wird den Nachlebenden vielmehr zum Verhängnis in der sakralen
Dimension des Wortes, indem sie ihr geschichtliches und gesellschaftliches Leben auf
Dauer entstellt. 52

Sebald’s discussion of guilt avoids the mythologisation and associated revanchism of
Strauß, but he comes close to an absolutist idea of German history when, for example,
he says of himself,

> Theoretisch könnte ich schon seit Jahren einen britischen Paß haben. Aber ich wurde
in einen bestimmten historischen Kontext hineingeboren, und ich habe nicht wirklich
die Wahl. 53

Free choice, the defining moment of the bourgeois individual, and the de facto
freedom to take on British identity after living in Britain for thirty years, are denied
him, Sebald implies, by virtue of the monolithic curse of German history and identity.

51 Leslie A. Adelson, *Crisis of Subjectivity. Botho Strauß’s Challenge to West German Prose of the
1970’s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1984), note to p. 144, on pp. 176-7. Here, Adelson also notes Strauß’s
early admiration for Foucault.


1.3.3 Enfants terribles and Alt-68-er

In terms of his literary biography, Sebald differs from Handke and Strauß due to his much delayed, more mature, and less controversial debut as an author. While Sebald completed a reasonably conventional, if peripatetic, apprenticeship as an academic, before starting to publish literary works in his forties, already as young men in the 1960s Strauß and Handke were literary poster-children for their rebellious generation. All three writers reported common experiences of growing up in post-war Germany, particularly the experience of being ‘babies of American culture’, whose main cultural reference points, during their childhood, were those of American popular culture rather than the German culture in which they grew up. Thus, Sebald writes that he went so far as to have a phase of ‘imaginary Americanisation of his person,’ caused, he claims, by the derogatory remarks about the American occupying forces passed by his relatives. These claimed that American morals were unworthy of a victorious nation:

Die Weiber gingen in Hosen herum und warfen ihre lippenstiftverschmierten Zigarettenkippen einfach auf die Straße, die Männer hatten die Füße auf dem Tisch [...] und was man von den Negern halten sollte, das wußte sowieso kein Mensch. Gerade diese abschätzig-berällzigen Bemerkungen sind es gewesen, die mich damals bestärkten in meiner Sehnsucht nach dem einzigen Ausland, von dem ich überhaupt eine Ahnung hatte. (DA 102)

A passion for the popular culture of America served as a resistance against the defeated, conservative culture of Sebald’s parents: moreover, all three writers, in adulthood, turned to Romanticism and linguistic conservatism in their later writings, a literary-political turn that can be read in part as a dialectical reversal of this rebellious childhood Americanophilia. Strauß, more vehemently than either other writer, later condemned his early love for American popular culture in aesthetic terms:

Ich hatte keine schlampige Sprache zu Hause gehört. Ich habe mich dem allerdings widersetzt und lange den Mist hochgehalten, der mir gefiel.55

55 Volker Hage, ‘Schreiben ist eine Séance’, Strauß Lesen, p. 199.
Although all three writers shared the generational experience of the disruptions caused by Germany’s defeat in the war and the subsequent occupation – both Strauß and Handke moved, as very young children, away from the Russian-occupied zone to the West[^56] – their biographies are of course not identical, and the use of a generational matrix to compare and interpret their work should not be seen as an attempt to elide the very different personal, professional, national and class elements in their three biographies.[^57] In the next sections, I provide very brief sketches of the biographies of the three writers in a 1968 generational context.

**a Sebald: (Auto)biography as allegory**

As Sebald presented his own biographical trajectory in interview, it was marked by moments by which the post-war generation typically defined itself: a childhood spent with an estranged father who returned from the war but refused to talk about Nazi crimes after the war. Sebald repeatedly emphasized the fact that his father had, as he saw it, socially and financially profited from Nazi crimes:

> My parents came from working-class, small-peasant, farm-labourer backgrounds, and had made the grade during the fascist years; my father came out of the army as a captain [...] It was that social stratum where the so-called conspiracy of silence was at its most present.[^58]

The only inherited transmission which the young Sebald reports receiving from this father is his father’s albums, which

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[^57]: One of the most significant differences must be seen in the class differences between the (petit-)bourgeois backgrounds of Strauß and Sebald as against the bitterly poor childhood of Handke. ‘[I]ch [bin] überhaupt nicht so aufgewachsen [...] … daß die Kindheit nie – wieder sind wir bei der Kultur – mit Büchern eigentlich nichts zu tun hatte… daß die Eltern überhaupt das nicht wollten, daß ich lese, oder nur heimlich die Mutter einen so ein bißchen unterstützte… daß da auch kein Haus war: Wo man auch lesen wollte, war man im Weg.’ Handke, *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen*, p. 189.

had photographs of the Polish campaign of 1939, first with a ‘boy-scout atmosphere’ and culminating in razed villages. But the images seemed ‘normal’ to Sebald as a child.\(^5^9\)

In his fictional works, he shows little of Handke’s empathy for his parents’ impoverished rural background, instead remarking caustically, in *Schwindel.Gefühle*, that after their ‘in certain respects difficult youth,’ the ability to purchase a respectable set of living room furniture must have seemed like a sign of divine justice, the mark that they had entered into the bourgeois sphere (SG 210). Typically for a member of the ‘second generation,’ Sebald claims that that he had to undertake the task of overturning the ‘normality’ of his parents’ discourse himself. In his account, his biography follows a pattern common to the 1968 generation. A childhood otherwise marked by silence about the past and a focus on familial prosperity was nonetheless overshadowed by a village cross that commemorated those who fell in the ‘last battle’ of April 1945 (SG 198); a perfunctory classroom viewing of a film of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen was followed by the shock of discovering the full extent of the Nazi genocide when the Auschwitz trials of 1965\(^6^0\) opened while Sebald was at university. His university years also led him to a commitment to the influential Frankfurt school of thought\(^6^1\) that marked his generation, with its dialectical thesis that capitalism had inevitably led to fascism. In his doctoral thesis on Sternheim, as in many of his later academic writings, he revolted against a previous generation’s ‘orthodoxe[ ] deutsche[ ] Germanistik’ – ‘eine[ ] Literaturkritik, die über keinerlei begriffliche Grundlagen außerhalb des herrschenden Systems verfügt.’\(^6^2\)

Sebald implies that the hermetic principles of a previous generation’s methodology reflect the poisonous combination of a complacent conservatism and a lack of self-critical reflection that he believed polluted post-war Germany. Instead, the mode of analysis that Sebald favoured in his doctoral thesis, which programmatically affirms

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\(^5^9\) Maya Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’.

\(^6^0\) Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’.

\(^6^1\) Sebald’s masters’s thesis, *Carl Sternheim: Kritiker und Opfer der Wilhelmminischen Ära* states his affiliation to a sociological-psychological methodology, and to a therapeutic function for literature.

\(^6^2\) *Sternheim*, p. 15.

\(^6^3\) *Sternheim*, p. 17.
the truth of dialectical thought, and emphasises socio-psychological methods, clearly leans on orthodox Frankfurt-school critical theory:

Wenn es im Werk eines Autors Widersprüchlichkeiten gibt, die sich [nicht] als Pole eines dialektischen oder paradoxen Modells bestimmen lassen, so sieht man sich [...] auf außerliterarische Mittel verwiesen. Diese Mittel können biographischer, psychologischer sowie soziologischer Art sein.\(^{64}\)

His generational revulsion at all things associated with the German nation eventually led him to permanent self-chosen exile in England – a choice which he described, in interview, as an ethical commitment to existential exile and rejection of his home nation, but which, Fuchs rightly points out, can in no way be compared to the forced exile of intellectuals from Nazi Germany, but rather reflects the usual career path of the post-world-war-II geographically mobile academic.\(^{65}\) Despite these shared experiences with other left-wing Germans of his generation, Sebald rarely explicitly associates himself with his age cohort, or with the political events of his lifetime: the events of the seventeenth, nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century dominate his narratives, even those which directly feature the first-person Sebaldian narrator.

**b Handke: pop icon**

Handke, who had already been portrayed in pop-art form on the cover of *Manuskripte* in 1966, notoriously exploded onto the German literary scene at a conference of the literary *Gruppe 47* in Princeton in April 1966, where he accused the assembled company of suffering from ‘Beschreibungsimpotenz.’ He thereby declared (literary) war on the establishment authors of the previous generation; an explicitly Oedipal attack that was, as his biographer Georg Pichler dryly describes, a ‘Tabubruch im jahrelang erprobten Ritus’.\(^{66}\) The Princeton intervention was followed by the success

\(^{64}\) *Sternheim*, p. 19.

\(^{65}\) Fuchs, *Die Schmerzesspuren der Geschichte*, p. 11.

\(^{66}\) Georg Pichler, *Die Beschreibung des Glücks: Peter Handke: Eine Biographie* (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 2002), p. 71. Pichler’s description of the event includes extracts from contemporary newspaper reports of the intervention which, intriguingly, frequently described Handke as a girl – a classic insult levelled at long-haired men of Handke’s generation, but also, perhaps, an attempted emasculation of the young upstart by the literary establishment of the previous generation. In his native Graz, his long hair caused him to be banned from local pubs (p. 80).
of his play *Publikumbeschimpfung* in July 1966, which radically questioned the language and mores of the *Bildungsbürgertum* who make up theatre audiences. Thereafter, he was frequently referred to as a ‘Beatle’ of German literature, a young author who determined or was enslaved by the *Zeitgeist*, the very exemplar of his rebellious generation.67

His next play, *Kaspar*, became a key text that informed the linguistic scepticism of the 1968 generation of writers, including Sebald and Strauß, who both wrote early essays on the play. (Strauß’s first reactions were cool: he distances himself from the political readers of the play who see in it a call to anarchy, and while acknowledging the artistry of the play, considers that

Handkes Abschied vom Imitationstheater [...] bedeutet ja schließlich, daß jene für alles bisherige Theater maßgebliche Spannung zwischen Gezeigtem und Verborgenen, Fingiertem und Tatsächlichem, jenes Trugspiel von zweierlei Wirklichkeiten verschwunden ist.)68

In the turbulent summer of 1968 Handke participated in counter-cultural ‘happenings’ in Paris and aligned himself with the rebellious student movement. In 1973, though, he left Germany for Paris and, with intermittent breaks, has remained there: his physical retreat from the politicized German literary world coincided with the creation, in feuilletonistic discourse, of a new movement in German and Austrian literature denominated ‘Neue Subjektivität.’ The critic Karen Ruoff Kramer deftly diagnoses the emergence of the discourse of ‘new subjectivity’ as a sign of a *Feuilleton-driven Tendenzwende,*69 in which the German literary establishment

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67 The Beatles remained a reference point for him long after their break-up, and indeed long after he had ceased to be classed as a pop author; in 1999 he wrote a tale, ‘Lucie im Wald mit den Dingsda,’ taking for its title figure the girl with kaleidoscope eyes, Lucy in the sky with diamonds. Peter Handke, *Lucie im Wald mit den Dingsda: eine Geschichte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999).


69 Kramer also explores the discursive creation and deployment of the word *Tendenzwende*, itself no more a transparent and uncontroversial signifier than *Neue Subjektivität*. In interview fifteen years later, when asked whether he felt that the words ‘Neue Innerlichkeit’ had anything to do with him, Handke replied that he also felt it was merely a faddish term, ‘Ich glaub, das hat doch jeder vergessen. […]
became wary of the critique of the culture industry formulated by the Frankfurt School, of the rejection of bourgeois literature, and of the student movement itself.

‘New Subjectivity’ was in effect a discursive signal for calling off a literary-cultural tendency, not a coherent designation for the literature which was supposed to supplant it.

Following his move to Paris, Handke’s subsequent works were eagerly assimilated to this tendency, celebrated by some critics for his return to what was later named ‘neo-Romanticism’ and condemned by others as having betrayed the demands of a revolutionary poetics. Dorothee Fuß has noted that his “unzeitgemäße[s] Vokabular, anti-emanzipatorische[s] Pathos und gar religiöse[ ] Reminiszenzen” have been calling forth outrage in critics since, in 1979, he opened his new literary programme with *Langsame Heimkehr*. The director Luc Bondy, a friend of both Handke’s and Strauß’s, calls Handke the teacher of an entire generation, who showed how to see the metaphysics and poetics of a landscape: precisely because of this pedagogical role, perhaps, his later interventions on behalf of Serbia, in the 1990s, were received with outrage. Nonetheless, Handke remains a figure of considerable stature among his literary peers and contemporaries; Elfriede Jelinek, for example, remains one of his staunchest defenders.

**c Strauß: Romantic of the electronic revolution**

Botho Strauß, too, has fulfilled a role as a paradigmatic artist of his generation throughout his career: for the past thirty years, he has been increasingly depicted as the primary outsider of German literature. Already as a student in Cologne and Munich, he became involved in avant-garde theatre and wrote theatre reviews for *Theater heute*, including several on Handke. In 1970, the director Peter Stein brought him to work at the newly founded Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer, where he began

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to produce his own works besides producing the plays of others. Although his works were also labelled as part of the ‘Neue Subjektivität’ movement, in 1977, in *Die Widmung*, he articulated a criticism of the concept of the self-identical, autonomously writing subject that, while informed by structuralism, has also been read as post-modern.  

*Die Widmung* was, at the same time, enormously popular—it went into its third printing six weeks after its initial publication—and despite the accusations of ‘negativity’ levelled at him by some critics of the 1970s (particularly Gerhard vom Hofe and Peter Pfaff in *Das Elend des Polyphem*), Strauß’s novel of alienation, abandonment and an attempt to construct an aesthetically adequate way of addressing that abandonment—of, to a certain extent, recreating elective affinities—clearly still spoke to a large section of his generation. After all, the protagonist Schroubek’s crisis of subjectivity is, in part, attributed to his politically impotent father, who taught him to curse the Nazis, but never to undertake any politically constructive action against them.

Since the mid-nineties, the controversy surrounding Strauß’s neo-conservatism, though not forgotten, has abated as warm reviews of his more recent novels and plays, such as *Die Nacht mit Alice, als Julia ums Haus schlich* have to some extent welcomed him back to the bosom of journalistic and academic favour. A recent *Festschrift*, published in honour of Strauß’s sixtieth birthday, contained homages ranging in tone from the adulatory to the sexually obsessive, from an impressive array of artists and critics; in several quarters, Strauß has not only been made respectable once more, but appears to be on the way to becoming a grand old man of German letters. Now as then, Strauß is read as a representative of his generation. Jan Eckhoff describes his early works as being exemplary for a member of the 1968 generation.

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75 Adelson cites Marcel Reich-Ranicki hoping that Strauß will write “der Roman seiner Generation”. Adelson, *Crisis of Subjectivity*, p. 138.


struggling as he does both with the conservative social climate and with the realistic forms of the Neue Volksstück.⁷⁹ Even thirty years later, on the basis of these plays, depicting the isolation of the subject and the corresponding autonomy of the object, Thomas Hürlimann considers Strauß to be comparable to Carl Sternheim as ‘der Arzt am Leib seiner Zeit’; he claims that Strauß has accompanied him on his journey from alienated student to older man, looking for the light that Strauß causes to appear in the encroaching darkness of our times.⁸⁰ In the same Festschrift, Carl Hegemann constructs a ‘rebellion’ narrative for Strauß when he writes how Die Widmung was originally, and wrongly, received as a work of revolutionary art, that depicted social reality in a socialist form, and how, after the appearance of ‘Gross und Klein’ in 1978, Peter Handke and Botho Strauß were seen as the last ‘genuine playwrights,’ who were also considered revolutionary by the social revolutionaries.⁸¹ He concludes that the fashionable left-wingers were wrong in their analysis, and the apparently contemporary element in Strauß’s early work is merely the historically coincidental background, a theory supported by Leslie Adelson as early as 1984.⁸² Adelson’s thesis is that Strauß’s prose is an heir to the student revolt in that it addresses a dilemma which that movement was unable to resolve and which ultimately contributed to its demise. At the heart of this dilemma is the capacity of language to oppress as well as to liberate.⁸³ Although she rejects the categorisation of Strauß as a writer of Neue Subjektivität, she does nonetheless locate his early prose in the ‘wasteland between subjective experience of the moment and generalized conceptual systems’,⁸⁴ and describes his

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⁷⁹ Jan Eckhoff, Der junge Botho Strauß: Literarische Sprache im Zeitalter der Medien (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1999), p. 8. Eckhoff considers Strauß’s role as outsider to be primarily one that operates in defiant opposition to a media-saturated culture and language.

⁸⁰ Thomas Hürlimann, ‘Der Dichter meiner Generation’, in Unüberwindliche Nähe, pp. 84-86, p. 84.


⁸² In this essay, Hegemann subsequently comes to the rather extraordinary conclusion that Strauß is, in fact, one of the thirty-six just men who are found in each generation, as foreseen in Kabbalist lore. See also, for a less hyperbolic analysis, Adelson, Crisis of subjectivity, pp. 3 ff. Adelson’s account here also contains a comprehensive history of the literature of the student movement.

⁸³ Adelson, Crisis of subjectivity, p. 4.

⁸⁴ Adelson, Crisis of subjectivity, p. 63.
aesthetic project in the 1970s as an attempt to mediate between present and past, his writing and literary tradition, language and the experience of the present. Such a historicising view was also supported by Klaus Peter, who in an August review in 1986 considered Strauß’s and Handke’s neo-Romanticism to spring from the disillusions of 1968, just as the Romanticism of Novalis sprung from the disillusions following the French Revolution of 1789.

**d Father Adorno: critical theory**

All three authors were educated in and profoundly influenced by the dialectical theories of the Frankfurt School. After the 1960s, though, all three departed from the more conventional left-wing ‘engaged’ path taken by other contemporary German novelists, notably Günter Grass. Sebald left Germany for Switzerland and then England; if this was not necessarily the ‘retreat into the private sphere’ of which German writers in the early 1970s were often accused, it certainly mirrors the disengagement of Strauß and Handke from the German public sphere and, in particular, the student movement, at the same time. Handke left the German-speaking countries for Paris. Nonetheless, he still considered his project close to Walter Benjamin: ‘Würde das Wünschen helfen, so wäre folgendes mein Wunsch: eine Wiederholung, eine Erneuerung, eine Wiederbelebung der Haltung Walter Benjamins’.

By 1970, although he remained in Germany, Strauß had become critical of the revolutionary aesthetic professed by his generation. The Frankfurt School nonetheless remained as a persistent presence in Strauß’s later work: in interview in 1980, he admitted

> In meiner intellektuellen Erziehung hat halt die dialektische Schule eine große Rolle gespielt. Man las alles von Benjamin und verschaffte sich mit einem Zitat das

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85 Adelson, *Crisis of subjectivity*, pp. 63-64.
87 *Beschreibung des Glücks*, p. 110. Handke cited, among other reasons for the move, his desire to have his daughter educated in the French, not the German school system.
entsprechende Fluidum. Aus dieser Schulung bin ich nie herausgetreten und werde da wahrscheinlich auch nie herauskommen.\textsuperscript{89}

This ‘Schulung’ was evident in the first text he authored, a story called ‘Schützenlehre’, written in 1963, in which he distanced himself from the undialectical, moralising views of Böll and Grass.\textsuperscript{90} Later, though, in 1986, in a key essay on Dieter Sturm, he decried what he considered to have become an establishment left-wing orthodoxy:

Die Anti-Haltung, der tief eingeimpfte, unüberwindliche Affekt der ersten Protestgeneration, wandert durch die persönliche Gemütsgeschichte, kehrt sich gegen die eigenen Anfänge und erhält sich schließlich als eine antirevolutionäre.\textsuperscript{91}

With savage irony, he at once mocks and acknowledges the role in re-educating the public conscience and reformulating German subjectivity that his generation undertook:

Er wie wir alle gehört schließlich mit zu den Erfindern des Zeitalters der Jugendlichkeit, diesem einzigen Hort des guten deutschen Gewissens, den wir schon deshalb nicht mehr verlassen können.\textsuperscript{92}

In the same essay, he also articulates a characteristic belief that ‘Kunst ist nicht für alle da’, and suggested that the esoteric and hidden, rather than the mediated and rebellious, may be the way of art in the future. In Paare, Passanten, the publication in which Strauß paid a firm farewell to urbane modernity, and to traditional identity, he paid homage to Adorno’s death while proclaiming, ‘Ohne Dialektik denken wir auf Anhieb dümmer: aber es muss sein: ohne sie!’\textsuperscript{93} Thereafter his thought moved, under the influence of Lévi-Strauss, in a structuralist direction.

Bude theorises that the 1968 student movement was far less one of libidinous liberation than the parallel movements in Paris or the U.S., that it was rather marked by guilt and a ‘laming fixation’ with the history of their parents’ generation.\textsuperscript{94} Thus,

\textsuperscript{89} Volker Hage, ‘Schreiben ist eine Séance,’ in Strauß lesen, p. 199.
\textsuperscript{90} Eckhoff, Der junge Botho Strauß, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{91} Versuch, ästhetische und politische Ereignisse zusammenzudenken, p. 251.
\textsuperscript{92} Versuch, ästhetische und politische Ereignisse zusammenzudenken, p. 254.
\textsuperscript{94} Bude, Bilanz der Nachfrage, pp. 88-9.
Introduction

unlike Handke’s and Strauß’s, Sebald’s analysis of German repression and trauma remains indebted to the tendentious psychoanalytical model propounded by the Mitscherlichs. His works, after he had left Germany in 1969, ceased to register any consciousness of the literary *Feuilleton* debates over the discourse of the past that raged in the decades of his self-imposed exile. Thus in 1983, he wrote programmatically:


Sebald’s generational vocabulary is one that centres on the terms of collective repression, collective guilt and the need for melancholy as a site of resistance. Astonishingly, in a footnote to this essay, Sebald remarks that the Morgenthau plan (to completely de-industrialise post-war Germany) would have fulfilled Robert Burton’s bleak description of the melancholy State, which ‘alsdann wahrscheinlich recht genau auf Deutschland gepaßt [hätte],’ and which would have, according to the Mitscherlich model espoused by Sebald, led to a phase of collective melancholy that would have purged Germany of its collective guilt (CS 102, and footnote). The profound changes in German public discourse that came with the *Historikerstreit* and re-unification do not seem to have modified his essentially oppositional understanding of the need for remembrance. Ten years later, he reiterated the same assertion that Germany was pathologically incapable of acknowledging its past: in response to the interviewer’s remark that he came from a left-wing SPD family which had no cause to reproach itself with anti-Semitism, he replied that his parents’ generation nonetheless partook in the common sin of guilt and repression: ‘Trotzdem hat mich immer gewundert, mit welcher Perfektion diese Generation imstande war, den Holocaust aus ihrem Gedächtnis zu eliminieren’. ⁹⁵ Indeed, in another interview in the same year, he dismisses the reunification of Germany in orthodox Marxist terms:

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Introduction

Das hatte mit Politik wenig zu tun. Es war zunächst ein Wirtschaftsphänomen, daß halt das Geld, das hier im Westen in großen Mengen in den Kellern lag, schließlich die Mauer unterspült hat.\(^6\)

To the accusation that this dialectical analysis of recent history ‘klingt irgendwie naive und antiquiert,’ he retorted, ‘Ich bemängele nicht, ich konstatiere nur: Das ist so.’\(^7\)

Sebald remained true to a Frankfurt School-inflected reading of history that, by 1993, had itself fossilized into a backward, inflexible ideology.

1.3.4 Lange Zeit: Strauß and Sebald

The following two sections outline the value of comparing Sebald’s work to that of Strauß and of Handke. While Sebald’s writing both follows and is in places a homage to Handke’s, an uncanny similarity between his approach to the persistence of the past in his works and in Strauß’s also reveals itself on a closer comparative reading. While Handke’s poetic project has, increasingly, become that of a ‘Beschreibung des Glücks,’ as Pichler calls it, of celebration of the present moment, both Sebald and Strauß, during the late 1980s and 1990s, were preoccupied in different ways with the problems of cultural amnesia and the concomitant responsibility of the poet to encode remembrance and memory in their texts. For Sebald, the memories that he seeks to retrieve in his poetics are most frequently those of private lives and tragedies erased by the destructive progress of history. Strauß similarly diagnoses a fatal cultural amnesia in contemporary Germany, but does not rely on the psychoanalytic model of repression used by Sebald; instead, throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, he increasingly affiliated himself with a conservative (or neo-conservative) line of German writers who decried the losses and ruptures with the mythical past inherent in modernity. Although the motivations for his cultural elitism and nostalgia are different to those of Sebald, Strauß is as inimical to the progress of modernity as is Sebald, and like Sebald, his prose evinces a fastidious distaste for the media-saturated culture of contemporary Germany and America. Thus, throughout the 1980s, Strauß’s prose sought to reclaim myth from its appropriation by fascism, to reconnect to what he described as the ‘long time’ of myth without resorting to a rejectionist anti-

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technologism. The enthusiasm that he developed for a scientific poetics has often been described as neo-Romantic. The critic Sigrid Berka describes this project, expressed through the means of allegory, as a model to negate the ideological post-modern strategies of forgetting.\(^{98}\) The areas in which Strauß’s work of the late 1980s and early 1990s are particularly relevant to my reading of Sebald can be listed under three headings: his rage against cultural amnesia and critique of the persistence of Nazism in contemporary Germany, his longing for a ‘lange Zeit’ that overcomes the rupture between modernity and premodernity – indeed annihilates the linear meaning of time altogether – and his desire to reconnect to myth, which, in Der junge Mann, appears as a series of symbols and rites from an irrational era, but which increasingly, in his works throughout the 1980s, began to appear as an ominously nationalistic myth of German identity.

While Strauß’s gnomic and elitist tone when discussing the decadence of modern society and its detachment from the mythical or poetic past differs from the elegiac tone that Sebald uses – at least in his poetic fiction, if not in his critical writings and in interview, where he is rather more vehement – the cultural nostalgia that in part informs Strauß’s attacks on contemporary German society does share some similar elements to Sebald’s own diagnosis. His might perhaps be diagnosed as a right-wing melancholy, to set alongside Sebald’s left-wing melancholy: Hubert Winkels suggests that Strauß and Handke both begin their poetic projects from this melancholic point of return:


In Der junge Mann, Strauß’s search for lost time is less a search for traces and more a desire to reconnect to a mythical time that has been lost, with the eventual aim of

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reviving the present, a project of restoration which he likens to Herder and Schlegel’s ‘universal poesy’.  

100 Thus, like Sebald, he aims for a Proustian recovery, but in his later work *Beginnlosigkeit*  

101 says that this Proust must restore the present as much as the past:

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\text{Es verlangte einen Proust der Vergegenwärtigung, um den ganzen Umfang der Anwesenheit zu erspüren, festzuhalten, was nie war, und nur für die Dauer der Erkenntnis ist.} \]

102 Nonetheless, he makes explicit the nostalgia that in part informs this project

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\text{Der anthropologischen Kondition des ewig Gestrigen entspricht seine Sage vom Goldenen Zeitalter, das mythische Einstweh, die Konstruktionen des Ersten und Anfanglichen sowie eine Weltgeschichte, die ihren Tatendurst aus der Verherrlichung einer besseren Vergangenheit empfängt. Es ist ein Urvermissen in alledem ausgedrückt.} \]

103 The myth of a golden age is one step in Strauß’s progression to a ‘steady state’ of *Beginnlosigkeit*, but a necessary one; his fictional deployment of this myth uses literary tropes, such as that of the primeval wood or of the debased modern street, that also appear in Sebald’s work. A comparison between the two, then, can help to point at those moments in Sebald’s work that mourn not only historical injustices, but also the loss of both a mythical golden age and a mythical previous standard of cultural education. Strauß shares with Sebald a complex, ironic relation to the literary traditions that preceded and surrounded him, and as with Sebald, tracing these intertextual references leads into an almost never-ending labyrinth of literature. As does Sebald, Strauß picks his literary elective affinities fastidiously, seeking legitimation for his project from a lineage of congenial and esoteric authors. Strauß is self-confessedly elitist in both in his selection of congenial authors and in his selection of readers. Sebald’s work nowhere explicitly excludes its readers, but in its densely intertextual networks and its profound erudition, it makes appeal to an audience who must necessarily be conversant in a German tradition of letters, which is itself steeped


102 Strauß, *Beginnlosigkeit*, p. 78.

103 Strauß, *Beginnlosigkeit*, p. 82.
in the philosophy of metaphysics; an audience which is gebildet in all the complex and often outmoded senses of that loaded term. As Schedel’s study of intertextuality in Sebald’s writings, ‘Wer weiß, wie es vor Zeiten gewesen ist?’ notes, Sebald’s dense web of intertextuality necessarily excludes those with a lesser level of education than the author himself from a certain reception of the text.

Es gibt zahlreiche Beispiele in Literatur und Kunst, in denen ein Autor oder Künstler durch Verzicht auf explizite Markierung [of intertexts, HF] auf eine bestimmte Schicht der potentiellen Leserschaft zielt und deshalb beim derart angesprochenen Rezipientenkreis die Fähigkeit, eine latent vorhandene Interferenz zwischen aufnehmenden und eingelagerten Text zu aktualisieren, voraussetzt.104

In Strauß, this cultural nostalgia and intellectual elitism is coupled with a vehement rejection of the ideologies of 1968 – as Monika Ritzer summarises,

Auch der Soziozentrismus der 68-er erhebt die Nivellierung zum Prinzip, sei es in der alles vereinheitlichenden ‘Frage nach den gesellschaftlichen Ursachen’ (PP 56) oder in der Utopien einer solidarisierten Menschheit. Und nivellierend wirkt letztlich die gesamte ‘liberal-demokratische Einrichtung’, die in ihrer ‘kulturellen Egalität […] jedem Ding gleichen Erscheinungswert zubilligt’ (PP 196) […].105

Again, Sebald nowhere rails against the legacy of liberalism, and mostly confines his critiques of contemporary Germany to the left-wing and slightly platitudinous. (I deal with the political engagement of the two writers in more detail in the conclusion to this thesis.) Yet Strauß’s perhaps more extreme example demonstrates the broader cultural context in which Sebald’s work can be read: as part of a wider aesthetic retreat from the engaged literature of the 1960s, and even the ‘new subjectivity’ of the 1970s, into a rarefied engagement with the German past, not merely in historical but also in cultural terms. Despite the postmodern epithets occasionally applied to him, Sebald’s self-imposed exile from Germany was also, in part, an exile from the postmodern age.

1.3.5 Metaphysical poets: Handke and Sebald

By 1991 (the year in which *Unheimliche Heimat* was published), Handke was a writer with an increasingly controversial but longstanding reputation. Unlike his explicit references to his chosen literary forefathers such as Kafka or Grillparzer, Sebald’s intertextual relationship with Handke is, in his fiction, implicit. Sebald published essays on Handke throughout the course of his academic career, marking the shifts in his intellectual preoccupations, from the tyranny of instrumental language (on Handke’s *Kaspar*, 1975\(^\textsuperscript{106}\)), to psychological disintegration and eschatology\(^\textsuperscript{107}\) in his essays on *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* and *Langsame Heimkehr* in the collection *Beschreibung des Unglücks*, published in 1985, and then to the discontents of Austrian *Heimat* discourse, in *Unheimliche Heimat*, published in 1991.\(^\textsuperscript{108}\) Although Handke is Sebald’s near-contemporary, Sebald emphasises that Handke is ‘over the border’ for him: in a literal sense, the geographical border between Austria and Germany over which Handke was born appears as a poetic division between them.\(^\textsuperscript{109}\) He implies that Handke and he are the inheritors of discrete literary traditions, which seems to make them members of two different tribes, despite the circumstance that they are members of the same generation, who grew up in a very similar Alpine environment. Peter Handke, born in provincial Austria in 1942, is Sebald’s near-contemporary, and after the age of four was also raised in a small-town, conservative, Catholic environment, in the Austrian Alps. In a more metaphorical sense, Sebald argued that Handke, among other Austrian writers of his generation, transgressed borders of traditional *Heimat* discourse in his literature:

\(^{106}\) ‘Fremdheit, Integration und Krise. Über Peter Handkes Stück *Kaspar’*, in CS pp. 57-68


Sebald is here referring to the Grazer Autorenversammlung, founded in 1972 by those young left-wing Austrian authors who felt themselves to be without literary antecedents, and who in particular felt excluded by the reactionary tendencies of the P.E.N. club, which had protested when the Nobel prize for literature was awarded to the 'terrorists' friend' Heinrich Böll. Like Sebald, Handke reported a generational experience of revulsion against his teachers:

Handke continues to say that his revulsion against the teacher was so great that he also transferred it onto Nietzsche. Nonetheless, unlike Sebald, Handke did not become obsessed with expiating Nazi guilt in his creative work. Thus, Handke's early novel Wünschloses Unglück is a poetic reworking of his mother's biography: here, Handke describes the Nazi régime in Austria as a structure that gave meaning to her otherwise bleak and isolated life in the provinces:

In the novel, Handke offers no explicit judgment on his mother's positive reception of Nazi ideology. Sebald, by contrast, in an essay on Graz literature, suggests that

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11 Pichler, Die Beschreibung des Glücks, p. 106.
13 Peter Handke, Wünschloses Unglück (Frankfurt am Main: suhrkamp, 1984), pp 22-23.
**Wünschloses Unglück** demonstrates a position of ‘exemplarische[ ] Detachement’.\(^{114}\) He himself judges Handke’s mother’s generation of provincial Austrians much more harshly, suggesting that, rather than being innocent dupes of Hitler, it was precisely the ‘ländliche Bevölkerung’ who were responsible for incubating and perpetuating fascism in their homes.

Der faschistische Terror war von Anfang an mit Familie und Heimat verbunden gewesen und dort, im sogenannten Schoß der Familie und in der heimatlichen Enge hielt er sich auch weit über seine Zeit hinaus.\(^{115}\)

At the same time, he privileges Handke’s generation of Austrian writers as one with an exceptional ethical sensitivity, dialectically developed in response to their parents’ crimes:

Das genaue Gewissen, das die während des Kriegs geborenen Schriftsteller, jenseits alles kurrenten Engagements, aus diesen Deformationen sich machten, war das Gegenteil der seelischen Indifferenz der Generation der Eltern.\(^{116}\)

Shame at the crimes of their parents, Sebald suggests, offers Handke’s generation little refuge but a ‘stumme Abseits,’ which leads to a generational shared experience of ‘Sprachlosigkeit, Sprachfindung und Sprachverlust’.\(^{117}\) These themes are indeed central not only to *Die Wiederholung*, but also to *Austerlitz*.

In his fiction, Sebald does not go searching for lost traces of Handke the author, who belongs to his own generation: instead, *Die Wiederholung*, as well as Handke’s earlier novellas *Langsame Heimkehr* and *Die Lehre der Saint-Victoire* are ghostly companions to parts of Sebald’s work, flickering in and out of his narratives like the lost brother Gregor Kobal in *Die Wiederholung*. By tracing the references and relationships to Handke’s work in *Austerlitz*, I reveal new aspects of Sebald’s treatment of those metaphysical and psychological concerns common to both writers. Further, I show that the implicit transformations that Sebald performs upon these themes in *Austerlitz*, and the explicit analysis that he conducts in his critical essays, reveal an affective commitment to ideas of post-religious redemption, utopia and

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\(^{114}\) ‘Damals vor Graz’, p. 136.

\(^{115}\) ‘Damals vor Graz’, p. 135.

\(^{116}\) ‘Damals vor Graz’, p. 133.

\(^{117}\) ‘Damals vor Graz’, p. 136.
homosocial love rather stronger than that explicitly constructed through an ‘aesthetics of approximation’ in his poetic texts. I claim that this intertextual love extends to Handke himself, for, notwithstanding the vast body of secondary literature that already existed on Handke, Sebald claims, as he does for Kafka, a privileged understanding of Handke as a ‘metaphysical’ writer whose works have been so grievously misunderstood as to have almost disappeared under the weight of uncomprehending criticism. He continues:

Es gibt offensichtlich heute kein Diskursverfahren mehr, in dem Metaphysik noch einen Platz beanspruchen dürfte. Und doch hat Kunst, wo und wann immer sie sich wirklich ereignet, zum Bereich der Metaphysik den engsten Bezug. (UH 163)\(^{118}\)

Sebald here at once rejects the critical practice of his Germanist colleagues, suggesting that they have forgotten the truly metaphysical nature of art, and aligns himself with an esoteric reading of Handke. In doing so, he at once dissociates himself from his own generation of critics and aligns himself with what he diagnoses as Handke’s true artistic practice.

In 1975, Sebald’s essay ‘Fremdheit, Integration und Krise. Über Peter Handkes Stück Kaspar’\(^{119}\) outlines and affirms the anti-rationalist aspects of the play. It declares – in true 1970s style – that Handke’s play demonstrates the paralytic confrontation between the desire to communicate and the inadequacy of language to articulate


\(^{119}\) CS. 57-68.
meaning; in his concluding sentence, Sebald maintains that literature alone can transcend this dilemma

indem sie der ungesellschaftlichen, verbannten Sprache die Treue hält und die opaken Bilder gebrochener Rebellion einsetzen lernt als Mittel der Kommunikation. (CS 68)

This unsocial language, Sebald says here, is the language of myth, a language which, in subsequent essays, he continues to praise in Handke’s later writings. In an analysis that is not dissimilar to the arguments also made by Foucault in the same year in *Discipline and Punish*, Sebald states that *Kaspar* describes ‘den in vielem trostlosen Versuch der bürgerlichen Verbesserung eines nach dem Maßstab der Allgemeinheit unzivilisierten Individuums’ (CS 58). *Kaspar* depicts the forcible abduction of Kaspar across the boundary of language into the ordered world of bourgeois society. Calling on Nietzsche to help him in his analysis, Sebald writes that Kaspar’s tormentors

neiden ihm das unbeschriebene Leben, das er repräsentiert, sein Vermögen – noch einmal Nietzsche – absolut und ‘unhistorisch zu empfinden.’ (CS 59)

Kaspar’s initial speechlessness places him beyond the sphere of history, bestowing on him instead the rare art of distinguishing between colours in the dark, or hearing wood rotting at a great distance: of an attention, that is, to the inherent, unmediated nature of the object which, in his later prose works, Handke would strive to achieve himself. The imposed process of ‘Sprechfolterung,’ by contrast, drags him into the tragedy of history, and becomes ‘das Zeughaus eines grausamen Instrumentariums’ (CS 63). Language is the brutal tool of enlightenment that divides his subjectivity, mechanises him, makes him endlessly reproducible (CS 66). Sebald’s Romantic conclusion is that a return to a pre-historic, paradisiac language of subjective and poetic wholeness is impossible, but that literature can transcend Kaspar’s dilemma by becoming mythological, invoking the ‘opaken Bilder gebrochener Rebellion’ as a means of communication (CS 68). This essay in some ways provides a bridge between Sebald’s earlier, more polemically Adornian criticism and his later, more eclectic essays, which are suffused with a Benjaminian melancholy that mourns the erasure of the bourgeois past as it mourns the destruction that it has caused, while holding out hope for a redemptive language of poetry.

In 1983, Sebald wrote a characteristically biographical analysis of Handke’s *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter*. While in general he approves of Handke’s sensitive but distanced portrayal of Bloch’s gradual disintegration into schizophrenia, he concludes
the essay by drawing a link between Handke’s pathology of alienation, and Handke’s own bad conscience about his childhood and humble origins.

Blochs ephemerer Ruhm als Torwart, der ihm eine Zeitlang über die Schwierigkeit der Erinnerung hinausgeholfen haben mochte, wäre dann eine Paraphrase des schriftstellerischen Ruhms Peter Handkes. Der arme Schüler aber, der hinter beiden steht, ist die Chiffre eines Bewußtseins das, wie Handke in seinem Journal anmerkte, sich mit dem Gedanken befassen muß, ‘einer unteren Schicht anzugehören, ein unstatthafter Emporkömmling aus gar keinem Milieu zu sein’. (BdU 130)

In 1984, Sebald continued pathologizing Handke in an essay which analyses ‘Helle Bilder und dunkle. Zur Dialektik der Eschatologie bei Stifter und Handke.’ Here, Sebald names Handke as an author who refuses the ‘apokalyptische[ ] Disposition der Jetztzeit’ and the ‘endorientierte Dynamik der erzählerischen Literatur’ (BdU 179) in favour of a ‘Heilsidée,’ an ‘Evangelium der Fälschung,’ as Handke calls Sorger’s aesthetic project in the Langsame Heimkehr (LH 176). This essay, which remains ambivalent in its attitude to Handke’s work, reads the Langsame Heimkehr and Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire as eschatological novels that outline a process of metaphysical redemption – a redemption that, he suggests, is as much to do with appeasing Handke’s bad bourgeois conscience as to do with a truly secular metaphysics. This essay remains close to Handke’s texts and to other critical readings of them, in diagnosing Handke as a neo-romantic, one who seeks – as does Sorger in the Langsame Heimkehr – to practice an aesthetic mode of seeing and, in so doing, to restore the lost mythical cipher-language of a pre-human nature to a disenchanted modern age. Sebald’s reading of Die Wiederholung, published seven years later, departs from the practice of his Germanist colleagues to derive elaborate theological conclusions built around a redemptive messianism, from what, it seems to me, is a much more politically motivated text than Handke’s earlier novellas.

Both Strauß and Handke have been represented as eternal sons: and Sebald, in a sense, is also the ‘eternal son’ of his literary forebears, as well as the brother of his literary contemporaries. How do these eternal sons, then, negotiate cultural transmission without reawakening the spectre of the bourgeois self? Is such a transmission doomed

120 BdU, pp. 165-186.
to end in haunting, fragmentation and apocalypse, or does, indeed, a Romantic poetics serve as a way to redeem this self? These are the questions that I address in the following chapters.
2 Bildungsroman and neo-Romanticism: Austerlitz and Der junge Mann

'Austerlitz gehörte] zu jenem Typus des Junggesellen, an dem etwas von einem Knaben bleibt bis zuletzt' (A 62). Austerlitz was W. G. Sebald’s last novel, and the one whose narrative is most conventionally novelistic, as it is focussed around a single, explicitly fictive, protagonist and employs a biographical structure. The novel narrates the attempts of the eponymous protagonist to construct a coherent autobiography out of the conflicting fragments of personal memory and historical narratives that constituted his childhood self. Jacques Austerlitz is on a futile search for a subjectivity or identity that is viable after the murder of his Jewish family by the Nazis and his enforced exile away from their assimilated Jewish European culture in an isolated, rural Welsh community.

Given this biographical structure and the focus on a search for identity and origins, this chapter reads Austerlitz in the light of the literary tradition of the German Bildungsroman and examines the ways that Sebald constructs and interrogates those fraught categories of identity, origin, tradition, return and Heimat that determine the genre of the Bildungsroman. That genre has of course been problematic and shot through with irony right from its putative origins in Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, and it is not my intention to impose the normative structure of a traditional genre on Austerlitz. Rather, I deploy aspects of the literary and cultural theories that have developed around the discourse of the Bildungsroman since its inception, particularly since Freud’s Oedipus complex has been assimilated to its matrix of models of development, to examine the poetic construct of identity in Austerlitz. The matrix of the Bildungsroman, which traps the nascent bourgeois subject between the twin demands of incest and inheritance, has a relentless vertical logic, positioning the hapless subject at the end of a chain of causality, one whose linear form is dictated by the progressive logic of modernity.

In this chapter, I provide an account of those Bildungsroman theories that view the genre as constructed by a matrix of esoteric and exoteric, inherited and incestuous forces. I summarise both those elements of the Bildungsroman that are present in Austerlitz, and Sebald’s own pedagogical-literary project. I argue that the dialectic of
Enlightenment that is exoterically at work throughout *Austerlitz* traps the Sebaldian subject in a further bind between self-destruction through memory and the obligation to remember. I also demonstrate how Sebald’s usage of dialectical images does not merely reveal history as a negative progression of impersonal forces of destruction, but also that these images contain within them esoteric hopes for escape from this dialectic. These are variously coded as messianic redemption and the uncanny lure of the pre-Oedipal space.

In order to provide a complementary perspective on the transformation of European cultural heritage and the inheritance of the *Bildungsroman* in post-war Germany, I compare *Austerlitz* to Botho Strauß’s 1984 novel *Der junge Mann*. This starts from a similar point of departure to *Austerlitz*’s melancholy project of cultural inheritance by excoriating the propensity of the modern world to forget its origins. It negotiates the *Bildungsroman* tradition by means of the Romantic thematic device of incest, producing a networked, dispersed reception of the *Bildungsroman* model. Particularly, I examine the depiction of the German past and the desire for subjective unity in both texts. Of course, the novels are very different: whereas Sebald’s novel is essentially an Adornian, negative project, Strauß’s is an affirmative, neo-Romantic one. Both novels, while informed by very different political and poetical analyses, express the Romantic yearning for lost unity that is, as Schlaffer suggests, the esoteric content of the *Bildungsroman*. Both structurally and thematically, *Der junge Mann* is a far more explicit transformation of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* than is *Austerlitz*, but poetically reworks many of the same problematic aspects of Bildung. Both novels reject the normative, optimistic ideology that has been seen as the inheritance of Wilhelm Meister, and create instead more fragmented, contingent links to the discourse of Bildung, rejecting any idea of unitary self-identical subjectivity in favour of a dissociated psychology that is allegorized in landscape.

The relationship between *Der junge Mann* and *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, and the *Bildungsroman* tradition in general, has been extensively analysed in several places already, and I do not intend to reproduce the excellent work already done on the topic.¹ Rather, I draw attention to certain specific areas where the incestuous moments

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¹ See, in particular, Marieke Krajenbrink, *Inter textualität als Konstruktionsprinzip. Transformationen des Kriminalromans und des romantischen Romans bei Peter Handke und Botho Strauß* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), and Katharina Strohkirch, *Zum Löwen geboren. Gender in Entwicklungsromanen aus*
of initiation and the negotiation of the legacy both of Enlightenment and of the German past in Der junge Mann parallel similar moments in Austerlitz. By comparing Strauß’s conservative treatment of the Bildung theme to Sebald’s critical one, and by tracing those motifs and debates that are common to Der junge Mann, Austerlitz and Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, not only can the inheritance of the Bildungsroman model in Austerlitz be made more apparent, but also the different ways in which this model has been appropriated at two different points of recent German history.

2.1 Wilhelm Meister and his sons: overview of Bildungsroman theory

The term Bildungsroman has a long and controversial history, and the lively debates surrounding its inception and usage are far too complex to be cursorily summarized here. The most rigorous usages of the term make of it a rigid model that encompasses at the very most six German canonical novels, from Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre to Der Zauberberg, or create a system of micro-categories of the genre that distinguish the category of Bildungsroman from the less august genres of Entwicklungsroman or Reiseroman. In my analysis, the specifically German aspects of the genre are the most productive ones when discussing Austerlitz, in particular its relation to the discourse of Bildung that developed around the period of Weimar classicism and dominated cultural and paedagogical discourses in the nineteenth century. Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre is supposed to be the model of this process of Bildung, a novel that foregrounds a young bourgeois man’s search for self through breaking away from his mercantile family, dabbling in artistic production, becoming seduced by an aristocratic lifestyle, and, in its continuation, Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre, finally finding a sort of identity in fatherhood and the renunciation of his artistic ambitions in favour of a medical career. It is entirely ambiguous whether or not Goethe in fact intended Wilhelm Meister to be an exemplary character – and its plot


contains so many ambiguities, reversals, ironies, digressions and interpolations that it can hardly be said to adhere to a linear model. Thus, the Bildungsroman is from its Goethian inception a genre that is not only always already ironic, but also – in a German-language context – embraces novels that in some way fail to describe a model individual development. Hence, despite the pious hopes of some nineteenth-century theorists, it is not at all a genre that bolsters and models the bourgeois concepts of ideal self-cultivation and assimilation into middle-class society encompassed in the term Bildung, nor does it necessarily contribute to the personal and moral Bildung of the reading subject who follows the protagonist through his process of education, unless it is by refusing to show an ideal path and encouraging the reader to learn from the protagonist’s mistakes. Far more, it reveals the fissures and ruptures that run through the modern bourgeois self, as through modern bourgeois society, even as it describes the protagonist’s attempts to escape that society and instead ascend to the realm of art.

And here we return to those concerns that preoccupy Sebald: the dialectic of Enlightenment; the cruelty caused by the grandiose totalitarian discourses of modernity; the psychological repression and dissociation suffered by individuals living in modern and post-modern societies; and the toll taken on the natural sphere by the progress of industrialisation and by war, processes that in themselves have become ‘second nature’. In a sense, Sebald’s volume of essays Die Beschreibung des Unglücks can be read as a collection of fragments of broken and unsuccessful Bildungsromane, and Unheimliche Heimat as a record of the way in which the concept of a lost or promised home that beckons at the beginning or end of the Bildungsroman narrative is itself a sick and oppressive ideology. As in all of Sebald’s fiction, elements and authors discussed in discursive terms in his academic essays reappear in poetic form in Austerlitz.

Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that the Bildungsroman reappears at times of historical transition, and seeks to find new ways of connecting to a tradition that appears in a new perspective. It is this crisis-driven aspect of the Bildungsroman – its renegotiation of the relationships between Enlightenment and a traditional metaphysical or mythical dimension that it is supposed to have erased – that is of crucial significance when reading Austerlitz. The plot arc of the classical

Bildungsroman is supposed to demonstrate a young man’s self-development, break with his traditional family and reintegration into modern bourgeois society, cemented by founding his own bourgeois nuclear family; but Heinz Schlaffer (who leans in turn on Benjamin’s reading of Die Wahlverwandtschaften⁴) theorises that Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister – and its lineage of Bildungsromane – contain within them an esoteric criticism of that very bourgeois model, together with a hidden mythical or metaphysical dimension that yearns for a pre-modern union with nature and the ineffable.

Austerlitz contains, as many critics have noted,⁵ hopes for a secular redemption, which form a counterpoint to Sebald’s otherwise catastrophic view of history. Yet its esoteric content is not exhausted by this messianic element. Here, Michael Minden’s The German Bildungsroman: Incest and Inheritance,⁶ which views the Bildungsroman as a novel that exoterically negotiates the patriarchal model of inheritance and esoterically clings to a moment of incest, proves fruitful for determining further aspects of Austerlitz’s esoteric content. His model discusses both inheritance in its most literal sense, as the Bildungsroman usually starts when its male protagonist flees his paternal household and the pressure it exerts for the protagonist to inherit his father’s material possessions and station in society, and also inheritance in Bakhtin’s sense of a negotiation and transmission of cultural tradition. Equally, Austerlitz’s travels are not only travels in search of his own memory, but also travels in search of his parents and his cultural identity. Austerlitz therefore negotiates not only the protagonist’s inheritance of his father’s patrimony, but the vexed question of inheriting and appropriating the literary tradition of the European bourgeois past.

By invoking the Bildungsroman form, and citing Hofmannsthal’s Andreas oder Die Vereinigten as a precedent, as we shall see, Austerlitz very indirectly inherits and comments on the Wilhelm Meister pretext.⁷ Running counter to any linear model of development and eventual inheritance in the Bildungsroman, Minden further


⁵ See especially Fuchs, Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte.


⁷ Gabriella Rovagnati has also noted the intertextual relationship between the protagonist of Schwindel.Gefühle and Andreas. Rovagnati, Das unrettbare Venedig des W. G. Sebald, in Sebald. Lektüren, pp. 143-156, pp. 151-152.
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theorises, is an esoteric Oedipal narrative of incest: incest in its literal sense, of erotic yearning for a mother or sister, and also in a more Freudian sense that equates incestuous desire with a desire to return to a pre-Oedipal stage of union with the mother and rivalry with the father. This desire can be read as a desire for a subjective self-identity which, in Freudian terms, is not possible subsequent to the resolution of the Oedipal conflict and which, historically, is not possible subsequent to the abandonment of traditional social forms and repression of the natural. Minden thus conceptualises the Bildungsroman as constituted by this tension between inheritance, the principle of linearity and of subjective limitation, and incest, an expression of infinite subjective potential and the collapse of difference. This interaction, he states, can be understood as a reflection of the attempt to unite in a single discourse the potentially infinite but perpetually partial subject and a form of objectification which does not negate it.8

These often uneasy tensions between inheritance and incest mirror the conflict within Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre between the utopian, but repressive Turmgesellschaft, and the poetic but doomed figures of the Harpist and Mignon.9 Viewed through the matrix of incest and inheritance, Minden suggests that the Tower represents the principle of masculine inheritance and of socialisation into the exchange-values of bourgeois society: ‘the Society of the Tower effects the secondary socialisation which is simply the continuation of the primary socialisation enacted between mother and son in which the modern subject is constituted.’10 The Harpist and his daughter, Mignon, born of incest, represent a poetic pre-modern ideal, which must be destroyed in order that the dialectic of bourgeois progress can proceed. Jürgen Barkhoff further argues that Mignon not only represents a pre-modern oneness of nature and art: ‘[...] neither true Naturpoesie nor the monistic concepts of nature behind it could survive in the northern climate of modernity. Both, however, should and could be sentimentally

8 Minden, Incest and Inheritance, p. 7.
9 See, for example, Schlaffer’s analysis in ‘Esoterik und Exoterik in Goethes Romanen’, or Marc Redfield’s Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman (Cornell: Ithaca & Condon, 1996).
10 Minden, Incest and Inheritance, p. 55.
celebrated in art.\textsuperscript{11} Incest, then, is not merely a metonym for the lure of pre-modern unity; in the \textit{Bildungsroman}, the fruit of incest becomes the very cipher for modern art itself.

Particularly in a German context, the \textit{Bildungsroman} form provides a means to demonstrate how concepts of origin, German identity and German cultural inheritance have become especially questionable following the destructive caesura of the Nazi regime. A reading of history that is informed by the dialectic of Enlightenment sees in the lofty ideology of \textit{Bildung} one more disastrous bourgeois structure that led inexorably to Nazism, most crudely in the Nazis’ appropriation of bourgeois cultural icons such as Goethe, Bach and Mozart. The liberating discourse of \textit{Bildung} carries within it the stifling one of \textit{Bildungskonservatismus}, fetishising culture as another industrial product to be consumed.\textsuperscript{12} The post-war period saw certain attempts at a return to the \textit{Bildungsroman} in the context of a German language and high culture that were thoroughly discredited.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{12} Armin Bernhard, \textit{Der Bildungsprozeß in einer Epoche der Ambivalenz} (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1996), p. 49: Bernhard shows how, in the economy of modernity, where values no longer inhere in things but are a function of their exchange value, increasingly, \textit{Bildung} itself becomes part of the exchange economy, not opposed to it, as it becomes a product among all others. Again, space does not allow me to go into the critique of the discourse of \textit{Bildung} as, on the one hand, a process of aesthetic fossilisation and conservatism and, on the other hand, one further discourse that serves to create false consciousness and legitimate the expropriation of the proletariat. See here particularly Egidius Schmalzriedt’s polemic, \textit{Inhumane Klassik} (Munich: Kindler, 1971), or for a more theoretically rigorous attack, Terry Eagleton’s \textit{The Ideology of the Aesthetic} (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) or Richard T. Gray, \textit{Stations of the Divided Subject. Contestation and Ideological Legitimation in German Bourgeois Literature, 1770-1914} (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1995). The topic of \textit{Bildung} in its pedagogical application became highly contentious following Germany’s supposedly disastrous showing in the Pisa study of 2002, and a section of \textit{Feuilleton} debate began advocating a return to the supposed Christian and classical ideals of \textit{Bildung}, or at least some form of traditional education – without, of course, reforming the class-bound German three-tier secondary school system. Here, see particularly Manfred Fuhrmann, \textit{Bildung. Europas kulturelle Identität} (Reclam: Stuttgart, 2002).

\textsuperscript{13} See, for example, Wilhelm Vollkamp, ‘Wilhelm Meisters ‘Theatralische Sendung’ und dessen ‘Lehrjahre’ im 20. Jahrhundert bei Botho Strauß und Thomas Bernhard,’ in \textit{Goethe-Jahrbuch} 1999 (vol. 116), pp. 168-177, for an analysis of the deployment of the \textit{Bildungsroman} form subsequent to
2.2 Austerlitz as anti-Bildungsroman: Sebald’s pedagogical project

Although the failure of Austerlitz’s central character to come to a stable sense of self profoundly questions the possibility (or indeed desirability) of any idealistic conception of the linear education of the bourgeois subject, Austerlitz is nonetheless a didactic novel. Despite its scepticism about the Fortschrittsoptimismus and Bildungsoptimismus of the nineteenth century, it was written by an author who, unlike Austerlitz, still remained in the formal educational system until his death. Thus, through destabilising and indirect narrative techniques, the novel is intended to educate the reader about the morally contaminated inheritance of modern European culture, in the sense that Benjamin intended for his Passagen-Werk:

Pädagogische Seite dieses Vorhabens: ‘Das bildschaffende Medium in uns zu dem stereoskopischen und dimensionalen Sehen in die Tiefe der geschichtlichen Schatten zu erziehen.’

Thus, when asked by Volker Hage whether he didn’t think that the theme of the Nazi period was exhausted as a literary topic, Sebald denied it vigorously, using precisely the theme of Bildung as an example:


His next literary project, he continued, was to be another form of archeologically constructed Bildungsroman: ‘das, was ich als die ‘éducation sentimentale’ des

1945: he includes Günter Grass’s Die Blechtrommel as a satirical reappropriation of Wilhelm Meister, where the dwarf Oskar Matzerath is the very principle of the impossibility of any kind of Bildung.

14 Borchardt: Epilegomena zu Dante I (Berlin: 1923) pp 56-57, cited in Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, prepared with the co-operation of Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt am Main: suhrkamp, 1982) V: Das Passagen-Werk, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (1982), p. 571. Austerlitz himself constructs his own magnum opus, which is intended to be a mammoth project on the buildings of modernity, and is strongly reminiscent of Benjamin’s Passagen-Werk.

fascistischen Subjekts bezeichne, zu erkunden.’ This proposed delineation of the fascist ‘éducation sentimentale’ (a French term which he chose to use in the place of the loaded Germanic term Bildungsroman) would have functioned an educational warning to an amnesiac post-war Germany.\textsuperscript{16}

Gerhard Mayer contends that, because of their failed lives and missing identity, the anti-heroes of post-war Bildungsromane cannot function as identification figures: their function is instead to provoke radical criticism of bourgeois ideology.\textsuperscript{17} Sebald’s poetic technique, hovering between documentary and fiction, both manages to criticise the dominant culture of memory of the 1990s – exemplified by Schindler’s List, a film which Sebald condemned as obscene\textsuperscript{18} – and creates a problematic moment of identification by blurring the clear boundary between character, author and reader, a moment which I explore more fully in Chapter Three. In Austerlitz, then, as in the traditional Bildungsroman, the integration and consistency of the subject becomes the meaningful fulcrum of society, the site where society’s discourses of morality and meaning meet and their validity is questioned. A tension then opens up: if the subject is the hapless victim of historical processes, of the machinations of modernity, then the inexorable erasures of modernity are liable to lead to the erasure of individual memory. This tension between the instability and centrality of the subject is never resolved, only explored and repeatedly restated throughout the novel.

Thus, although Austerlitz is intended as a figure of identification for the reader, rather than acting as a proxy for the reader, living out exemplary mistakes and learning experiences on the reader’s behalf, his lack of coherent identity functions as a constant, disorienting rebuke. Sebald’s novels are intended to have, at the most, a prophylactic effect, warding off the catastrophes that he sees as part of the inevitable

\textsuperscript{16} Peter Weiss’s Ästhetik des Widerstands is particularly important in constructing a literary lineage for Austerlitz as an ethical Bildungsroman. Sebald suggests that Ästhetik des Widerstands is a Bildungsroman with a moral rather than an aesthetic imperative, where the archaeological work of memory becomes more significant than a productive poetics, and where the subject that is produced in the course of its writing is less any ‘aesthetic subjectivity’ in a Schillerian sense, but rather undergoes a ‘Transformation des verletzten Subjekts in eine andere, intransigente Person’, to become a subject of resistance (CS 132).

\textsuperscript{17} Gerhard Mayer, Der deutsche Bildungsroman von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1992), p. 411.

\textsuperscript{18} Maya Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’.
destructive process of modernity: ‘if people were more preoccupied with the past, maybe the events that overwhelm us would be fewer.’ For him a true engagement with the past is a painful process: in an essay on Günter Grass and Wolfgang Hildesheimer, Sebald condemns German novels of the 1950s which allow too easy an identification with the mythical figure of the ‘good German,’ and hence pre-empt any real engagement with guilt or grief (CS 105). He notes that, by contrast to the complacent writing that he detected in the 1950s, German writers of the 1960s were disgusted by the apathy and resentment of the previous generation of writers:


Writing against the dominant culture of forgetting here is a process of moral education of the writer, as well as of the reader, an education away from ‘egozentrische Larmoyanz’ (CS 103) towards a sober engagement with guilt and mourning for those who had been murdered by the Nazis. Thus, despite his bleak analysis of the impact of Enlightenment and modernity on German history, Sebald still frames his work within the twin Enlightenment ideals of individual enlightenment, and of the morally unique function of literature for educating the reader. As Bildungsroman, Austerlitz is still intended to perform an enlightening function in a post-Enlightenment, morally ignorant Germany. Having thus shown that Austerlitz can fruitfully be read in the Bildungsroman tradition, in the next sections, I look at the specific functions of education and self-formation in Austerlitz.

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19 Maya Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’.
21 Sebald’s position, here, is a commonplace of literary historiography, which sees a caesura taking place in German literature in 1959.
2.2.1 *Austerlitz*: Plot summary

At the end of his life, in 1995, Jacques Austerlitz, an impeccably educated English *Bildungsbürger*, twice over narrates his life history that has been lived from a position of disinheritance, loss and self-division. The chosen recipient of this confessional narrative is a nameless Sebaldian narrator, who meets Austerlitz through a series of uncanny coincidences, and who appears to be chosen by fate – 'entgegen jeder statistischen Wahrscheinlichkeit, von einer erstaunlichen, geradezu zwingenden inneren Logik' – to be his amanuensis (A 68). Austerlitz's first narrative starts out from his early childhood, spent in a foster home in Wales. This narrative details what Austerlitz denominates his 'false English life,' describing his isolated childhood in a preacher's home, shambolic public school education, and then leaps to a nervous breakdown in later life when he retires from a post as an art historian. The second narrative, narrated twenty years after the first story, which both structurally and symbolically mirrors the first, details his subsequent attempts to construct his 'authentic' biography in retrospect, in a 'lange hinausgeschobenen Erinnerungsprozess'. The process of reconstruction eventually brings him to the realisation that he had been a Jewish refugee child sent to England from Czechoslovakia at the age of four, only to have this part of his history entirely repressed by his parents. This information leads him to return to his 'authentic' city of origin, Prague, where he is able to find his mother's best friend, his first childminder, still living in the flat where she lived in the 1930s, and also discovers the identities of his biological Czech parents. He fails, however, to find out the ultimate fate of his parents in Nazi-occupied Europe. Perhaps because of this lacuna in his understanding of his origins, he remains unable to make any meaningful link between his lost Czech childhood and his futile adult life. The erasures that the Shoah has wrought on his own biography and on his cultural and familial inheritance have irreparably damaged his sense of identity. Thus, instead of coming to the end of his wanderings and finding an accommodation with bourgeois society, at the end of his narrative Austerlitz abandons his house and all his worldly goods to the Sebaldian narrator, and continues his search for the traces of his father. Throughout his miserable, alienated childhood, Austerlitz

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22 I explore this relationship in more depth in Chapter Three.
23 'Volker Hage im Gespräch mit W. G. Sebald', *Der Spiegel*. 
is plagued by the sense that ‘ein unsichtbarer Zwillingsbruder ginge neben mir her, sozusagen das Gegenteil eines Schattens’ (A 84). As in the Weimar classical tradition, or Romantic cosmology, then, Austerlitz, as modern everyman, is a fractured soul. His internal division has been signalled even prior to the commencement of the Bala narrative by the grown Austerlitz’s motley clothing, which, we are told, he invariably wears:

schwere Wanderstiefel, eine Art Arbeitshose aus verschossenem blauem Kattun, sowie ein maßgeschneidertes, aber längst aus der Mode gekommenes Anzugsjackett. (A 14)

The learned, outward role of unworldly but gentlemanly scholar implied by the expensive but old-fashioned suit jacket is contradicted by the rough trousers and hiking boots, denoting the epic work and odyssey that Austerlitz undertakes in search of his past.

By narrating the failure of a journey of personal development, Austerlitz can be read as part of a tradition of anti-\textit{Bildungsromane}, a novel tradition as old as that of the \textit{Bildungsroman} itself. Like the \textit{Bildungsroman}, the often parodic anti-\textit{Bildungsroman} concerns itself with the formation of the individual in capitalist society: however, here the protagonist embarks on a journey of decay rather than one of education, and the breach between individual self and society is irreparable. Rolf Selbmann and other theorists of the \textit{Bildungsroman} see the ‘failed’ Bildungsroman as equally constitutive of the genre as the ‘successful’ one. The biographical narrative


\textsuperscript{25} See Rolf Selbmann, \textit{Der deutsche Bildungsroman} (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984), p. 40. This negative categorisation is mirrored by Charles Saumarez Smith, in the \textit{Observer} review of Austerlitz, where he refers to Austerlitz as ‘The hero of the book, or more properly the anti-hero since he essentially does nothing especially useful with his life…’. Charles Saumarez Smith, ‘Another time, another place’, \textit{The Observer}, (September 30, 2001).

\textsuperscript{26} ‘Als \textit{Bildungsroman} wäre ein Roman dann zu bezeichnen, wenn seine Bildungsgeschichte mit dem Anspruch auftritt, verbindliche Instanz für den gesamten Roman zu sein. Hierbei ist es für die Zuordnung als Bildungsroman gleichgültig, ob diese Bildungsgeschichte gelingt, bruchlos abläuft, zu
of *Austerlitz* echoes the structure of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and also contains elements from Hofmannsthal’s unfinished modernist *Bildungsroman Andreas*. Rather than directly modelling itself on or parodying any one of these novels, however, *Austerlitz* dialectically refracts themes and motifs from both in the context of pre-war and post-Shoah Europe. It performs the didactic function of the *Bildungsroman*, in that its narrator casts its eponymous protagonist as a representative of an entire society in transformation at a particular historical moment – here, a post-war and post-Shoah Europe afflicted with amnesia about its traumatic past – and intends that the reader learn from the protagonist’s process of development. The movement of Austerlitz’s biographical narrative thus superficially mirrors that which Michael Minden claims is constitutive of the traditional *Bildungsroman*: ‘The answer to the question, ‘Where is this journey of maturation and discovery leading?’ is Novalis’s ‘immer nach Hause.’’ Nonetheless, like Heinrich von Ofterdingen, Austerlitz never completes this journey home. Indeed, in its diffuse and fragmented form, *Austerlitz* more nearly resembles *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* than the *Lehrjahre* as an ironic deconstruction of the possibility of such linearity. *Austerlitz* describes the impossibility of completing such a journey in the face of the destruction wrought by the erasures of history and Nazi brutality. Indeed, Sebald said of himself in interview: ‘Going home is not necessarily a wonderful experience. It always comes with a sense of loss, and makes you so conscious of the inexorable passage of time.’ The negative *Bildungsroman*, then, demonstrates that home is a chimera; however, as I will show in the course of my analysis, *Heimat* and home are chimeras that still prove strong lures for both Austerlitz and his narrator. First, in the next section, I analyse the role of formal and informal education in *Austerlitz*, and show how the topos of education, key to the *Bildungsroman*, functions in *Austerlitz* to demonstrate the workings of the dialectic of Enlightenment.


28 Maya Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’.
2.2.2 *Anti-Bildungsroman*: negative paedagogy and the dialectic of Enlightenment

Austerlitz's 'false English life,' the first half of his life story as told to the narrator, has in itself the form of a classic *Bildungsroman*, describing as it does the protagonist's childhood, religious indoctrination, institutional schooling, growing awareness of self, entry into bourgeois society through a liberal education at a university and, finally, successful embarkation on a professional career as an art historian. However, while the narrative of the Goethean *Bildungsroman* is ostensibly transparent, where an omniscient narrator details the linear progress of the protagonist, who is able to recollect and reflect upon his development at any time, the protagonist of *Austerlitz* is first depicted in a position of traumatic ignorance that informs the entire first half of the narrative.

*a Formal education: Bala and Stower Grange*

The starting point of Austerlitz's Welsh biography – his family home, which he calls 'eine Art von Gefangenschaft' – is from the first marked by alienation and compensatory fantasy. Austerlitz's foster-father Emyr Elias is rooted in a traditional, pastoral culture, and, as he is a Calvinist preacher, in religious structures similar to the eighteenth-century Pietistic communities that formed the social background for the production of the inward-looking German bourgeois subject. Indeed, the preacher's house shuts out the twentieth century, as it refuses admittance to either the radio or newspapers (A 88). The erasure and loss by which this uncanny family home is characterized are represented concretely through its coldness and its permanently shut windows, which further traumatising the small boy:

Noch heute träumt es mir manchmal, daß eine der verschlossenen Türen sich auftut und ich über die Schwelle trete in eine freundlichere, weniger fremde Welt (A 69).

In classic anti-*Bildungsroman* style, Austerlitz's Welsh childhood and education, far from being experienced as a 'heile Welt,' are described in melancholy and satirical terms. His home education is stamped by a religion that has been inherited from the seventeenth century – a burning fire-and-brimstone Calvinism, obsessed with eschatology, divine retribution and the torments of the damned (A 72). As a child, Austerlitz believes that the Bible contains esoteric meanings that refer to him alone, found in the story of the infant Moses, or the exodus of the Israelites, quite apart from
the exoteric meaning that he reads aloud from the letters on the page (A 85).\textsuperscript{29} As in the case of the unfortunate anti-\textit{Bildungsroman} hero, Anton Reiser,\textsuperscript{30} such Biblical images become more real to him than his sad and culturally impoverished home life, and the identity that he creates for himself as a child is produced largely intertextually, through the biblical and oral culture of rural Wales. As a small child, Austerlitz feels alienated from his distant adoptive parents and seeks refuge from their harsh religion in the Welsh-language ghost stories of Evan the shoemaker. Later, with true \textit{ Bildungsoptimismus}, the scholarly child views formal education as his only means of escape from his narrow background – ‘Von der ersten Woche an verstand ich, daß diese Schule [...] mein einziger Ausweg war’ (A 92), although the boarding school to which he is sent is described as a rampantly eccentric \textit{Anstalt} governed by petty despotisms, sorely lacking in intellectual or moral excellence:

Das Schulleben hielt sich mehr oder weniger von selber in seinem Gang, eher trotz als dank der in Stower Grange wirkenden Pädagogen. (A 90)

Austerlitz’s only resources for personal growth are independent reading: trained by his homiletic background, his school reading seems to him not onerous, but ‘als öffnete sich mit jeder umgewendeten Seite eine weitere Tür’ (A 93), as well as his intimate friendship with another pupil, Gerald. In contrast to the moment of embarkation of the traditional \textit{Bildungsroman} hero, whose true development begins once he has left the restricted sphere of formal education and starts on a career in the world, leaving school for the university marks the beginning of Austerlitz’s decline: ‘der Beginn meines eigenen Niedergangs, meiner im Laufe der Zeit immer krankhafter werdenden Verschließung in mich selber’ (A 173). After thirty years working as an academic, Austerlitz retires early, having given up all faith that formal education can provide a

\textsuperscript{29} The wandering caravan of the Israelites in the Sinai desert forms a recurrent motif of endless exile throughout Sebald’s work: see, for example, DA 43: ‘Und insbesondere an Tagen, an denen Aurach mit Kohle gearbeitet und der pudrig feine Staub seine Haut mit einem metallischen Glanz imprägnierte hatte, schien es mir, als sei er soeben aus dem Wüstenbild herausgetreten oder als gehöre er in es hinein’. Max Aurach’s (or Ferber’s) biography mirrors Austerlitz’s in many structural and motival areas, not least this one.

\textsuperscript{30} Anton Reiser, whose journey of social integration paradigmatically ends in failure, indeed is the anti-\textit{Bildungsroman} to match \textit{Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre’s} supposedly positive model, is brought up in a restrictive Pietist environment, and has little else to occupy his infant imagination than Biblical culture. Karl Philipp Moritz, \textit{Anton Reiser: Ein psychologischer Roman} (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995).
cure to the chronic decline of modern society: 'teils [...] wegen der auch an den Hochschulen, wie ich sicher selber wisse, immer weiter um sich greifenden Dummheit' (A 178). The school at Stower Grange serves as a microcosm for culturally impoverished post-war society, ruled by 'zahllosen ungeschriebenen Regeln und einer oft ans Karnevalistische grenzenden Gesetzlosigkeit' (A 92). It is a dystopia of 'Großtyrannei und des Kleindespotismus, der erzwungenen Dienstleistung, der Versklavung' (A 90). Austerlitz's university years at Oriel are not even described in any detail, and, in line with Sebald's own opinions of the attacks on the British higher education system made by Thatcher, Austerlitz eventually leaves scholarly life because of the 'gross stupidity' he finds encroaching all around him. He intends to finish his own research project in early retirement, but, at the end of his false English life, finds himself unable to do so. The enlightening promise of education falls apart. Where previously, as in Stower Grange, scholarship had appeared as a compensatory life to Austerlitz — 'Und doch sei das Lesen und Schreiben immer seine liebste Beschäftigung gewesen' (A 180) — writing now becomes a means of self-destruction, as Austerlitz rewrites and destroys his work, seeing his scholarly knowledge 'nicht mehr wie einst meine Leitlichter waren, sondern böse Verlockungen, mich in die Tiefe zu stürzen' (A 181). Not only his magnum opus, but also his entire scholarly existence now appears to him as a process of destruction:

Schon spürte ich hinter meiner Stirn die infaime Dummheit, die dem Persönlichkeitsverfall vorausgeht, ahnte, daß ich in Wahrheit weder Gedächtnis noch Denkvermögen, noch eigentlich eine Existenz besaß, daß ich mein ganzes Leben

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hindurch mich immer nur ausgelöscht und von der Welt und mir selber abgekehrt hatte. (A 182)

In Austerlitz, then, formal education has become at once a dystopian mirror of the chaos of post-war society – a mockery of any Bildungsideal – and, later, commodified as one product among many in late capitalism.

**b Informal education: Andromeda Lodge**

Austerlitz’s visits to Gerald’s country estate, Andromeda Lodge, recall Wilhelm Meister’s idealized perceptions of the noble milieu which he first entered as a young actor: the grandiose Andromeda, a relic of a pre-capitalist Wales ruled by a privileged squirarchy, is exotic, ‘überwirklich’ (A 142), visiting is like being ‘in einer anderen Welt’ (A 122). As Austerlitz discovers in his later visits to abandoned great houses ‘von denen in den fünfziger Jahren [...] durchschnittlich alle zwei bis drei Tage eines demoliert worden ist’ (A 154), by the 1950s, the aristocratic milieu has become anachronistic and doomed to destruction, and unlike Wilhelm Meister, Austerlitz shows no desire to be assimilated into it. Rather, the idyll of Andromeda arouses in him the desire for his own extinction – ‘ich wünsche mir heute, sagte Austerlitz, daß ich in dem Frieden, der dort ununterbrochen herrschte, spurlos hätte vergehen können’ (A 119).

Andromeda Lodge is a *locus amoenus* situated in a beautiful bay by the sea, a refuge that provides an alternative family for Austerlitz. It is also littered with cabinets of natural curiosities, which follow a form of organisation of knowledge inspired, Austerlitz tells us, ‘der Familienüberlieferung zufolge’ by a visit of Darwin’s. Andromeda Lodge plays out the dialectic of Enlightenment in more comic than tragic fashion, via the schism in the clan according to which in every generation one of the two sons leaves Catholicism and becomes a natural scientist. At Andromeda, the reigning Catholic is Uncle Evelyn, who, according to Gerald, has become crippled from pure miserliness, which he justifies by donating his money for the Congo Mission ‘zur Errettung der dort noch im Unglauben schmachtenden schwarzen Seelen’ (A 130). I deal with Sebald’s treatment of the Congo in Chapter Three, and with his attitudes to European colonialism in Chapter Four; here, suffice it to say that Catholicism is here clearly portrayed as in cahoots with the project of Empire, a mythology that is decidedly less ethical than the humane project of naturalism carried
out by the youthful and sympathetic Uncle Alphonso. Alphonso’s naturalism is an anti-Enlightenment project that advocates closeness to nature rather than a taxonomic, destructive approach (we are to assume, presumably, that the cases of moths depicted in Andromeda Lodge are the creation of an earlier generation of Fitzpatricks.) Alphonso decries the devastation of the rock pools around Devon and Cornwall:

jetzt, kaum ein halbes Jahrhundert später, sei diese Pracht durch unsere Sammelleidenschaft und andere, gar nicht wägbare Störungen und Einflüsse nahezu völlig vernichtet. (A 135)

Instead, Alphonso takes Gerald and Austerlitz out into the night to observe the moths on their own terms of darkness and silence, initiating Austerlitz into a lore which, unlike almost all other formal instruction, stays ‘besonders unvergesslich’ for him throughout his life (A 140). Despite, then, Austerlitz’s negative experiences of formal education, sentimental education, received in a noble and loving environment, retains its lure and its value in the novel. This almost pre-modern environment is the direct opposite of the repressive structures of bourgeois society, as I next show.

c The fortress of bourgeois society

Throughout his adult life, Austerlitz attempts to shield himself from his tragic memories by a process of self-preservation through psychological self-immurement – he seals himself off from others as a form of self-protection, while admitting ‘daß ich in diesem Michabwenden mich gerettet wählte und zugleich mir vorkam wie ein zum Fürchten häßlicher, unberührbarer Mensch’ (A 312). As soon as his memory is re-awakened, Austerlitz has a dream in which this psychological defence mechanism is depicted in concrete form:

Ich bin in diesem Schlaf, in dem mein Körper sich tot stellte, während in meinem Kopf die Fiebergedanken sich drehten, im Innersten einer sternförmigen Festung gewesen, in einer von aller Welt abgeschnittenen Oubliette, aus der ich versuchen mußte, ins Freie zu finden, durch lange, niedrige Gänge, die mich durch sämtliche je von mir besuchten und beschriebenen Bauwerke führten (A 204).

32 Ruth Franklin’s short essay, ‘Sebald’s Amateurs’, argues that Austerlitz is typical of Sebald’s characters and narrators in valuing ‘amateurism,’ or personal endeavour, over institutionalized knowledge. The Andromeda case full of moths would seem to blur the distinction. Ruth Franklin, ‘Sebalds Amateurs’, in W. G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma, pp. 127-140.
The star-shaped oubliette is a doubly-determined figure in *Austerlitz*: initially, in this dream, it is a metaphor for the well of forgetting (*oublier*) in which he had imprisoned himself away from his memories. The formal remnants of his *Bildung* here provides him with a means to construct walls with the ‘von mir Jahrzehnte hindurch fortgesetzten Wissensanhäufung, die mir als ein ersatzweises, kompensatorisches Gedächtnis diente’ (A 206). The insanely elaborated defences of European fortresses show, as he tells the narrator at their first meeting,

wie wir, um gegen jeden Einbruch der Feindesmächte Vorkehrungen zu treffen, gezwungen seien, in sukzessiven Phasen uns stets weiter mit Schutzwerken zu umgeben, so lange, bis die Idee der nach außen sich verschiebenden konzentrischen Ringe an ihre natürlichen Grenzen stoße [...]. (A 25)

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault notes that this idealized star-shape is one of the most enduring forms which modern administered societies devise for their engines of punishment, namely prisons. In these institutions, ‘the walls are the punishment of the crime; the cell confronts the convict with himself; he is forced to listen to his conscience’, and the principal object of such ‘carceral action’ is ‘coercive individualization’. Foucault argues that the prison thus is not merely an isolated building, but is paradigmatic of the violent imposition of abstract structures by the unholy alliance of science and the law on the human soul: it ‘must be the microcosm of a perfect society in which individuals are isolated in their moral existence, but in which they come together in a strict hierarchical framework’. Sebald’s repeated use of the motif of the star-shaped fortress in connection with Austerlitz’s interior world – his dreams and studies – indicate that Austerlitz’s isolation and suffering are the products of an inhumane, societal mechanism. Subsequently, the narrator confirms Austerlitz’s analysis of the fortress system when he spends an afternoon exploring the star-shaped fortress of Breendonk.

Da konnte ich in ihm, trotz seiner nun offenbaren rationalen Struktur, allenfalls das Schema irgendeines krebsartigen Wesens, nicht aber dasjenige eines vom menschlichen Verstand entworfenen Bauwerks erkennen. (A 36)

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34 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 239.

The rational construct of society and of identity has become unrecognizable as a product of the human mind: the narrator states that

\[
\text{ich sie zuletzt mit keiner mir bekannten Ausformung der menschlichen Zivilisation, nicht einmal mit den stummen Relikten unserer Vor- und Frühgeschichte in irgendeinen Zusammenhang bringen konnte. (A34)}
\]

The fortress here is the apotheosis of modernity: the hypertrophied rational thought which originally conceived it has lost its reason by ceasing to be self-critical, and the dialectic of Enlightenment plays itself out once more. Where reason has failed, Sebald instead turns to its irrational, traumatized cousin, memory.

### 2.2.3 Das dem Andenken sich verpflichtende künstlerische Subjekt: Austerlitz as memory artist

Thus, we see that Austerlitz’s self is constituted by a socially constructed memory that is at once oppressive and fragile. The issue of memory is central to all discussions of Sebaldian poetics. For Sebald, the key link between the spheres of literature, history and subjectivity, or personal identity, is provided by memory:

The moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory. To my mind it seems clear that those who have no memory have the much greater chance to lead happy lives. But it is something you cannot possibly escape: your psychological make-up is such that you are inclined to look back over your shoulder. Memory, even if you repress it, will come back at you and it will shape your life.\(^{36}\)

By foregrounding Austerlitz’s biography to give the novel its formal structure, Sebald places subjectivity at the centre of his project of memory. Jacques Austerlitz is a fictional representative of writers like Améry, whose biography becomes a concrete locus where Sebald can trace the devastations of European history. Memory is thus the constitutive moment of the subject in Sebald, and also the locus of connection between the self and society, where personal and collective memories touch. Austerlitz is marked by an uneasy tension between a belief that the subject – or the protagonist, Austerlitz – can be the only adequate locus for this memory, and a profound scepticism about the feasibility or desirability of unitary subjectivity. If subjectivity is the locus of memory, Austerlitz’s adult subjectivity is in crisis because of his fraught

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\(^{36}\) Jaggi, ‘The Last Interview’. 
relationship to memory: both his own personal memories, and to any cultural memory connected to his Jewish origins.

The models of memory that Sebald operates with in *Austerlitz* have been extensively analysed by most of the main Sebald critics. Fuchs has described his models as being constituted by *mémoire involuntaire* and *bricolage*, non-linear models of memory that disrupt the linear process of history and yet do not provide a stable nor complete model of the past; other critics have explored his techniques of memory that deploy film, archive, collections, museums, photography, architecture, landscape, oral narrative and intertextuality to reconstruct and, ultimately, demonstrate the impossibility of reconstructing memory. Mona Körte’s analysis is particularly valuable: her article “*Un petit sac*”. W. G. Sebalds Figuren zwischen Sammeln und Vernichten’ provides an extensive set of models to describe Austerlitz’s attempts to construct a self both without memory and after memories return. She describes Austerlitz’s self as a ‘Sammelsurium’ that is constructed in its relation to arcane collections of objects, and notes that the borrowed, war-battered rucksack is the sole guarantor of his identity – a point which I address further in Chapter Three. Memory in *Austerlitz* pervades the novel’s entire structure, at once located in the remembering subject, Jacques Austerlitz, and in the landscape of the text itself. Kilbourn shows how

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37 *Mémoire involuntaire*, according to Benjamin, is the return of memory without any conscious effort to retrieve it on the part of the subject. Benjamin theorises that it is a phenomenon created by capitalist society. Unlike traditional societies, where the individual is bound into collective memory by means of commemorative rituals and artifacts, capitalist society separates the individual from the collective, and causes memory to return involuntarily: ‘Dieser [...] gehört zum Inventar der vielfältig isolierten Privatperson. Wo Erfahrung im strikten Sinn obwaltet, treten im Gedächtnis gewisse Inhalte der individuellen Vergangenheit mit solchen der kollektiven in Konjunktion.’ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, with the contribution of Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, (Frankfurt am Main: suhrkamp, 1972-), I: *Abhandlungen*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (1974), p. 611.


the rich metaphors and dialectical images that make up the text of the novel are models of external memory, making of memory a cultural as well as a psychological artefact. Architecture and cinema, in particular, he writes, serve as successive metaphors for memory as an exteriorised, visually constituted phenomenon. Sebald’s emphasis on memory as culturally constructed through historically determined modes of representation does not so much override an overtly psychoanalytical model as demonstrate implicitly the irreducibly metaphorical or tropological nature of the psychoanalytical account of memory.40

Marcel Atze has researched Sebald’s readings of Maurice Halbwachs, and noted the profound influence of Halbwachs’s theories of collective memory on *Austerlitz*, pointing out particularly the socially and externally constructed nature of memory in the work, and the fact that Austerlitz, in his passion for becoming a memory artist, becomes entirely alienated from the present, like one who sees visions." Almost all of the recent research done on Sebald is confronted by the aporias of memory in his work: the Sebaldian project is one of obsessive searching for memory traces that is constantly faced with blanks caused by traumatic loss of memory, the inadequacy of official commemoration in the face of individual loss, the impossibility of ever truly knowing how things were at any point in the past.

**a Destructive memory: memory as erasure of the subject**

This centrality of the subject to Sebald’s model of memory is another of these aporias of memory: the subject is both constituted and destroyed by remembering. Thus, for example, by emphasising the principle of the *Nebeneinander* over that of hierarchy and linearity, *bricolage* provides a way for Austerlitz to circumvent the destructive Enlightenment principle of linear development, and to produce a different form of biographical narrative, one constructed from fragments of memory. Nonetheless, the *Nebeneinander* is no sphere of infinite subjective potentiality for Austerlitz, in the sense suggested by Martin Swales,42 but rather a torture: for Austerlitz, some moments

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42 Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse*, p. 29.
are without beginning and end whereas ‘andererseits sein ganzes Leben [erschien] bisweilen wie ein blinder Punkt ohne jede Dauer’ (A 173). He longs for the Nebeneinander as a redemptive annulment of history, where ‘sämtliche Zeitmomente gleichzeitig nebeneinander existierten’ but knows that this also opens up the wretched prospect of ‘eines immerwährenden Elends und einer niemals zu Ende gehenden Pein’ (A 152). In Sebald’s poetics, remembering becomes a morally charged duty. Thus, writing about Peter Weiss’s poetics of memory, Sebald remarks that memory is not merely a topographical construct, but a painful, destructive obligation.

Deutlicher aber als jedes andere zeitgenössische oeuvre demonstriert das des Peter Weiss, daß ein abstraktes Totengedächtnis wenig vennag gegen die Verlockungen des Gedächtnisschwunds, wo es nicht auch in der Erforschung und Rekonstruktion der konkreten Stunde der Peinigung eine übers bloße Mitleid hinausweisende Mitleidenschaft beweist. (CS 130)

In undertaking such a reconstruction, Sebald states that ‘dem Andenken sich verpflichtende künstlerische Subjekt’ can only justify its own existence through a process of remembering – ‘Schreiben, das ist der Versuch [...] die Erinnerung ins Werk zu setzten, die allein das Überleben rechtfertigt im Schatten des Berges der Schuld’ (CS 130). Paradoxically, however, the artistic subject (künstlerische Subjekt) also threatens its own physical and psychological integrity through this very act:

In solcher Rekonstruktion nimmt das dem Andenken sich verpflichtende künstlerische Subjekt, wie Weiss es versteht, nicht zuletzt auch Eingriffe vor in die eigene Person, die in ihrer Schmerzhaftigkeit das Anhalten des Erinnerns gewissermaßen garantieren (CS 130).

Here, Sebald acknowledges Nietzsche’s thesis that remembering has its origins in violence and is inhumane in nature, but sides, along with Weiss, with Nietzsche’s ‘dyspeptic moralists’ who insist on the cruel art of mnemotechnics, and on remembering the violence of the past. Memory is for Nietzsche part of the painful and violent process of socialisation; it maims the psyche in order to fit the individual into a ‘sociale Zwangsjacke.’ Only ‘die Sittlichkeit der Sitte,’ the slave morality indicted by
Nietzsche in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*,\(^{43}\) portrays this kind of suffering as in any way good or useful for the subject who suffers. The only hope which Nietzsche holds out at the end of this grim history of morals is the ‘das autonome übersittliche Individuum’ (GM 2.2) who breaks free from morality, – and here Nietzsche adds the crucial rider – ‘(denn ‘autonom’ und ‘sittlich’ schliesst sich aus)’.\(^{44}\) Sebald’s melancholy poetics does not envisage any such ‘souveraine Individuum’ who carries ‘ein Vollendungs-Gefühl des Menschen überhaupt’ at the end of human progress, but Benjamin’s angel of history, who, in horror, looks upon progress as ‘eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert.’\(^{45}\) For Sebald, history is a continuing process of destruction, at the end of which can only be the extinction of humanity. Instead of Nietzsche’s hope for redemption through the overman, or indeed Benjamin’s compensatory messianism, Sebald believes that the most that can be wished for is an active remembrance of the dead, to attempt to stave off future calamities.\(^{46}\) In his essay on Weiss, Sebald re-interprets Nietzsche’s sweepingly schematic model, whereby modern society is based on a forgotten history of cruelty and, indeed, the bones of the dead, in the concrete context of twentieth century history. In doing so, he sombly notes the erasure of the hopes inherent in Nietzsche’s model of crime and retribution,

die doch nie ganz erlösche die Hoffnung, ‘daß jeder Schaden irgend worin sein Äquivalent habe und wirklich abgezahlt werden könne, sei es selbst durch einen Schmerz des Schädigers.’ Diese Konjektur, die Nietzsche für die Grundlage unseres Rechtsempfindens hielt [...] kann, ihrem eigenen Sinn entsprechend, freilich nur in einer archaischen Gesellschaft in der Praxis übersetzt werden. Im Frankfurter Prozeß hingegen konnte es [...] zu einem wahren Ausgleich für die Opfer [...] nicht kommen. (CS 142)

With no hope either of restitution, or salvation from the continuing catastrophe of repression and destruction, Sebald restores the primacy of the forces of guilt and retrbution.

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\(^{46}\) Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’.
morbidity, forces scorned by Nietzsche. Instead of hoping to overcome guilt and morbidity dialectically, he views them as intertwined forces which work against the natural desire to forget, and, maybe, help to prevent crimes in the future. Thus, he brushes Nietzsche’s version of history against the grain: in place of the imperative to say Yes to the future, he puts the imperative to remember.\(^{47}\)

As he also emphasises in an essay on Jean Améry, this burden of remembrance can prove too great for the writer.\(^{48}\) In these *Campo Santo* essays, Sebald ascribes the deaths of Améry and Weiss to the toll taken by the writing out of their memories. Thus, not only is the epistemic status of memory uncertain, but salvaging that memory can lead to the permanent destruction of the subject. Sebald is well aware that remembrance is damaging both to the remembering individual and to the collectively remembering society. Commenting on the work of Hans Erich Nossack, he notes:

daß nämlich die Erinnerung ein Skandal ist und daß, wer im Eingedenken sich übt, sich wie Hamlet die Mahnung der neuen Machthaber wird anhören müssen […] daß in einem belasteten politischen Gemeinwesen der Wille, der Opfer zu gedenken, die seiner Etablierung voraufgingen, gleichbedeutend ist mit dem Zweifel an der Legitimität der neuen Ordnung, die auf eine Derealisierung der Vergangenheit und die Identifikation mit den Siegern angewiesen ist. (CS 104)

By invoking Nietzsche, Sebald highlights the cruelty inherent in his own ethically-driven project to remember and transmit the history of suffering. Nietzsche sees the history of civilisation as a history of the workings of amoral wills to power. He theorises that society later adopts a ‘Christian’ slave morality to gloss over the inexorable cruelties of civilisation, and thus, that cruelty and morality inextricably support one another. Sebald cites Weiss’s concern as to whether ‘das Schweigen, das Aufgeben nicht ehrlicher wäre als der Drang sich zeitlebens eine Gedächtnisstätte seiner selbst zu errichten’ (CS 132). Herein lies the danger of re-instituting the remembering subject as the locus of morality: the damaged subject restores to itself some measure of justice, but in doing so becomes complicit in the cruelties of

\(^{47}\) It should be noted that Sebald is far too sophisticated a scholar to extrapolate further from the Nietzschean model, and suggest that the Nietzschean project of creating an ‘overman’ directly led to the Nazi mass murders. Rather, he restricts himself to an ironic exploration of elements of the reverse side of the Nietzschean project.

civilisation. As for Hamlet, Austerlitz’s task of redeeming the inheritance of his murdered father leads neither to autonomous manhood nor to restorative justice. Instead, it merely prolongs his lost and aimless wanderings. Nonetheless, this very redemptive lure is always on the horizon of Austerlitz’s memory work.

b Dialectical images: memory techniques and redemptive lure

The redemptive lure of memory also flits through Sebald’s externalized landscapes of memory, often expressed as ‘dialectical images.’ Thus, for example, as we have seen, the fortress is a negative, disciplinary moment in Austerlitz’s construction of self. The historically destructive function of the fortress – the second moment of the star-shaped fortress noted by Foucault, that of hierarchically ordered microcosm of repressive society – is played out in the second half of the book. Here the ‘sternförmige Festung’ reappears as the concentration camp of Theresienstadt, where Austerlitz’s mother was imprisoned after he was sent to safety on a Kindertransport. As Theresienstadt is the point at which Austerlitz’s travels in search of his mother end, Austerlitz’s tortuous path out of the oubliette into memory only leads to another repressive fortress, where the traces of his dead mother are lost. Sebald describes at length the grisly parody of bourgeois society created by the SS at Theresienstadt, when the Red Cross comes to perform an inspection:

und Theresienstadt, nachdem man abermals, inmitten dieses ganzen Trubels, siebeneinhalbtausend der weniger ansehnlichen Personen zur Auslichtung sozusagen nach Osten geschickt hatte, verwandelt war in ein potemkinsches, möglicherweise sogar manche seiner Insassen betörendes oder doch mit gewissen Hoffnungen erfüllendes Eldorado [...]. (A 348)

All the institutions of high culture are included in this murderous paradise, from a sanatorium to a theatre and concert hall (A 349), where, Austerlitz speculates, his mother may have reprised her successful performance in the role of Olimpia in the Tales of Hoffmann (A 350). This grotesque and cynical fetishisation of the gebildete Kultur, which the SS have done so much to destroy among the Jews of Eastern Europe, is posited as the logical end of a paranoid modernism, just as the transformation of Austerlitz’s mother, Agáta, into a soulless automaton for the amusement of the SS is an extreme exemplar of the soul-destroying capitalist

49 Sebald includes a map of the star-formed walls on pp. 336-7.
mechanism of individuation through isolation and repression. *Austerlitz*, then, invokes
an Adornian view of history that situates Nazi crimes and the Shoah as at once
eemplars and logical end points of the overall process of the dialectic of
Enlightenment. The Shoah reveals itself to be the occluded meaning behind the
generalized motifs of decay, oppression and loss in European history throughout the
book. The intellectual and architectural wasteland that is post-war Europe in *Austerlitz*
is merely the manifestation of the mechanisms of oppression that constituted it in its
Enlightenment apotheosis.

The image of the fortress of the modern self, then, has two aspects. One is the
oppressive, disciplinary aspect, at the heart of which there is only an empty space. In
its second aspect, the narrator discovers that the ominous contents of the torture
chamber in Breendonk remind him of a topography from his own childhood. In
Sebald’s poetics of trauma, the narrator’s private memories of nameless childhood
horrors (only metonymically indicated by the enigmatic word ‘Wurzelbürste’,
associated with his father in the narrator’s consciousness) represent echoes both of
particular, intimate childhood traumas, and of the inherited shame of being German.
Thus, identity and society in *Austerlitz* also have at their heart the irrational irruption
of childhood traumas. This introduces a psychoanalytic element into the structure of
memory that disrupts the otherwise totalizing imagery of nature and society together
bent on their own destruction and on the destruction of the self. However, the trauma
for narrator and character is very different: whereas the narrator is traumatized by his
inherited guilt, Austerlitz is traumatized both by the loss of his intact childhood and by
the lure of its lost memory. The desire to re-animate the uncanny mother-doll Olimpia
is a temptation that, as we will see, both narrator and character share; it is a desire that
lures both of them back to a faith in authentic origins that is somewhat at odds with
the mournful and melancholic project of memory that, on an exoteric level, *Austerlitz*
appears to pursue.

The motif of the star-shaped fortress is one of many that Sebald uses ironically to
undermine Austerlitz’s concrete achievements and discoveries about his past,
demonstrating that his personal project of subjective construction and bourgeois
*Bildung* has failed. Such dense but fragmented images, built up through elements of
narrative scattered throughout the novel, are, in Benjaminian terms, dialectical
images: that is, images preserved or reclaimed from the past, which mirror the
structure of history as a whole, when viewed from the standpoint of history’s end. Sometimes, as in the image of the parrot, the course of history is entirely negative. Sometimes, though, it contains a messianic hope enfolded in its dialectical layers. A key example is the freemason’s temple that Austerlitz seeks out in Liverpool Street Station, which, hidden away from public view, contains an image of redemption,

in diesem das in Goldfarben gemalte ornamentale Bildnis der unter einem Regenbogen schwimmenden dreistöckigen Arche, zu der gerade die Taube zurückkehrt, in ihrem Schnabel den grünen Zweig. (A 67)

This temple, with its image of the dove that leads the Jewish people to their safe shore, from Genesis 8.11, has been hemmed in by the Great Railway hotel. This is an institution which is not only emblematic of nineteenth-century bourgeois civilisation, but also, we are told, built on a graveyard that once held London’s poor. This graveyard in turn was built on the site of Bedlam. This one dense image contains in it the dialectic of Enlightenment, as Sebald interprets it. The ark of rational Enlightenment utopianism is built on the graveyard of the mediaeval madhouse and eighteenth-century asylum – an institution that, in *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault diagnoses as representing the repressive side of Enlightenment.\(^{50}\) The hotel covers over a mass of entangled skeletons, a picture of which is reproduced in the book, looking as though they are screaming in never-ending pain that, now, will go unheard through the rumble of trains. Nonetheless, the moment of hope it represents still glimmers through past the subsequent brutalizing processes of modernity, represented by the railway. Such dialectical images thus both ironize and preserve Enlightenment hopes throughout the novel; an irony which, in some cases, approaches Romantic irony, and in others kitsch. Having demonstrated that neo-Romantic elements not only appear in but also structure *Austerlitz*, in the next section, I explore neo-Romantic elements in *Austerlitz* further by comparing it with Botho Strauß’s more explicitly neo-Romantic *Bildungsroman, Der junge Mann*.

### 2.3 Comparison of Austerlitz and Der junge Mann

It is here, where the dove emerges from the hotel ceiling, that a comparison of *Austerlitz* and Strauß’s *Der junge Mann* becomes useful. In both novels, the classic

concerns of the aesthetic education of the self, and of inheriting and transmitting the literary, philosophical or cultural heritage of the pre-Nazi German past, reappear with new significance in the context of a post-modern society. Both authors consider that contemporary German society has a compulsive and fatal amnesiac relation towards its past. Sebald, as I have discussed above, attributes this amnesia to a lack of imaginative sympathy with the victims of the Nazis; Strauß explicitly diagnoses this wilful forgetfulness as the consequence of ignorance, of insufficient Bildung and superficial relation to the deep mythical roots of culture.

Denn Unwissenheit, so heißt es in den gnostischen Evangelien, ist schlimmer als die Sünde. Sie macht uns zu ‘Geschöpfen der Vergessenheit’, und ihnen ist die sichere Selbstzerstörung beschieden.51

The literary responses of Strauß and Sebald to this problematic differ, as do the aspects of the problematic that they chose to address, not to mention the fact that their work has been received in extremely different ways and among extremely different audiences. Nonetheless, Sebald’s melancholic, ethically informed approach to the German literary tradition can be read as a counterpoint to Strauß’s self-consciously neo-Romantic, scientistic poetics, in the way in which they respond to this perceived crisis in German and European culture by having resource to the culture of the past. Both Austerlitz and Der junge Mann are saturated in intertextual references to the classical German literary and philosophical tradition, and both have a pedagogical mission: to educate a readership which Strauß and Sebald see as having been neglectful of its cultural heritage. Further, the authors take up theoretical positions towards this heritage that are radically opposed to each other, yet complement each other. If Walter Benjamin, and his Angelus Novus, provides Sebald with his main allegorical understanding of culture and cultural history, Strauß declares:

Dennoch mag es – ‘im Spiel der geschichtlichen Möglichkeiten’ – erlaubt sein, sich vorzustellen, daß an der Pforte unserer Demokratie nicht allein der Engel mit dem kritischen Schwert gestanden hätte, der Wächter über Aufklärung und fortschrittliches

51 Botho Strauß, Der junge Mann (Munich: dtv, 1997), p. 214. Henceforth referred to in the text as DJM.
Bewußtsein, sondern eben auch jener eines wissenden, schaffenden Bewahrens: daß also neben einem Benjamin auch ein Borchardt gestanden hätte.\(^{52}\)

The two poles of Benjamin and Borchardt here posed by Strauß resemble the two poles in what Aleida Assmann has called a *Bildungsdialektik*, which she sees at work in German cultural history since the origination of the Weimar classical concept of *Bildung*. She suggests that the discourse of *Bildung* is a dialectic of scientism and religion, limited by ideas of historical consciousness. This dialectic is determined by, on the one hand, a pole which constantly reassesses *Bildung* in a historically critical light and might hence be called ‘Benjaminian’, and the pole of timeless aesthetic autonomy, which defiantly asserts, in the face of historical change, that the ideals of poesy and aesthetic truth are (or should be) both immutable and exist (or should exist) in a sphere entirely separate to politics, and could hence be termed ‘Borchardtian’.\(^{53}\)

Where Sebald’s view of history is thus apocalyptic, suffused with images of a constant fire, in the introduction to *Der junge Mann*, Strauß dismisses apocalypticism as another ‘Täuschung und Stimmung des Menschengeschlechts’ (DJM 7). Instead, he claims, in direct opposition to Sebald’s ecological catastrophism, that the 1980s are a ‘doch glückliche Periode deutscher Geschichte’:

> Wo mancher nur den glitzernden Zerfall erkennt, da sieht er viele Übergänge und Verwandlungen, sieht er den verschwenderischen Markt der Differenz, der aus der wesentlichen Unsicherheit und Offenheit dieser Gesellschaft hervorgeht. Vielfalt und Differenz aber gewähren allem Seienden den besten Schutz vor Tod und Verwüstung. (DJM 11)

Strauß considers apocalypticism, then, merely the pendant to a mistaken belief in progress. For Assmann, as for Sebald, the Shoah forms the end point of the dialectic of *Bildung*: the Shoah is no longer legible through the means of *Bildung*, and also provides the terminus point to the dialectic of Enlightenment. Paradoxically, however, by declaring the end of the dialectic of Enlightenment,\(^{54}\) and attempting to bypass the


\(^{54}\) A brief scene in *Der junge Mann* transparently and rather crudely parodies the Frankfurt School, in the guise of a ‘Frankfurter Institut,’ represented by a social democrat, a ‘stickige Büromensch’ (DJM 84).
modern era by making connections between postmodern poetics and culture, and 
myth, Strauß's literary project continues the dialectic of Bildung past the traumatic 
caesura of the Shoah by attempting to further a Romantic concept of the autonomous 
poet. Equally paradoxically, Austerlitz, by mourning the loss of the past and the 
division of the self, necessarily invokes a Romantic yearning for lost unity which Der 
junge Mann attempts to resurrect, as part of Strauß's project to reclaim Novalis's 
concept of progressive universal poesy. Like Sebald, Strauß recognises the complexity 
of traditional narrative in the postmodern era; while Sebald undertakes a complexly 
refracted narrative strategy that I explore further in Chapter Three, Strauß fragments 
his narrative persona between various first and third person narrators, and an 
omniscient philosophical theoriser. While Austerlitz aims at the ethical and historical 
education of the reader, Strauß's pedagogical aim in Der junge Mann is more esoteric: 
to break with the linearity which he sees as endemic in our culture:

Wir brauchen andere Uhren, das ist wahr, Rückkoppelungswerke, welche uns befreien 
von dem alten sturen Vorwärts-Zeiger-Sinn. Wir brauchen Schaltkreise, die zwischen 
dem Einst und Jetzt geschlossen sind (DJM 10)

Such 'circuits,' he suggests, could be 'Allegorien. Initiationsgeschichten. 
RomantischerReflexionsRoman. Ein wenig hergebracht, ein wenig vorgetragen.' This 
statement serves as a programmatic model for his transformation of the 
Bildungsroman: Der junge Mann represents an attempt to use the inheritance of the 
Enlightenment in order to reconnect to the Romantic era.

2.3.1 Critique of German culture and its pedagogical correction

Der junge Mann is a complex, non-linear novel that engages with abstruse neo-
Romantic modes of allegory in an attempt to connect to the mythical pre-modern 
German past. It is therefore somewhat difficult to summarise in a linear fashion. Its 
programmatic Einführung sets out the author's aesthetic project; the next section, Die 
Strasse (Der junge Mann) is a conscious reworking of Wilhelm Meister's aesthetic 
education in the theatre, whose protagonist Leon Pracht is initiated into a Cologne 
theatre in 1969. Thereafter, the novel splits out into diffuse, interrelating fragments, 
featuring diverse journeys of subjective dissolution and resolution that are loosely 

172), whose obsession with the shibboleth of 'democracy' shows a lack of 'female intelligence' and 
interest in Leon Pracht's insights into an alternative society.
connected with the post-apocalyptic theatrical project that Pracht tries to create in *Die Strasse*, but which in no way add up to a coherent biography. *Der Wald* contains an allegory of a female bank worker who stumbles out of linear time into a timeless wood where she encounters allegories of the detritus that is consumer society, and sups with the sinister ‘Head of all Germans.’ Next, set in the near future, after consumer society has collapsed, *Die Siedlung* tells of an anthropologist who becomes drawn into an illegitimate affair with a member of the tribe he is supposed to be studying, and further engages in incest. Then, *Die Terrasse* is a *Bildungsgespräch* that concerns the aesthetics and future of Germany, including a set of fables about art; and *Der Turm* returns to the Pracht figure. In my comparison, I focus on the fragments *Die Strasse, Der Wald, Die Frau meines Bruders* and *Die Geschichte der Almut.*

In interview in 1986, Strauß declared an aspiration to achieve a new elitist fusion of poetic and scientific intelligence through the publication of *Der junge Mann.* This fusion marks a departure from the pessimistic attitude towards technology and science held by Benjamin and Sebald. *Der junge Mann* attempts, by means of textual ‘feedback loops’ between past and present, ironically to reclaim and transform fragments of German literary history, and to reclaim myth and metaphor for a generation of Germans brought up on television:

> ohne Mythen und Metapher ist unser zentrales Organ [...] nicht angeschlossen an die Ordnung des Lebendigen [...] mit der Wiederkehr der Erinnerung werden auch die Wasser wieder klar (DJM 214).

Where Sebald considers his pedagogical responsibilities to be towards a morally ignorant German readership, Strauß’s is for a future generation of ‘andere Leser,’ whose educated aesthetic sensibilities make them find reading a difficult process.

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56 This movement away from a universally paedagogical, enlightening function of the Bildungsroman self-consciously mirrors the move from Enlightenment to Romanticism in the Bildungsroman, as described by Gerhard Mayer: ‘Das ideologisch erstarrte bürgerliche Menschenbild der späten Aufklärung wich einem geistesaristokratischen Leitbild. Das frühromantische Lebensgefühl ist unbürgerlich, denn es entzieht sich gesellschaftlich gebundener Konformität; es orientiert sich vielmehr am außergewöhnlichen “genialischen Individuum”.’ Mayer, *Der deutsche Bildungsroman*, p. 60.
This project for reclaiming a gnostic legacy and mythical cultural memory is very different to Sebald’s project of personal and social remembrance of suffering, but it is developed in response to the same social and literary context, and to the same German cultural inheritance. Strauß’s abstruse pedagogical project still engages with the contemporary (West) German state, and contains constant debates about the morality and feasibility of democracy (see, for example, the lengthy debate between Reppenfries and Hanswerner in Die Terrasse)\(^{58}\) as it is imagined in the 1980s.

### a The German forest and the German past

If Strauß is trying actively to engage with the condition of German post-war society, in Austerlitz, by contrast, Germany, and the idea of Germanness, is an alien and painful lacuna.

Austerlitz experiences Germany only through the obscene administrative neologisms of the Shoah, and as a sinister wood, glimpsed from a train — a

grenzen- und namenlos[e][s], gänzlich von finsteren Waldungen überwachsen[e][s] Land, das ich durchqueren mußte, ohne zu wissen wohin, und das, was ich nun dort draußen

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\(^{58}\) In the ‘Terrasse’ section of DJM, the figures of Reppenfries and Hanswerner carry on a form of Bildungsgespräch on the possibility of recreating an art that, in the context of the Federal German Republic, can connect to the mythologies of the past. Berka points out that this discussion also parodies the discussions between Settembrini and Naphtha in Der Zauberberg. ‘Beide [Reppenfries and Naphtha] bringen die gefährliche Seite einer zu wörtlichen Nietzsche-Nachfolge zur Anschauung, die den rhetorischen Charakter seiner Bildungskritik und seine Liebe zur ‘wahren Bildung’ ganz verloren hat.’ Berka, Mythos-Theorie und Allegorik bei Botho Strauß, p. 76. Hanswerner, by contrast, is a parody of Settembrini and his unreflected passion for critical modernity.
Although *Austerlitz* is written in German, by casting Austerlitz as a Czech Jew, and setting his story variously in England, Wales, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, Sebald evades the vexed question of German identity. (I deal with this question of German language and identity more fully in Chapter Three). In addition, Sebald uses a German idiom which, while it is a distinctively original ‘Sebaldian’ language, also, like Austerlitz’s concept of history, reads as though its development had been arrested at the end of the nineteenth century, whereas Strauß deliberately incorporates contemporary colloquialisms in order to point up the impoverished nature of German as it is currently spoken, as well as the elegance of his own poetic idiom.

To take an example from *Der junge Mann*: when Yossica, an emblematic figure of disaffected, rootless German youth, is asked if she intends to apply for an apprenticeship, she replies ‘Hat doch keinen Zweck, krieg ich ja doch nicht,’ (DJM 195). Her colloquial language is not only intended to show up her lack of *Bildung*, in the sense of culture, or respect for the mother tongue, in comparison to the measured speech of those around her, but also expresses the failure of the individualistic project of *Bildung*, in the sense of education. Yossica had previously stated her chief aim in life in terms of self-fulfilment – ‘Ich möchte frei leben und mein Leben selbst bestimmen’ (DJM 195) – but her defeatist response to any concrete attempts at self-determination via an apprenticeship show her unfitness to become a free subject, and, by association, the unfitness of her generation. In response to this perceived impoverishment, Strauß self-consciously not only attempts to re-invigorate the German language by means of neologisms, but also accords it a quasi-mythical status. Correspondingly, Strauß repeatedly re-imagines the German wood, which in *Der junge Mann* appears as a sphere of initiation and transition. Simon Schama has described this discourse of the wood as locus of ‘timbered virtue’, a dialectical image that is a supposed constant in cultural representations of Germany from Tacitus

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59 Later, though, Yossica becomes transformed into a flower not dissimilar to the blue flower of the *Klingsohrmärchen*: she is reduced to a face alone lying on the ground, a fate which apparently allows her to find self-fulfilment as an artist and a lover. As will become apparent, Strauß’s gender politics are questionable.

on, a source of Germanic authenticity, and also of German atrocity. Schama writes that the German Romantics appropriated the trope of the German wood as a site of resistance to the stony Latin world of reason and science, claiming that they were reclaiming the wood from oblivion: however,

It was the survival, rather than the disappearance, of the cult of Arminius and of the woodland *Heimat*, even at a time when German political fortunes were at their lowest ebb, that enabled a later generation to revitalize the ancient myths and traditions.\(^6^1\)

Schama traces the permutations of this revival of German timbered identity, from Klopstock’s overwrought *Hainbund*, the Grimm’s *Althdeutsche Walder* through xenophobic discourses of *Heimat*. ‘The long, undeniable connections between the mythic memory of the forest and militant nationalism have created a zone of great moral angst in Germany’, Schama concludes.\(^6^2\)

Both Strauß and Sebald are fully aware of the complex cultural and historical connotations of the literary wood.\(^6^3\) Whereas, in *Austerlitz*, the wood appears as a menacing space, in *Der junge Mann* the wood appears in its double aspect as site of historical trauma and Romantic source of poetic inspiration. An elaborate allegorical sequence, entitled *Der Wald*, describes a bank worker (*Bankkauffrau*) metaphorically performing a journey from post-modern Germany (epitomized by the car she is driving, and indeed the feminist neologism of her name), through an ‘erhabenes Tor, durch das […] eine Vielzahl bunter und ferner Erinnerungen hereinströmte,’ into the back entrance of the wood (DJM 67-70). The wood is not monolithic and intimidating, like that which Austerlitz views, but is full of rubbish thrown away by the consumer society. As Marieke Krajenbrink notes,\(^6^4\) the polluted condition of this wood cannot simply be read as a satirical comment on the traditional icons of German culture itself. Rather, the condoms, Polaroid boxes and newspapers littering the wood ironically draw attention to the fact that the wood and its romantic, mythical memories still maintain their archaic allure for the modern German subject (DJM 70). If Benjamin declares that the art work has lost its aura in the era of technical reproducibility, the

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\(^{6^1}\) Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, p. 102.

\(^{6^2}\) Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, p. 119.

\(^{6^3}\) See, for example, Sebald’s analysis of the apocalyptic function of the wood in Döblin’s *Wallenstein*. Sebald, *Döblin*, pp. 119 ff.

presence of a discarded Polaroid boxes and newspapers in the wood suggest that that myth has survived despite, not because of, the reproducibility of the artwork. Once she has passed through this wood and away from the sphere of linear time, the bank worker then proceeds, via a tower where all the voices of Germany are offered to her for sale in return for units of self (‘Ich-Quanten’).

The tower also reappears in a later sequence in the novel, where Leon Pracht flees through the wood, past the sphere of ordered neo-classical gardens towards Romanticism:

Ich entfernte mich nun aus der klaren Achsenordnung des Barockgartens, ließ rechterhand Heckenlabyrinth und Kegelspiel zurück, überquerte die kleine Palladiobrücke, um nun in den romantisch-modernen, den illusionären Teil der Park-Anlage vorzudringen. (DJM 306)

Later, in ‘Der zurück in sein Haus gestopfte Jäger’, an enthusiastic businessman, Gründe, develops a project to build a utopian community around the tower in the centre of the mythical wood (an image from Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre), devoted to creativity and self-reliance, but the bank worker knows that this is doomed to a disastrous outcome despite his supposedly well-meaning vision. She says

Jedesmal, wenn sie, durch ihre Erlebnisse beschämt, unter sich blickte, verschwamm das heitere Gesicht des Besitzers mit dem karpfenmauligen Haupt aller Deutschen (DJM 107).

Thus, Der junge Mann is not merely cultural critique of post-war Germany, but also allegorically alludes to the persistence of the dark side of German history beneath contemporary media-saturated culture. The wood takes on more mythical overtones. Yossica’s disaffectedness and cultural impoverishment is not merely the result of the ‘große Menge von Meinungen und Informationen, lauter unerprobte Existenz’ that Reppenfries diagnoses as the ailment of modern Germany. (DJM 194). Rather, Pracht suspects

aus diesem jungen Geschöpf das Anwehen eines alten Unheils, eines geschichtlichen Fluchs viel eher zu verspüren als eine Jugend- oder Wohlstandsnot. Plötzlich war es der lange Atem der Rache, welcher dieses Mädchen (und unzählige Altersgenossen) in ein offenes Missglücken hineintrab (DJM 197)

Presaging the arguments that he would later present in ‘Anschwellender Bocksgesang,’ Strauß has Yossica warn the debating thinkers of the ineradicably
xenophobic nature of Germany, ""Ausländer raus"" and so, das sind bleibende Sachen, die liegen in Deutschland so sicher in der Luft wie saurer Regen' (DJM 197). Acid rain, of course, is not necessarily an immutable fact of nature, but a product of technocratic industrialisation. Strauß may here be satirising the ignorance of youth about the natural world, satirising knee-jerk ecologism, or himself making an ecological protest about the depredation of the natural world by industry: possibly, all three. If *Der junge Mann* predates *Austerlitz* by fifteen years, it only predates *Nach der Natur* by two: Colin Riordan writes that *Nach der Natur*’s apocalyptic views of natural destruction are very much of the spirit of the late 1980s.

In the context of 1988, when this text was written, the prospect of a final global catastrophe was all too immediate. Images of catastrophe were common in German literature of the period, as Axel Goodbody (1997) has shown. Strauß’s accounts of the despoliation of nature by contemporary culture are more allegoric than apocalyptic, but certainly share in the environmental pessimism of Sebald, along with the knowledge that humanity’s natural Heimat has been rendered entirely inaccessible. However, where Austerlitz fears and seeks to ward off this ‘historical curse’ of Germany through his moralising narrative, Strauß indicates that this curse, and with it the legacy of Hitler, is unavoidable, indeed lies in the metaphysical essence of Germany. Therefore, the false, liberating, cosmopolitan values of Enlightenment, which have made Germans ‘frei wie noch nie, frei wie verrückt’ are exposed as not only hopeless, but destructive (DJM 195). The ‘Rückkoppelungsschleifen’ that Strauß constructs in the novel thus are intended to dispel the myth of Enlightenment, to reconnect to German myth and create
eine[] große[] Gesundung, eine[n] gehöri gen Reinwaschung, um uns den Quellen und Zuflüssen der großen Kulturen wieder anzuschließen und Stärkung aus ihnen zu erfahren. Zugehörigkeit. (DJM 213)

Strauß’s elaborate allegory of the wood can be read as a concrete counterpoint to the void that is all that Austerlitz can imagine in the place of Germany. Austerlitz has a similarly mythical imagination of Germany to that of Strauß’s narrator: he feels that it is a ‘tatsächlich mythologische[] Landschaft […] nur die äußere Tarnung einer

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unterirdisch über viele Quadratmeilen sich erstreckenden Produktionsstätte’ (A 326). In Austerlitz’s narrative, too, a stream that represents a kind of ‘essential Germanness’ – here, the Rhine – is located out of time, but his narrative associates the ‘romantische Theaterkulisse’ on the Rhine with horror. Unlike the dialectical images of built architecture and ruinous landscapes, the German wood is unambiguously a locus of horror in Austerlitz, its metaphysical-mythical content no resource of poetic meaning, but rather of German crimes.

b Postwar German society and the persistence of Hitler

Both authors contrast these dark, essentialist images of Germany with set-piece images of its contemporary urban society. Both Austerlitz and Leon Pracht emerge from the dark woods into the hectic, postmodern commercialism of a German shopping street. Leon Pracht escapes from the ‘unholder Garten’ of the romantic park into a ‘herrliche [], moderne[] Großstadtstraße’ (DJM 311). Austerlitz tells us

Sowie ich herausgekommen war aus der Vorplatzunterführung, wurde ich aufgenommen von einer unübersehbaren Menschenmenge, die, nicht anders als Wasser im Flußbett, über die gesamte Breite der Straße dahinströmte... (A 321)

For Austerlitz, the German street is no less horrifying for him than the wood. Indeed, it is more so, because it appears to him both as an alienating space of modernity, and as a simulacrum of Enlightenment reason which hides the murderous past behind it:

Es beunruhigte mich, daß ich, wenn ich emporblickte an den Fassaden zu beiden Seiten der Straße... nirgends... eine krumme Linie erkennen konnte oder sonst eine Spur der vergangenen Zeit. (A 322)

The continued existence of the German wood behind the postmodern façade is evident: ‘Als erstes stach mir auf meiner Exkursion die große Zahl grauer, brauner und grüner Jägermantel und Hüte in die Augen’ (A 322). Leon Pracht also feels the street as a site of jarring disjunction between past and present: ‘Wie konnte dies altertümliche Gelände so ohne jeden Übergang in die pralle Lebensader einer glitzernden City einmünden?’ (DJM 312). His street scene is more explicitly allegorical, a hyperreal ‘Trugmaschinerie’ or ‘holodrome’ (DJM 313) cast by a deceiver, who reduces the sacred space of Germany to an amnesiac urban waste:

The ‘Fußgängerparadiese [...] die es anscheinend in Deutschland [...] in mehr oder weniger derselben Form in sämtlichen Städten gibt’ (A 322) are both the contemporary continuation of Benjamin’s arcades, and the apotheosis of rationality. Where for Sebald the teeming masses and empty facades are horrifying because they represent an attempt to obviate the crimes of the German past, for Strauß this urban ‘Elysion’ (DJM 313) is horrifying because it denies the mythical, spiritual power of this past. Leon Pracht escapes from this dystopia back into the wood. From here, he swims under the sea back up to a ‘Transformatorenhäuschen (DJM 314). Once safely restored to the wood, he re-enacts a redemptive section of Novalis’s *Klingsohrmärchen*, in which ‘kein Stein lag mehr auf den Menschenbrust’ (DJM 315).

In keeping with Strauß’s project of non-linearity, this Romantic moment of resolution is not permanent, and Pracht is returned to disenchanted everyday life. Rather than a meaningful trajectory, then, a transforming play and an exchange between postmodern and eternal-mythical determine the existence of Leon Pracht.

By contrast, Austerlitz leaves the street and continues on his journey through Germany. However, in gazing at the Rhine, he imagines the sunken village of Llanwyddyn where his father lived as a child. Unlike Leon Pracht, Austerlitz sees no rescue or transformation from these waters, nor any way to resurrect the lost civilisation of his father’s childhood: instead, Austerlitz envisions a drowning host of mice who ‘verzweiflungsvoll rudert, um auf die rettende Insel zu gelangen’ (A 327).

In his childhood, Austerlitz connected the drowning of Llanwyddyn with a ‘Vergeltungsmythologie,’ the visitation of God’s wrath on the sinful village, and imagines that his father alone was saved, as a righteous man, from the flood that otherwise buried the entire village and his foster-father’s history and identity. His journey through modern Germany shows that, even if he, like his foster-father, is a sole survivor from a terrible flood that wiped out his own family culture, no such justice is at hand for the German perpetrators or their victims. As he stands on the street, his rucksack causes a woman in a Tyrol hat to take him for a homeless person. She gives him a mark as alms, ‘diese im Jahr 1956 mit dem Kopf des Kanzlers Adenauer geprägte Münze.’ Post-war German democracy, as epitomized by
Adenauer, is shown to be no adequate recompense for Austerlitz’s profound metaphysical homelessness, but rather an insult. The alms-giver’s Tyrolean hat epitomises, for Sebald, the menacing persistence of Nazi ideology in modern Germany, as well as in his own biography: Rüdiger Görner quotes Sebald as saying,

dass ich meiner vaterländischen Vorgeschichte, in der das Trachtlerische keine unbedeutende Rolle gespielt hat, nie würde entkommen können.\(^{66}\)

If Strauß’s Germany is under threat by the exchange-values of the commodity society, Sebald’s is damned by its refusal either to reject its ‘trachtlerische’ legacy, or to provide proper compensation to its victims. Thus, the view of German history, and the inheritance of German culture, shown in Austerlitz are entirely critical, indeed catastrophic in a Benjaminian sense. Sebald’s negative allegories of both the ‘trachtlerisch’ and the contemporary aspects of German society indicate that the inheritance of German culture, and indeed that of modernity, is entirely destructive. Der junge Mann, similarly to Austerlitz, envisions a society variously overshadowed by the dead corpse of ‘Belshazzar,’ the ‘worst of all Germans,’ or still controlled by him from below, in the form of a grisly ‘Haupt der Deutschen’ – a grotesque figure which is vaguely associated with Hitler, and to whom the bank worker is led after she has refused to buy anything with ‘Ich-Quanten’ from the tower. This surprisingly commercially-minded Head declares ‘Ich bin das Wesen aller Deutschen [...] keiner denkt deutsch ohne mich’ (90). Half seductive, half terrifying, the unchanging presence of the Head of the Germans underground suggests the timeless existence of the mythical German nation within the soul of the modern German state. Strauß suggests that this presence is beyond the reach of history – ‘Ich zeite!’ – (DJM 91) the Head declares. More, it is omnipresent, as it controls the ‘Grundwässer des Menschen’, (DJM 83) and, although the Head invites the bank worker to an ‘offenen Gedankenaustausch’ (DJM 92), it is a mythical being, inaccessible to critical reason. Later, the Head appears as the ruler of the mythical space of the wood: the wood appears as a locus amoenus, an Edenic space where the bank worker becomes pregnant, gives birth to a child and brings her up until chased out of her idyll by a

monster, which rapes the mother and chases the child. Only the Head of all the Germans saves her from this dark aspect of myth.\(^\text{67}\)

In *Austerlitz*, the sole appearance of Hitler shows him flanked by his enthusiastic supporters at Nuremberg:

\[\text{nicht nur wurde die allen gemeinsame tragische Vorgeschichte beschworen in der Zeremonie der Totenehrung, in der Hitler und Heß und Himmler, wie Maximilian es uns beschrieb, zu den Klängen eines die Seele der ganzen Nation bis in das Innerste aufruhrenden Trauermarschs durch die breite Gasse der schnurgerade ausgerichteten, von der Macht des neuen Staats aus lauter unbeweglichen deutschen Leibern gebildeten Kolumnen und Kompanien schritten [...]. (A 247)}\]

This apparition is not dissimilar to the vision of the ‘trauerzornig’ German nation in its entirety, following the catafalque of the Head of all the Germans, that Leon Pracht witnesses from the Terrace (DJM 295). In both novels, Hitler is an apparition produced by the totality of German culture and society, not a fate that befell it from the outside. Like Strauß, Sebald shrinks from too direct a portrayal of Hitler – if in *Der junge Mann* he appears as a series of allegorical or hybrid monsters, in *Austerlitz* he appears in one of the most encapsulated and mediated of all narratives, Austerlitz telling how Vera recounted Austerlitz’s father Maximilian describing Hitler in *Triumph des Willens*. In both narratives, Hitler is the dark but almost unnameable heart of German history, hypostatized as absolute, inherited evil. Unlike *Austerlitz*, however, which shows Germany as permanently in thrall to this influence, Strauß attempts to circumvent it by transforming it in poetry. Marieke Krajenbrink suggests that this transformation is intended as an ironic reflection of Romantic images, which she explains as follows:

\[\text{Das reicht von der nationalistischen bzw. nationalsozialistischen Perverzionierung in Richtung völkischer Deutschtümelei und der sich in der Reaktion darauf entwickelte}
\]

\(^\text{67}\) Here, it must be noted that Strauß’s depiction of the ‘mythological’ aspect of women descends into tiresome clichés about reproduction and physicality. Pat and Margarethe, the actresses who initiate Leon into the theatre, are halfway between mythical goddesses of initiation and socially plausible, historical characters. Thus, their clothes and material appearance are described minutely, as is their lesbian interaction, just as the bank worker’s car and business meetings are described. Nonetheless, their ‘essence’ is revealed as entirely Other, foils by means of which male protagonists find themselves.
Diskreditierung der Romantik als gefährlichen deutschen Irrationalismus […] bis hin zum […] dekonstruktivistischen Romantikbild.  

She suggests that in this way ‘werden dem Leser die Spuren der Vergangenheit […] in der Gegenwart vor Augen geführt, und zwar mit einer ironischen Distanz’. This aesthetic procedure, although informed by a different political analysis and poetic project, does mirror Sebald’s techniques of ‘Spurensuchen’ and of aesthetics of networks. Indeed, Berka goes even closer to a Sebaldisian reading of history in her interpretation of the allegorical head, suggesting that it represents a fetishized consumerism that has indeed sprung up precisely at the point where the Nazi past was repressed. ‘Hier erscheint – wie schon bei den Syks – die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern als Zustand permanenter (geistiger) Umnachtung’, she writes, with a clear echo of the Mitscherlichs. ‘Die Trauerarbeit muß unabschließbar – also melancholisch – bleiben, weil sonst die Gesellschaft ihr einziges (wenn auch gehaßtes) Liebesobjekt als Bezug verlieren müsste’, she concludes.  

In socio-psychological terms, both authors agree that Germany’s failure to mourn means that the cathected father/Hitler-figure will always return.

2.3.2 Incest and initiation: negotiation of inheritance in the two novels

If *Austerlitz* mourns the loss of Austerlitz’s individual integrity, *Der junge Mann*, as Leon Pracht’s journey through the wood and the city show, charts a voyage away from traditional humanism towards a mode of self-reflexive romanticism. Both novels employ a fragmentary structure. Whereas *Austerlitz* is concentrated around the biography of its central character, *Der junge Mann* consists of myriad fragments of biographies, which reflect each other but, in Romantic fashion, do not add up to any one consistent biographical narrative. Instead, each fragment narrates an allegorical journey of a depersonalized figure away from a modern, realistic, post-Enlightenment sphere through an initiation into a Romantic sphere of myth, where time is disrupted and the linear form of *Bildung* is abandoned in favour of a depersonalized, reflexive form of initiation. The emphasis on initiation is a direct reversal of the linear project of bourgeois subject formation: according to Erich Biebel, the institutionalisation of

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education, as opposed to initiation, is a key constitutive moment in the transition from undifferentiated feudal forms of life to bourgeois modernity. Biebel diagnoses institutionalized education as a mechanism designed to cement the identity and further the economic interests of the bourgeoisie, but one which opens up an aporia between the economic basis of bourgeois life and ‘eine der bürgerlichen Erwerbssphäre ausgelagerten Kunstwelt’. By rejecting the economically informed process of Bildung in favour of the pre-modern institution of initiation, Strauß is rejecting the tensions implicit in a search for authentic self-realisation within the confines of society in favour of an immanent ‘steady state’ model of being. Unlike ‘pre-modern’ initiations, however, the initiations described in Der junge Mann do not serve to integrate the protagonist into a pre-existing society, but are aesthetic initiations that separate the narrator from social bounds. They are a rejection of modernity that moves the protagonist away to a mythical pre-history.

More, there are many instances where Strauß represents a move away from a subject-centred vision entirely, towards a diffuse, mystical one that cites the Romantics. The episode ‘Die Frau meines Bruders’ is a paradigmatic narrative of initiation within the novel, in which the initiate passes from an Enlightenment, scientist view of linear temporality through incest and abasement into the synchronous time of myth. As in Austerlitz, this internal section of the novel’s narrative reverses the linear Bildungsprozess of Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, sending the protagonist back to his origins in response to the alienation and amnesia of modern society. However, where the authentic locus of Austerlitz’s identity is sited in his Czech childhood, in ‘Die Frau meines Bruders’...
meines Bruders’ the protagonist is returned to a prelapsarian, impersonal condition. He reverses the Oedipal process by rejecting bourgeois socialisation, passing through and reuniting with nature. Helga Kaußen points out the references made by Strauß to Lévi-Strauss’s research on the incest taboo as a symbol of the boundary between nature and (historical) culture:


Sebald’s comments about initiation are here instructive: writing about mourning rituals on Corsica, he notes how in fact, the pre-modern initiation ritual, as described by Lévi-Strauss, already contains elements of the bourgeois theatre: it is not, in fact, an unreflected self-abnegation in the face of timeless myth, but always carries with it a sense of self-consciousness and self-presentation:

In der anthropologischen Literatur, bei Frazer, Huizinga, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss und Bliz wird mehrfach beschrieben, wie die Mitglieder früher Stammeskulturen, wenn sie ihre Initiations- oder Opferrituale zelebrierten, in einer unterschwellig immer mitlaufenden Form der Selbstwahrnehmung ein sehr genaues Bewußtsein hatten davon, daß ihr zwanghafter, stets mit Verletzung und Verstümmelung verbundener Extremismus im Grunde nichts anderes war als pure, bisweilen allerdings auf den Punkt des Todes gehende Schauspielerei. (CS 30)

Thus, self-conscious theatricality and initiation are always bound together, as, indeed, they are in Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre. The process of incestuous initiation in Der junge Mann takes place as follows. The narrator of ‘Die Frau meines Bruders’ is an anthropologist, who is supposed to be observing the development of language in a tribe called the Syks, but who loses his position of scientistic objectivity, instead becoming sexually attracted to a Syk woman. Here, Pracht is akin to the figure of

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75 The Syks are the people who have developed in the utopian settlement grounded by the Hitler/entrepreneur figure Gründe, in conjunction with the bank worker.
Novelli, who is invoked at the beginning of Austerlitz – a man who, after being tortured by the Nazis, fled to South America and joins a tribe in the jungle, going so far as to learn their language (A 43). Once again, Strauß’s anti-scientistic position is not unlike Sebald’s own affection for a pre-modern, anti-Enlightenment view of nature, which privileges the Wunderkammer over the punitive observations and dissections of Dr. Tulp’s anatomy lesson, or indeed nineteenth-century ethnography itself. Strauß’s anti-scientistic empathy is, unlike Sebald’s, affirmatively sexual. Having rejected the rational premises of Enlightenment science, Strauß’s narrator longs to dissolve the Enlightenment construct of his individual self (DJM 155). Subsequently, the narrator is locked into a Syk chalet – located past the original forest on a colony border – with his brother’s wife, referred to as a ‘fremde Verwandte’ (DJM 159). Here, the narrator dreams that their bedroom is transformed into ‘einen blumenüberladenen Katafalk, die verschwenderische Keuschheit ging über in die stille Pracht der letzten Dinge’ (DJM 160). Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject is here useful in interpreting the liminal import attached to the catafalque, and to the further motifs of revulsion that the story employs from this point on. For Kristeva, the abject

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76 See, for example, Westwärts-Ostwärts. Aporien deutschsprachiger Ghetto geschichten, p. 162: ‘Das 19. Jahrhundert hatte bekanntlich ein geradezu unstillbares Verlangen nach der Beschreibung all dessen, was als fremd- und ausländisch anziehend und abstoßend in einem erscheinen konnte.’ For Sebald, the ghetto narrative treads a perilous line between a scientific study on the one side and ‘der krassen Karikatur andererseits.’ In a satirical nod to the all-encompassing pretensions of the Frankfurt School, the officious bureaucrats who are sponsoring and monitoring Pracht’s research are based in Frankfurt. Their ostensibly objective standpoint, of course, has as much to do with Foucault’s structures of discipline and control as does Dr. Tulp’s anatomy lesson. Sebald, ‘Westwärts-Ostwärts. Aporien deutscher Ghetto geschichten’, Literatur und Kritik 23 (1989) Nr.233/34, pp. 161-177.

77 In an interview with Volker Hage in 1986, Strauß speaks dismissively of French post-structuralist thought, complaining that ‘Die Leihformen aus dem Französischen sind ja entsetzlich!’ (214) Mancher hierzulande könne keinen Text mehr schreiben, ohne daß ‘eine Bataille-Lacan-Sauce drübergegossen’ werde. However, it is clear from this statement that he is at least familiar with contemporary French writers, and in an earlier interview, he makes the fundamental position of Freud in his thinking clear: ‘Freuds Schriften allerdings sind ihm wichtig gewesen: zur Analyse menschlichen Verhaltens und seiner Hintergründe.’ (192). Thus, although Kristeva’s work may not have directly influenced Strauß, Powers of Horror draws on the same Freudian and Lévi-Straussian structures that inform Strauß’s thinking, and indeed was published almost contemporaneously with DJM, two years previously. These intellectual and historical links make Kristeva’s theories a useful intellectual tool in understanding Strauß’ complex mythologies.
is that which is repelled to mark the boundary of nature and culture, body and world. The corpse is the very locus of the abject: ‘the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled.’ Thus, the dreams of the cadaver serve as a further stage in the journey away from socialization and individuation, an expulsion of the ‘I’ and a step closer to the boundary between time and myth.

Once the border of humanity has been overstepped, the brother’s wife undergoes a transformation into a ‘kotiger Dämon,’ lying in her own bodily wastes in the bath. Incest has turned her into a creature ‘das in unendlicher Entfernung von der Sphäre des Menschen niederkauerte, am Rand, nein schon inmitten der breiigen Zuflüsse der Verdammmis hing’ (DJM 162). The transgression of boundaries of the body and morality usher in the incest to come, which in turn transgresses the boundaries of the physical subject, and the symbolic order of society wherein it is inscribed. Consummating his re-absorption of the abject, he makes love to his brother’s wife in the bath of faeces, and falls into a ‘dumpfe Ohnmacht’ from which he awakes in a ‘blüten-weißen Bettuch (DJM 164),’ a symbol of the poetic purity bestowed on him after his passage through incest. Later, however, in keeping with the self-ironic, postmodern poetic strategy of Der junge Mann, this seemingly ecstatic incest is revealed as a procedure administered by the Frankfurt school for which he receives a large bill. Nonetheless, the narrator accepts the necessity of the procedure, and retains his respect for his brother’s wife as a figure of initiation. He now recognises his incestuous lover in her true artistic form:

Als Frau meines Bruders nächtlich und begehrenswert, erschien sie mir nun, als Künstlerin entlarvt, hell und verehrenswürdig. (DJM 169)

Despite his disillusionment with science and with the manipulative procedure, the change wrought in him by incest remains. He is liberated from the oppressive procedures of objective science, and gains an amount of insight into the nature of his quest: a futile repetition, but he also achieves a poor irony that allows him to negotiate it. As Leon Pracht says later in the novel, ‘Durch Abfluss und Kloake geschieht auch die erweiterte Geburt. So werden wir alle noch einmal durch den Trichter gepresst und

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manche Leiben wie Max und Moritz liegen am Boden in flacher, erschreckter Gestalt’ (DJM 304).

2.3.3 Theatre in Der junge Mann

‘Die Frau meines Bruders’ makes explicit Strauß’s invocation of incest and of the Romantic desire to overcome the construct of the Enlightenment self in order to unite with myth. The first section of the novel, *Die Straße*, more directly parallels the forwards-oriented *Bildungsprozeß* both of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and of *Austerlitz*, by invoking the trope of the theatre as a space of aesthetic, as well as mythical, initiation

*Der junge Mann* is so structured that the theatre appears, not as identical to initiation, but as a precursor to the more profound ritual of incest, both on a structural and on a discursive level. This first section of *Der junge Mann* narrates how Leon Pracht, the ‘young man’ of the title, rebels against his bourgeois father’s authoritarian request to continue his own scholarly work, and instead embarks on what his father describes as a ‘Höllenreise zum Theater.’ Appropriately enough, this section is set in Cologne in 1969, and Pracht’s rebellion against his father is explicitly coded as generational. In the theatre, he directs an ambitious production of Genet’s *Les Bonnes*. Pracht confusedly dreams of finding bohemian freedom and artistic purity in the theatre, akin to Wilhelm Meister, but unlike Jacques Austerlitz, whose ability to imagine a future for himself has been all but erased by the loss of his personal identity, and whose creative vision – shown in his scholarly work – is more concerned with uncovering the past than with burning a path into the future. Pracht follows an extravagant theatrical vision that hopes variously for ‘a grand heresy,’ or even the redemptive-sounding ‘a new Jerusalem,’ in a theatre that appears to him as ‘eine mir unzugänglicher Mysterienstätte.’ Where for Wilhelm Meister the theatre is a space to experience and meditate on the follies of his youth, for Leon Pracht it is a sphere of aesthetic initiation, where he breaks with the values both of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, as represented by his father, and of didactic liberalism. Pracht’s father is a scholar of early Christianity, who believes that ‘Es genügt, die Klassiker zuhause zu lesen. Man verdirbt sich bloß die Fantasie, wenn man ins Theater geht.’

The scepticism shown towards paternal scholarship, here, also mirrors the inferior status of institutional scholarship in *Austerlitz*, which functions as a compensatory memory, an avoidance mechanism or even, as in the Bibliotheque Nationale, as an
oppressive structure of power that promotes ignorance. Historical knowledge is nonetheless intimately bound up with the *bien-pensant* patriarchy for both novels: Hilary asks Austerlitz ‘ob ich vielleicht von Haus aus, durch meinen Vater oder einen älteren Bruder, mit der Geschichtswissenschaft vertraut sei’ (A 111). Austerlitz’s uncanny self-parenting in his scholarship is an aberration in the traditional patriarchal structure of knowledge, even to a benevolent pedagogical figure. Despite his father’s opposition to a theatrical career, Pracht at first integrates his father’s scholarly inheritance into his production, drawing on the paternal repertoire of theological symbology, Pracht fantasises that his role as a director is like that of a Phrygian heretic with the two actresses as his disciples. However, Pracht subsequently breaks with his father’s tradition of *Bildung*, when a director advises him to abandon his pedagogical concept.

Alle Bemühungen, sie (Schauspieler) zu didaktisch-formalen Kunststücken abzurichten, führen unweigerlich zu einer krampfhaften Einschränkung ihrer Begabung. (DJM 51)

Like Wilhelm Meister’s production of *Hamlet*, his *Les Bonnes* is supposed to be a definitive statement about the contemporary state of humanity. However, Pracht now expresses this through a post-apocalyptic setting.

doch spielt es auch jetzt, nein, noch ein wenig später – wenn alles vorüber ist. Es spielt auf einer längst abgegrasten Weide der Gesellschaft. Überall lungen verlorene Gruppen herum, kauern entstellte Einzelwesen auf ödem Boden. Nichts zieht sie mehr voran. Alle Entwicklungen, alle Antriebe und Forschritte sind zum Erliegen gekommen. (DJM 38)

The choice of production mirrors the move from a subject-based to an anti-individualistic vision. Wilhelm Meister’s *Hamlet* symbolises Wilhelm’s attempt to work through his Oedipal complex, to move away from his fixation on the maternal and to prepare for his own fatherhood, thereby generating a social and historical identity for himself. Thus, where *Hamlet* is a play which is often taken to more or less define the modern, self-questioning humanist individual, *Les Bonnes* is a sadomasochistic play of identities in which the two principal characters, two sisters, switch personae incessantly, thereby self-reflexively deconstructing any possibility of reading them as unitary individuals. Eventually, the sisters end up by murdering each other (DJM 40). This postmodern production is not intended to educate the German public
in order to create aesthetic subjects out of them, and to build a democratic Germany, as Wilhelm Meister’s theatre at the dawn of the bourgeois age is. Instead, it is to be 

-die Gegen-Welt, die Mythenwanderung, die Überschreitung, die Bühne als Eingangspforte zur großen Erinnerung, Tanz der Reflexionen mit den Geistern, das Gebärden-Zeremoniell [...]. (DJM 32)

-an ambitious attempt to reach back to a mythical age. Ironically, a reviewer of the play sees not this grandiose attempt to ‘remember’ humanity in the production, but simply an overstretched attempt to revive a now-outmoded play. Already at the beginning of the novel, the attempt to transmit an inherited text in a didactic fashion has all but failed.

Instead of an educational project for the audience, the theatre becomes for Leon himself a space of initiation. However, as for Austerlitz, this memory is not easily accessible. The theatrical space is guarded by two scornful actresses, Pat and Margarethe, and while he is trying to get past their guard and become initiated into its secrets, he describes his situation in terms very similar to those Austerlitz uses to describe his own condition as he is on the brink of discovering the truth about his past:


The theatre is further feminized for Pracht by being associated with the influence of his mother. If, like Wilhelm Meister’s father, Leon’s father condemns the theatre, so also Leon’s mother encourages her son’s theatrical ambitions, like Wilhelm Meister’s mother who gives Wilhelm his puppet theatre –

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79 see A 204: ‘Ich bin in diesem Schlaf, [...] im Innersten einer sternförmigen Festung gewesen, in einer von aller Welt abgeschnittenen Oubliette, aus der ich versuchen mußte, ins Freie zu finden, durch lange, niedrige Gänge, die mich durch sämtliche je von mir besuchten und beschriebenen Bauwerke führten’.
[Der Vater] wollte [...] mir das Theater als beiläufige Liebhaberei gestatten, zum Ausgleich für die harte Wissenschaftsfron. Die Mutter hingegen hatte längst verspürt, daß meine Neigungen tiefer reichten, und heimlich unterstützte sie sogar. (DJM 24)

By entering the theatre, Leon is connecting to a secret, maternal inheritance, which he had already sought out in his father's esoteric texts –

jene christliche[... Geheimlehren [... in denen so viel von weiblicher Weisheit, von ‘Gott der Mutter’ die Rede war, von einer allmächtigen erotischen Gnade, wie ich es denn empfand. (DJM 22)

This ‘omnipotent erotic grace’ can be identified with the figure of incest as described by Minden, an oedipal union with ‘God the mother’ which purges the son from the inherited sins of the father – including the sin of individuation, but also, more concretely, the sins of the Nazi past, represented by the paternal perpetrator generation. Thus, Der junge Mann is replete with narratives which suggest a rejection of the paternal linguistic order, and a refusal to work through the Oedipus complex, a process allegorized in ‘Die Frau meines Bruders’ and ‘Der Wald’ – the bank worker’s refusal to participate in the exchange of self demanded by the tower, for example, implies that she rejects the process of secondary socialisation which Friedrich A. Kittler claims the Tower effects in Wilhelm Meister. These esoteric elements of oedipal refusal, the maternal, incestuous theatre and the Romantic longing for unity, which are implicit in the Bildungsroman model and are made explicit in Der junge Mann, also emerge in Austerlitz.

2.3.4 Austerlitz’s inheritance: The nom du père

The complex of paternity and inheritance also determines Austerlitz’s identity – or, rather, lack of identity. We know from the outset of Austerlitz’s autobiographical narrative that the only father he remembers, Elias, inverts the classic Lacanian function of the father. Instead of naming the child and hereby introducing it into the symbolic world of language, he robs the protagonist of his sense of self by giving him the wrong name –

80 Quoted in Minden, Incest and Inheritance, p. 55.
So ist mir aus meiner frühesten Zeit in Bala fast nichts mehr erinnerlich, außer wie sehr es mich schmerzte, auf einmal mit einem anderen Namen angeredet zu werden. (A 69)

In his Écrits, Lacan theorises that inheriting the name of the father and the process of filiation binds the male into the symbolic, linguistic order, removing him from the sphere of incest and introducing him into the sphere of the bourgeois family. The disruption of Austerlitz’s naming process thus leaves Austerlitz not only without a father, and without a native language, but also renders him unable to complete the Oedipal process, leaving him incapable of entering the social order of family and career, or forming adult sexual relationships. The break from his adoptive father and his religious paternal order is finalized when Elias rejects him in his adolescence. Austerlitz is told at the age of fifteen that he has been fostered, indeed that even an intention to adopt him has been frustrated, and is symbolically ‘disinherited’ by being disowned, in biblical fashion, by his adopted father on his deathbed.

At fifteen, when Elias dies, Austerlitz inherits his true name, that of his biological father, the name which marks him out as an individual, utterly distinct from the rural Welsh society in which he was raised - ‘Wäre mein neuer Name Morgan gewesen oder Jones, dann hätte ich das beziehen können auf die Wirklichkeit’ (A 102). It is initially suggested by his teacher Penrith-Smith that Austerlitz retain a dual identity; that the name Austerlitz remain occluded from the microsociety of his schoolmates, in the most literal sense a ‘bürgerliche Name,’ used only to identify him in the administrative structure of the educational system –

As far as the other boys are concerned, you remain Dafydd Elias for the time being. There’s no need to let anyone know. It is just that you will have to put Jacques Austerlitz on your examination papers or else your work may be considered invalid. (A 102)

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The bare signifier of the name ‘Austerlitz’ initially throws the boy into an existential crisis, as he cannot associate it with any personal heritage or symbolic meaning:

Aber Austerlitz hatte ich nie zuvor noch gehört, und ich war deshalb von Anfang an überzeugt, daß außer mir niemand so heißt, weder in Wales noch auf den Britischen Inseln, noch sonst irgendwo auf der Welt. (A 102)

With the aid of his history teacher, he manages to build an illusory identification with the Napoleonic battle of Austerlitz, and particularly with the French military victory, a promising bright light like the sun over the field of Austerlitz:

Je öfter Hilary das Wort Austerlitz vor der Klasse aussprach, desto mehr wurde es mir zu meinem Namen, desto deutlicher glaubte ich zu erkennen, daß das, was ich zuerst als einen Schandfleck an mir empfunden hatte, sich verwandelte in einen Leuchtpunkt, der mir ständig vorschwebte, so vielversprechend wie die über dem Dezembernebel sich erhebende Sonne von Austerlitz selber. Das ganze Schuljahr hindurch war es mir, als sei ich auserwählt worden, und an dieser Vorstellung, die ja in keiner Weise meinem, wie ich zugleich wußte, zweifelhaften Status entsprach, habe ich festgehalten, fast mein ganzes Leben lang. (A 111)

Shame and namelessness, as Fuchs shows, are transformed through allegorical imagination into a poetic identity. The battle of Austerlitz, where Prussia was defeated by France in 1805, took place at a point when Enlightenment intellectuals across Europe still hoped for the spread of liberalism through Napoleon’s political conquests. It also proved to be the catalyst for ensuing Prussian educational reforms, including the foundation of the Humboldtian University in Berlin, reforms that were intended to put into political praxis the philosophical theory of Bildung. However, in Sebald’s melancholy metaphysics, the Enlightenment connotations of the name become dialectically transformed into oppressive ones. Asked in interview with the *Spiegel* about his choice of name for his protagonist, Sebald said that the association with Napoleon was deliberate, indeed that it was a complex that informed all of his writings.

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82 Fuchs, *Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte*, p. 57.
Was mich daran wiederum interessiert, ist die Tatsache, dass man in Deutschland dann rund 130 Jahre später dasselbe noch einmal versucht hat, mit noch brachialeren Methoden, diese Idee einer deutschen Hegemonie.

In his essay on Hebel, Sebald expands on the connection between the defeat of Napoleon and the dialectic of Enlightenment:

Möglichweise ahnte Hebel um 1812/1813, daß mit dem Fall Napoleons und der Erhebung der Deutschen eine abschüssige Bahn begann, auf der man nicht leicht würde einhalten können, und daß die Geschichte, wie sie von da ab sich anließ, im Grunde nichts als das Martyrologium der Menschheit sei. (LL 34)

As the defeat of Napoleon is followed by the rise of Prussia, so the significance of 'Austerlitz' is dialectically transformed from a positive, Enlightening one to a modern and violent one. Benjamin further notes, in the Passagen-Werk:

Der pont d’Austerlitz war eine der ersten Eisenkonstruktionen in Paris. Mit dem Blitzstrahl darüber wird er zum Emblem des hereinbrechenden technischen Zeitalters.

At the end of the novel, we are told that the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris is built on the remains of the old Gare d’Austerlitz: but this redemption of the name for the cause of Bildung is ambiguous at best. The library is an information system that in fact blocks access to knowledge, a ‘den Bedürfnissen jedes wahren Lesers von vornherein kompromißlos entgegengesetzten Gebäude’ (A 392), into which Jacques Austerlitz disappears for good. Worse, it is rumoured that the stolen property of the murdered Jews of Paris is still being stored somewhere in its basement.

Und dort drunten auf dem Lagerplatz Austerlitz-Tolbiac stapelte sich in den Jahren ab 1942 alles, was unsere Zivilisation, sei es zur Verschönerung des Lebens, sei es zum bloßen Hausgebrauch, hervorgebracht hat, von Louis-XVI-Kommoden, Meißener Porzellan, Perserteppichen und ganzen Bibliotheken bis zum letzten Salz- und Pfefferstreuer. (A 408)

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83 Sebald, 'Ich fürchte das Melodramatische', Der Spiegel.
84 Benjamin, Das Passagen-Werk, p. 234
85 The collected shipwrecked baggage of Jewish bourgeois society mirrors the bric-a-brac that Austerlitz photographs in the ANTIKOS BAZAR in Theresienstadt, which also, as Fuchs says, to a large extent represents an inventory of the destruction of nineteenth-century Jewish aspirations. Fuchs, Die Schmerzenspuren der Geschichte, p. 62.
Even Fred Astaire, whose ‘bürgerliche Name,’ Austerlitz overhears in another chance radio programme, was also Austerlitz (A 103), does not add any levity to the name’s connotations. In Austerlitz’s account of Astaire, it is not his light-footed dancing skills that are significant, but the only memories that Astaire reports from his childhood, the ominous sounds of the goods trains shunting to and fro in the freight depot next to his childhood home. Jacques Austerlitz, through his name, becomes both victim and heir of the dialectic of Enlightenment, and shows the limits of the discourse of Bildung – although he himself tells the narrator that such coincidences mean very little (A 104), a statement clearly given the lie by Sebald’s own aesthetics, and by the fact that only the name Austerlitz eventually provides him with a link to his personal heritage. Before embarking on his story, indeed, he tells the narrator:

Von meinem heutigen Standpunkt aus sehe ich natürlich, daß allein mein Name und die Tatsache, daß mir dieser Name bis in mein fünfzehntes Jahr vorenthalten geblieben war, mich auf die Spur meiner Herkunft hätten bringen müssen [...]. (A 68)

When he finally goes to seek out his old home, the very rarity of his name allows him to find his childhood house without difficulty.86 In a further dialectical twist, although the original values, associated with Enlightenment, that were attached to the name ‘Austerlitz’ have been negated, the inherited name still allows Jacques Austerlitz to retrieve his lost origins and hence his lost childhood self. It also allows him to meet again with his first teacher, named, significantly, Věra, who tells him the ‘true’ story of his childhood. ‘Austerlitz’, then, binds the protagonist of the novel not into the bourgeois paternal order, but into an eclectic, semi-occluded history of Europe that ranges from Jewish exile to Napoleonic victories; it has less a patriarchal ordering function than a mystical one, marking the protagonist out as, in some mysterious fashion, ‘chosen’. As I show in the next section, the name ‘Austerlitz’ also binds Austerlitz at once into the pre-Oedipal, maternal order, but also provides the key to an unstable reconciliation between this order and the virtues of the bourgeois age.

86 Marcel Atze has researched the political significance of the name ‘Austerlitz’ for the Prague Jewish community: see ‘Die Gesetze von der Wiederkunft der Vergangenheit’, in Sebald. Lektüren, pp. 202-203, where he argues that with the name, Austerlitz inherits a Jewish tradition of exile and flight.
In the enclosed narrative of retrieval, Sebald describes an intact ‘true’ family for Austerlitz. This ‘original’ family is a counter-weight both to the brutal Nazi parody of society at Theresienstadt, and to the spiritually empty, loveless world of Austerlitz’s Welsh childhood. By locating Austerlitz’s origins in the Czech Jewish bourgeoisie, in the persons of the scrupulously bohemian and Francophile Austerlitz-Aychenwald family, Sebald excludes Austerlitz from any culpability in the Nazi (or communist) crimes committed by Germans who saw no contradiction between genocide and gebildete Kultur. This distinction allows the highly literary text of Austerlitz to be grounded in a faith in the aesthetic and political integrity of the Bildungsbürgertum ethos and family structure, while it directs moral outrage at Nazi crimes. Austerlitz is hereby portrayed as having inherited an intact moral virtue, which he has managed to preserve throughout his adult life. By virtue of being a victim of Nazi persecution, he is guiltless of the stain of modernity and of the guilt attached to German Bildung. He is also an innocent ‘ewiger Jüngling’ who has even blocked all knowledge of the Nazi state of terror from his consciousness:


Whereas in Sebald’s analysis of German culture, for a German person to forget Nazi crimes is tantamount to compounding their inherited guilt, for victims of Nazi crimes forgetting is rather the blameless mark of massive trauma. For Austerlitz, then, his pathological ignorance of Germany and of German crimes, as well as his Jewish

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87 I use ‘bohemian’ in both senses of the word: not only does the family live in Bohemia, but Austerlitz’s parents are members of the rakish theatrical and radical poetical worlds, and never marry, while remaining devoted to each other. I discuss the significance of Bohemia in Sebald’s work at more length in Chapter Four.

88 Karin Bauer argues that Austerlitz’s story ‘is the negative imprint of the lost ideal of the good European.’ Austerlitz is the wandering Jew adrift in the new hybrid Europe, but in a damaged, non-celebratory way. Thus, Bauer acknowledges Austerlitz’s passive ‘goodness’ at the same time as she notes the impossibility of its realisation in a meaningful subjective form. Karin Bauer, ‘The Dystopian Entwinement of Histories and Identities in W. G. Sebalds Austerlitz’, in W. G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma, pp. 233-250.
origins, serves as one further protection against any possible complicity in German culture. As we have seen, Sebald views German bourgeois culture, even German Jewish culture, as irremediably tainted by Nazism: writing about the half-Jewish Peter Weiss, he concurs with Weiss that merely having Jewish parentage does not cleanse one of guilt.

Die allzu leichtfertige Exoneration verschlägt nicht; ganz im Gegenteil, es spricht aus ihr das Bewußtsein, daß er [...] eben doch zu den Deutschen gehört, zumindest insofern, als auch im Haus seiner Eltern die sogenannte deutsche Gesittung herrschte. (CS 143)

Indeed, Austerlitz’s father himself supports the thesis that the culture of the German family was inextricably complicit in Nazism:

Trotzdem, sagte Véra, fuhr Austerlitz fort, habe Maximilian geglaubt, daß das deutsche Volk in sein Unglück getrieben worden sei; vielmehr hatte es sich, seiner Ansicht nach, selber von Grund auf, aus dem Wunschdenken jedes einzelnen und aus den in den Familien gehegten Gefühlen, in dieser perversen Form neu geschaffen [...]. (A 244)

Although, in keeping with Sebald’s other fictional works, the novel elegiacally details the dark side of almost all bourgeois cultural institutions, from the spa town to the library to the university, Austerlitz is portrayed as the heir of an idyllic family with classic Bildungsbürger credentials. His birth father, Maximilian Aychenwald, although of Russian origin, bears a name with connotations of the German oak, and hence with German virtues of solidity and faithfulness. Aychenwald is a classic example of the radical intellectual bourgeois:

Maximilian ist von Grund auf Republikaner gewesen, und habe davon geträumt, die Tschechoslowakei inmitten der überall in Europa unaufhaltsam sich ausbreitenden faschistischen Flut als eine Art von zweiter Schweiz zu einer Insel der Freiheit zu machen (A 225).

He thus appears as a positive counterpoint to Elias, the weak and dictatorial priest-father, by courageously working for a concrete paradise on earth, rather than preaching eschatological doctrine. Aychenwald’s political work fails (had it not, of course, he might have been complicit in the Czechoslovak communist régime after the war – an aspect of European history which Austerlitz chooses to ignore almost entirely), and he disappears from Paris in 1941 or 1942. By going so far as to
speculate that his fate may have been, ‘daß er südwärts gefahren, zu Fuß über den Pyrenäen gegangen und irgendwo auf der Flucht verschollen ist’ (A 366), Austerlitz encourages the identification of his father with the persecuted scholar, Walter Benjamin: again, Benjamin is a positive image of the amateur, holistic scholar, perhaps in direct contradistinction to the Frankfurt School, whose bureaucracy refused to protect Benjamin from Nazi persecution by providing him with a position in American exile. Austerlitz’s search for his father may be fruitless, but in conducting it, he is attempting to reverse the amnesia of history and to attempt to find justice for his father’s memory. This is different to Leon Pracht’s transformation of his father’s scholarship into poetry, but both figures aim at a similar rescuing of the positive aspects of their paternal inheritance into narrative. Sebald also suggests, in an essay on Nossack, that those who attempt to recover the repressed memory of German society are also questioning its legitimacy, after the manner of Hamlet:

Nossack hat früher als andere auf den Begriff gebracht [...] daß nämlich die Erinnerung ein Skandalon ist und daß, wer im Eingedenken sich übt, sich wie Hamlet die Mahnung der neuen Machthaber wird anhören müssen. ‘Do not for ever with thy vailed lids /Seek for thy noble father in the dust’. (CS 104)

As in Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, and in the Bildungsromane succeeding it, Austerlitz’s journey in search of his self fails to result in the retrieval of a stable identity. Nonetheless, Sebald still keeps faith with the belief that, in Austerlitz’s childhood, the values of the Bildungsbürgertum were alive and meaningful. Further, this bildungsbürgerliche family, unlike Leon Pracht’s, produced a loving, linguistically gifted child, rather than one already split by the Oedipus complex or repressed by authoritarian parents. In contradistinction to the unsocial, painfully lonely adult Austerlitz, his old nurse Vëra claims that as a child he was possessed with an unusual facility of communication:


Again, in contradistinction to the anarchic Stower Grange boarding school, his first teacher herself appears both as a repository of untainted memory in the present, and as a kind educator and care-giver in the past:

The infant Austerlitz is fluent both in French, the language of cosmopolitan sophistication, and in his native Czech –

Wenn wir zwischen den Birn- und Kirschbäumen über die Wiesenhänge des Seminargartens gegangen seien [...] sei das Französische, nach einer mit Agáta getroffenen Vereinbarung, unsere Umgangssprache gewesen, und erst wenn wieder heimkehrten, [...] hätten wir, über häuslichere und kindlichere Dinge sozusagen, tschechisch geredet. (A 227)

The pairing of these two subsequently forgotten languages mirrors the two that Austerlitz learns in his second family, English and Welsh. Unlike French and Czech, however, which are the child’s means of adequately entering the linguistic order and engaging with the public and private spheres, with civilization and with domestic felicity, English and Welsh are associated with dismal religion and uncanny stories:

Von Evan habe ich auch, formlich im Flug, das Walisische gelernt, weil mir seine Geschichten viel besser eingingen als die endlosen Psalmen und Bibelsprüche [...] Im Gegensatz zu Elias, der Krankheit und Tod immer in einen Zusammenhang brachte mit Prüfung, gerechter Strafe und Schuld, erzählte Evan von Verstorbenen, die das Los zur Unzeit getroffen hatte [...]. (A 82)\(^8^\)

In another instance of the dialectic of Enlightenment, the languages of European civilization are subsequently erased by those of archaic religion and superstition. The Welsh and English ‘false’ sets of signifiers dissolve when Austerlitz undergoes the crisis of personality subsequent to discovering his own identity:

Wenn man die Sprache ansehen kann als eine alte Stadt [...] so glich ich selbst einem Menschen, der sich, aufgrund einer langen Abwesenheit, in dieser Agglomeration nicht mehr zurechtfindet [...]. (A 183)

\(^8^\) Evan is both a cobbler and a Geisterseher, whom the child Austerlitz visits against Elias’s wishes, not unlike the way in which he is transfixed by ‘der bucklige Schneider Moravec’ whom he can see from Věra’s flat (A 228) – both men dim relations of Benjamin’s ‘buckliger Zwerg’, who understands the secret mechanisms of history.
Nonetheless, when Austerlitz returns to Prague and meets Věra, his native Czech returns to him in a miraculous recovery:

Mitten in diese Bemerkung war Věra selber, unwillkürlich, wie ich annehme, sagte Austerlitz, aus der einen Sprache in die andere übergewechselt, und ich [...] verstand nun wie ein Tauber, dem durch ein Wunder das Gehör wiederaufging, so gut wie alles, was Věra sagte, und wollte nurmehr die Augen schließen und ihren vielsilbig dahineilenden Wörtern lauschen in einem fort. (A 227)

To what extent this recovery is intended ironically cannot be strictly determined, and it is notable that the secondary literature is highly uncertain on this point; nonetheless, it indicates that Austerlitz has managed to slough off the residue of his repressive second socialization and, even briefly, returned to his pre-exile and hence pre-alienation origins. Austerlitz, then, despite its commitment to the dialectic of Enlightenment and melancholy aesthetics of ruins, still names a faith in authentic origins of the self. In the next section, I show examine how this authentic origin is linked, as it is in Der junge Mann and indeed Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, to the maternal sphere and to incest.

### b Agáta/Olimpia: Incest and the Theatre in Austerlitz

Although Austerlitz recovers some of his father’s history, as for Leon Pracht, it is his maternal inheritance that is more important either than his relationship to his Welsh father or to Aychenwald. Although he senses his father’s presence in the Gare d’Austerlitz (A 411), he inherits both his first and last name from his mother.

Agáta ihrerseits habe von der besseren Welt eine eher kunterbunte, von dem von ihr über alles bewunderten Jacques Offenbach inspirierte Vorstellung gehabt, aus welchem Grund ich im übrigen auch, sagte Věra, zu meinem sonst unter den Tschechen nicht gebräuchlichen Vornamen gekommen sei. (A 226)

If Austerlitz’s Czech father is a portrait of the masculine civic virtues, Agáta, his mother, like the comparable mother figures in Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre and Der junge Mann, represents the aesthetic institution of the theatre. A link between the theatrical performance of identity and the name Austerlitz has already been established by André Hilary in Stower Grange, who teaches his students about the Napoleonic battles, in particular the ‘Glanzstück’ (A 107) of the battle of Austerlitz, by means of interactive dramatic performances: ‘[...] wobei er aus dem Erzählen oft in
dramatische Schilderungen und aus diesen in eine Art Theaterspiel überging mit verteilten Rollen, zwischen denen er mit erstaunlicher Virtuosität hin- und herwechselte’ (A 106). A professional singer whose success comes ‘viel geschwinder, als sie zu hoffen gewagt hatte’ (A 243), Agáta nonetheless manages to be an exemplary mother to the infant Austerlitz. As in the pedagogically successful transformation of Napoleonic history into drama, the theatrical career that Agáta follows is described without the knowing irony and mockery with which Goethe delineates the superficial, morally bankrupt side of theatrical life. Rather, Agáta’s stage appearances elevate her even further above the material -

Ich fürchtete, Agáta habe sich wahrhaftig verwandelt in eine zwar zauberhafte, über mir doch vollkommen fremde Gestalt [...] (A 236)

Her transformation into an erotic muse does not abate any of her maternal tenderness. This linkage of the erotic, the theatrical and the maternal is evident in Austerlitz’s description of her unrobing after a performance:

Sie trägt ein vorne geschnürtes, aschgraues Seidenmieder, aber ihr Gesicht kann ich nicht erkennen, sondern nur einen irisierenden, niedrig über der Haut schwebenden Schleier von weißlich getrübter Milchfarbe, und dann sehe ich, sagte Austerlitz, wie ihr der Schal von der rechten Schulter gleitet, als sie mir mit der Hand über die Stirne streicht. (A 237)

Austerlitz’s portrayal of his mother is a perfect retrieval of memory, despite the repression of sixty years, and the fact that he was only four when parted from her. Thus, the theatrical space as a place of subjective initiation and mythical repetition in Austerlitz is not dissimilar to that in Der junge Mann; although, whereas Pracht attempts to direct his female actresses to perform transgressive sexuality in order to initiate the returning time of myth, Austerlitz, both in infancy and adulthood, is only the dumb witness of the repetition of Agáta/Olimpia’s performance. Nonetheless, Pracht’s directorial vision for his actresses in Les Bonnes is very close to Austerlitz’s formative experience of the theatre.

90 In Der junge Mann, Yossica is transformed into a headless flower precisely by a struggle between ‘two talent hunters,’ Schwarzsicht and Zuversicht, who tear her apart in a dispute between career success and artistic truth. Agáta, it appears, can achieve both without any aesthetic or moral conflict.
Die sexuellen Gleichnisse werdet ihr als die letzte grosse Symbolsprache der Alten Welt erfahren, sie wird euch Halt bieten und zugleich das unfehlbare Mittel eurer Selbstzerstörung sein [...]. (DJM 39)

The apparent double perfection of Austerlitz’s mother and of his infant memory is shown when the adult Austerlitz returns to the empty theatre in which Agáta performed in Offenbach’s *Contes de Hoffmann*. On arrival, he cannot read the scene at all – ‘vor mir das Proszenium, auf dem Agáta einmal gestanden hatte, war wie ein erloschenes Auge’ (A 235). However, by an almost mystical process of focussing on the stage curtain, he sees it sway, the orchestra begin to play, and he catches a glimpse of Agáta in stage costume:


Just as experiencing the theatre initiates Austerlitz into memory, the theatre as the sacred space of the mother is a place of initiation into art for the infant Jacques, and the infant is initiated into reverence for art via the theatre, the space of the mother – ‘sowie wir das Theater durch den Bühneneingang betraten, sagte sie, sei ich [...] in ein ehrfürchtiges Schweigen verfallen’ (A 235). This passage with the blue shoe appears as a moment of kitsch, where irony is absent and a yearning for the identity of real and ideal is expressed in a somewhat twee picture.\(^1\) Kitsch, as a solution to the alienation

\(^1\) The accusation of kitsch was also leveled at *Austerlitz* in a review in *Die Zeit*. Discussing the scene where Austerlitz lists the contents of an antique shop window in Theresienstadt, a scene key to the Benjaminian poetics of bricolage that underly the concept of memory in *Austerlitz*, Iris Radisch comments, ‘Der Glaube an die wahlweise tiefe oder höhere Zeitlosigkeit und Verwandtschaft weit auseinander liegender Geschehnisse ist der schwarze Kitsch, aus dem diese Andenkensammlung kommt.’ Radisch, ‘Der Waschbär der falschen Welt’.

Franco Moretti comments that a *bricolage* methodology often underlies the *Bildungsroman’s* recourse to kitsch, stating, ‘Kitsch literally “domesticates” aesthetic experience. [...] Moreover, it raids all sorts of aesthetic material to construct what will be the typical household of modern times.’ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World. The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 37. Kitsch is ‘not different from neoclassical taste because it has betrayed its aspirations, but because it has remained faithful to them in a historical context that has changed too radically.’ (Moretti, *The Way of
of the modern subject, has, according to Minden, haunted the Bildungsroman ever since Goethe described the exequies of Mignon, as organized by the Society of the Tower. The twinkling sky-blue shoe, magically transported to the present, is the fetishistic symbol of a hope for the reconciliation of the real and the ideal in the human, akin to the state of undivided bliss described in the Klingsohrmärchen (represented by a blue flower rather than a blue shoe). The blue flower, indeed, is cited in Der junge Mann after the protagonist has passed through incest to unity – ‘Und Clematis, unzählige Blüten, hingen über der Hauswand und bedeckten sie mit tiefem Himmelsblau’ (DJM 166). Sebald himself was implacably opposed to the concept of kitsch, and condemned it as the illegitimate attempt to create a bourgeois heaven on earth, noting critically that:

die von der bürgerlichen Phantasie betriebene Säkularisierung der Utopie, der Versuch, sich einen Himmel auf Erden zu schaffen, leicht ins Kitschige hinüberschwingt und also in einen Bereich, in welchem die Legitimation des Erzählers in seinem Werk nicht mehr zu bewerkstelligt ist. (BdU 176)

Yet charges of narrative illegitimacy cannot easily be leveled at the appearance of the shoe: despite its restorative function in the context of Austerlitz’s narrative, the shoe is ironized by also being an intertextual quote, which comes from the very beginning of Hofmannsthal’s Andreas. When Andreas enters the town of Venice, he recalls the forbidden visits that he made in childhood to the theatre in Vienna. As they are for the infant Austerlitz, these visits are a trip into a fantastic land; in the adult Andreas’s memory, between the neck of a double bass and the head of a musician ‘der himmelblaue Schuh war wunderbarer als alles.’ The actress who wears it is playing a nameless fairy-tale princess, ‘Gefahren umgaben sie, dunkle Gestalten, Fackeln, ein Zauberwald nahm sie auf’ – in kitschy form, her stage role is an allegory of Agáta’s

the World, p. 38). Austerlitz’s reconstruction of a ‘heile Welt’ via the bric-à-brac in a Theresienstadt antique shop window is reminiscent of Wilhelm Meister’s rediscovery of his grandfather’s beloved Kunstkabinett in the final chapters of Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, as well as the collections of butterflies at Andromeda Lodge: in all three scenarios, a pile of antiquarian rubbish is overloaded with aesthetic significance in an attempt to create meaning out of a fragmentary society.

Hofmannsthal abandoned work on the text in August 1913, a historical moment that is laden with Sebaldian significance.

life, complete with the dark backdrop of the menacing German wood. In the play of Andreas’ memory, though, the action of the play is entrancing, but the blue shoe alone a powerful fetish that overcomes all others:

alles das [the action of the play] war schön, aber es war nicht das zweischneidige Schwert von zartester Wollust und unsaglicher Sehnsucht, das durch die Seele ging, bis zu Weinen, Bangen und Beglückung, wenn der blaue Schuh allein unter dem Vorhang da war.\(^\text{94}\)

For Andreas, the blue shoe is not just the poetic blue flower of Romantic longing, but also a sexualized, disembodied fetish. Glossing this passage towards the end of his essay, ‘Venezianisches Kryptogramm. Hofmannsthals Andreas’,\(^\text{95}\) Sebald writes:

Abgesehen von der glückseligen Gefühlswällungen, die den Fetischisten beim Anblick des geliebten Objekts überkommen und die wohl nirgends so völlig gültig wie gerade hier beschrieben wurden, handelt diese Passage von der unverhofften Epiphanie der Bilder [...]. Das lyrische Bild, die Inkunabel der kreativen Phantasie, operiert an der Grenze des eben noch Zugänglichen. Es ist der fetischistischen Neigung, die die Libido genau dort verbirgt, wo niemand sie vermuten möchte, zutiefst adäquat. (BdU 77)

Thus, the blue shoe is a key to Sebald’s rejection of synthesizing interpretations of Andreas that seek to read it as an affirmative Bildungsroman. Rather, Sebald reads the novel as an intended Bildungsroman, which has become distorted by repressed lust into a ‘Venetian cryptogram,’ an exploration of the centrifugal powers of our lives which tend not to ‘eine schöne Bildung, sondern auf Deformation und Zerstörung’ (BdU 63). Erotomania lies at the heart of these centrifugal powers:

Und der Andreas-Roman ist in letzter Konsequenz angelegt als eine pornographische Etüde auf dem höchsten Niveau der Kunst, als der absolute Gegensatz also zum Konzept des Bildungsromans. (BdU 65)

Bourgeois mores, he writes, repress the erotic and cruel lusts that in fact constitute Andreas’s (and Hofmannsthal’s) psyche. The erotic elements bubble to the surface throughout the fragmentary novel, from Andreas’s cruel dreams about dogs to the intertextual references to Casanova’s imprisonment in Venice, yet Hofmannsthal

\(^{94}\) Hofmannsthal, Andreas, p. 17.

\(^{95}\) BdU, pp. 61-77.
stubbornly clings ‘aus einer Art Bußfertigkeit’ to the concept of the Bildungsroman (BdU 76).

With such a dubious lineage, it is no wonder that in Austerlitz, structural ironies in the novel as a whole call into question the authenticity and innocence of Austerlitz’s intertextual theatrical vision. The Prague theatre is still, bleakly yet ironically, the means by which Austerlitz is saved: it is theatre friends of Agata who manage to get Austerlitz’s name on the list for a Kindertransport (A 252). The blue-shod Agata sings the role of Olimpia in The Tales of Hoffmann: the figure is taken from Der Sandmann, a figure who initially appears as a beautiful girl, an object of desire for the deluded Nathaniel, but who later is revealed as a machine. Agata as Olimpia is thus an ambiguous figure, connected both with the Romantic yearning for incestuous unity, and the Romantic irony that denies the possibility of such unity. As noted above, Vera reports that the infant Austerlitz seems alienated by Agata’s Olimpia costume, and Austerlitz confirms this impression:

ich selber, fuhr Austerlitz fort, entsann mich nun wieder, von einem mir bis dahin unbekannten Kummer erfüllt gewesen zu sein, als ich, weit jenseits meiner Schlafenszeit, die Augen im Dunkeln weit offen, auf dem Diwan am Fußende von Véras Bett gelegen bin, auf die Viertelstundenschläge der Turmuhrn gehorcht und gewartet hatte, bis Agata nach Hause kam [...]. (A 237)

Agata as Olimpia is uncannily transformed, a disruptive absence in the otherwise blissful maternal sphere. This moment of theatrical transformation and abandonment may have found an intertextual precedent in the work of Peter Altenburg, for Sebald picked out a very similar moment in Altenberg’s Mein Lebensabend for his critical attention: Sebald interprets Altenberg’s alienation in adulthood from his mother as a repetition of a childhood alienation, where Altenberg is distraught at his mother’s absence and his nursemaid cannot console him.

In dieser endgültigen Separation von der Mutter wiederholen sich die Trennungsschmerzen, die das Kind empfand, wenn seine ‘wunderbare vergötterte Mama abends ins Theater, in Gesellschaft ging’. Die Angst, von der geliebtesten Frau auf immer verlassen zu werden, ist, wie sich aus zahllosen literarischen Quellen nachweisen ließ, von zentraler Bedeutung im Programm des bürgerlichen Gefühlslebens. Altenberg jedenfalls erinnert, daß seine infantile Alteriertheit in der

Austerlitz’s infant moment of loss is at once an ironic citation of the commonplaces of bourgeois literature, in which, Sebald tells us, Altenberg’s separation from his mother also represents a separation from nature itself, and a foreshadowing of the tragic separation to come. Later, indeed, the Nazi invasion of Prague, and the infliction of anti-Semitic regulations, render Agáta as immobile as Olimpia herself, capable only of lying on the sofa or, on the eve of her deportation, leaning against the window looking motionlessly out (A 260). The picture of the child Austerlitz which appears on the cover of the book, of him attired as a page for a costume ball in which his mother appeared as the ‘Rose Queen’ continues this Romantic uncertainty: not only does the only photograph of Austerlitz as a child represent him in a masquerade, but the child depicted is clearly more than four years old, the age at which it is supposed to show Austerlitz. Indeed, the child in the photo is a threatening revenant more than a soothing vision: Austerlitz tells the narrator

Und immer fühlte ich mich dabei durchdrungen von dem forschenden Blick des Pagen, der gekommen war, sein Teil zurückzufordern und der nun im Morgengrauen auf dem leeren Feld darauf wartete, daß ich den Handschuh aufleiben und das ihm bevorstehende Unglück abwenden würde. (A 268)

Here, the erotic associations of the glove become transformed into a deadly challenge to a duel with the Doppelgänger. Or, again, the erotic veil of powder that appears over Agáta’s face as she bends over the infant Austerlitz undergoes a process of dialectical transformation throughout the novel. It initially appears as talc, with which Austerlitz’s foster mother Gwendolyn inexplicably covers herself in the months before her death. The talc shines in her death chamber like ectoplasm, which is a ghostly token of the continued presence of the dead among the living (A 87). Austerlitz only in later life finds a meaningful name for this ectoplasmic talc – ‘das arsanische Grauen’ (A 95). This name only becomes comprehensible to Austerlitz when the powder subsequently reappears as the ‘giftweiße Schwaden’ (A 263) with which a pest-control officer fumigates the apartment of Austerlitz’s mother, Agáta, after she has been deported to Theresienstadt. The white clouds reappear for a fourth time as the clouds of hair-powder surrounding the imprisoned Casanova, ‘als Zeichen
Bildungsroman and neo-Romanticism: Austerlitz and Der junge Mann

gewissermaßen der Auflösung seiner Körperlichkeit’ (A 292). The clouds that attended on the death of the ‘false’ mother, symbolising ghostliness and – perhaps – a Calvinist desire for spiritual cleanliness – in the second half of the narrative gain the added significance of the lethal drive for German racial and cultural ‘purity’ that led to the murder of Austerlitz’s biological mother.

As in Der junge Mann, thus, a Romantic motif is dialectically represented in a way that draws attention to the Nazi misappropriation of that motif, yet still retains its original import. The improbable appearance of the blue shoe can be read in the same way: it performs a similar function to that of Mignon’s elaborately constructed bier and funeral ceremony in the narrative of Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre. The stagy vision represents the Tower’s attempt to erase possibility of perfect identity through aesthetic subjectivity, of the fusion of art with life, while at the same time the esoteric content of the narrative suggests that this perfect identity did, once, in fact exist. The blue shoe and the photograph of the mother are the quintessential dialectical images in this AnXi-Bildungsroman: both expressing the negative aspects of the dialectic of Enlightenment, while yearning for a Romantic union with the mother. Exoterically, Austerlitz both transmits the ‘historische Erbe’ of German culture, and simultaneously undermines this heritage, showing that the negative dialectic of modernity destroyed the moral integrity of its totems, and thus leaves both the protagonist and the individual reader rootless in a meaningless world. Esoterically, and however ironically, Austerlitz expresses a Romantic belief in the lure of incestuous love and the integrity of personal origins and a hope for their restoration.

c  Die Geschichte der Almut: art and resignation

Before I discuss the further implications of this Sebaldian uncanny in the next chapter, I will briefly return to Der junge Mann to describe how, in the section called ‘Die Geschichte der Almut’, Strauß offers an alternative model for negotiating paternal inheritance. Almut tells her story at a point in the novel where Leon Pracht is describing how he is torn between masculine idealism and feminine sensuality, identifying the sensual with a torturing desire for erotic repetition. In response, Almut tells how the aesthetic can resolve this torment. As a young woman, she rejects her Danish mother’s punitive fairy tales in favour of following in her German father’s steps as a restorer of eighteenth-century paintings. As for Sebald (SG 197), Tiepolo, the Italian artist who crossed the Alps to bring fine art to Bavaria, is a figure of central
significance for her art. For Sebald, Tiepolo is the artist who is linked, in his imagination, to his own village painter, and hence who informed his own childhood aesthetic education:

Ich sah den Tiepolo, der um diese Zeit auf die Sechzig gegangen sein muss und bereits sehr an der Gicht gelitten hat, in der Kälte der Wintermonate zuoberst auf dem Gerüst einen halben Meter unter der Decke des Treppenhauses der Würzburger Residenz liegen [...]. Mit solcherei Phantasien im Kopf und in Eingedenken auch an den Krummenbacher Maler, der vielleicht in der Winterszeit desselben Jahres an seinen vierzehn kleinen Kreuzwegstationen sich nicht weniger mühte als Tiepolo an seinem grossen Deckengemälde, bin ich dann [...] gegangen [...]. (SG 198)

Like the Krummenbach painter, Almut’s father is devoted to Tiepolo’s inspiration:

Sein grösstes Vorbild war allemal Tiepolo, und ihn studierte er immer aufs neue. Wenn er einen faltenreichen Ärmel oder Umhang auszumalen hatte, galt stets die Devise: ‘Schatten setzen wie Tiepolo’. (DJM 254)

Almut becomes her father’s apprentice at fourteen, learning her father’s craft of being ‘im Dienst eines umfassenden In-Erscheinung-Tretens des Schönen und Früheren’ (DJM 256). This craft, as her father sees it, ‘könne doch unmöglich seine nützliche Wirkung auf den Menschen unserer Tage verfehlen’ (DJM 256). The burden of the perfection of the past, though, weighs heavily on her father, and he feels his inadequacy in the face of it. When he dies, the oppression is transferred to Almut: she leaves restoration and rejects art.

Es ging ja schliesslich so weit, dass ich nicht mehr eine armselige Postkarte vom Isenheimer Altar [...] betrachten konnte, sondern zerriss und zum Abfall warf. (DJM 261)

Still, Almut remains in the thrall of a conservative, restorationist aesthetic, and when by accident she finds herself at an exhibition of Abstract Expressionists, she feels so threatened by one painting that she stabs it. At her trial, her psychologist attempts to make her confess to an anti-American act, committed

besser aus rechtem Gewissen, aus grunddeutscher Kunstauffassung. Schliesslich sei es doch bedenkenswert, daß das beschädigte Werk einer rein jüdisch-amerikanischen

97 I return to the Sebaldian narrator’s visit to the Krummenbach chapel towards the end of my third chapter.
Almut’s act is purely aesthetic, untainted by the German past. Little surprise, then, that she is welcomed into the circle of the restorers of the painting, who demand that ‘ich [Almut] meine abgebrochenen Anfänge nicht liegen ließe’ (DJM 276). She learns their craft, rejects her mother’s superstition in favour of her own feminine and creative powers, and subsequently tries to break free from what she considers the overly pedantic, spiritually impoverished techniques of the restorers’ group. Nonetheless, alone, she is incapable of restoring an artwork with the correct balance of artistic abandon and respect for the past, and considers herself a failure. Almut is still a true artist, who acknowledges her failure in the face of the greatness of art of the past. Her failure to restore the art with the passion she feels is essential to a true aesthetic is perhaps inevitable, in the face of the decadence of postmodernity, but her act of destruction is as much a creative act as that of restoration, fired as it is by a pure aesthetic terror. Ironically, for Strauß, honest communication with the art of the past can create the possibility of a restoration of aesthetic productivity, if not the restoration of the artwork. And after she has told her story, the ‘worst of all Germans’ is finally laid to rest: Hitler is banished. Thus, poised between the two poles of the Sebaldian uncanny – the torment of sexual desire, and the recurrence of the Nazi past – Strauß lets a few moments of aesthetic truth break forth. These are not a means to liberate the subject, who is in thrall to the work of art. Rather, they hold forth hope for the redemption of art at the expense of society and of the individual: indeed, for the rescuscitation of myth.

Thus, my comparison of Der junge Mann and Austerlitz shows how both novels articulate similar problematics of historical and aesthetic fragmentation in the wake of the destructions of the Nazi era, and draw on neo-Romantic strategies in an attempt to connect to a pre-modern or authentic past. However, while Strauß’s self-consciously fragmentary aesthetic form privileges the autonomy of art over that of the postmodern subject, for Austerlitz, as we have seen, there is no such ecstatic moment of self-annihilation as Almust undergoes, and his aesthetic experience in the theatre – whether creative or receptive – proves inadequate to redeem either the autonomy of
art or his own broken life. Instead, it is related to the lure of incest, which redeems the past in that instant, and brings his mother, fleetingly, to life. Like Andreas, Austerlitz is condemned to repeat his previous experiences so that he has to go through “alle schiefen und queren Situationen seines Kinds- und Knabenlebens”, through all this painful entanglement (BdU 64) over and over again. Leon Pracht, however, escapes from his aesthetically chaotic youth a more disillusioned but still independent character. In the next chapter, I address the nature of the repetitions and splits that are here revealed in the Sebaldian male subject, and show how another trope of the Weimar classical ideal of Bildung, that of the voyage of the poet to Italy, becomes transformed in Schwindel.Gefühle into the site of the Sebaldian uncanny. Here, as in Austerlitz, a ‘perversion’ of bourgeois heterosexuality appears as a lure to avoid the relentless logic of linear history. However, in Schwindel.Gefühle it is not a victim of the Shoah who is so lured, but the narrator himself. Having examined the temptations that the narrator undergoes in the testing-ground of the poet, Italy, I return to Austerlitz to examine the seemingly transparent role of the narrator in that novel, too.
3 Doppelgänger and uncanny homosexuality: The crisis of the Sebaldian subject

The uncanny irruptions of Andreas into the text of Austerlitz demonstrate that sexuality and guilt are the shadow of the hope for redemption in Sebald’s poetics. In this chapter, I outline elements of the crisis of the Sebaldian subject that were present in his work prior to Austerlitz, and that show the persistence of sexuality, and the Sebaldian historical uncanny, in his work. Thus, as shown in the introduction and in the previous chapter, when viewed through the Oedipal schema of bourgeois society, the vertical logic of inheritance takes on a historically guilt-laden and sinister aspect for the 1968 generation who rebelled against their Nazi perpetrator fathers and attempted to uncover the repressed crimes that lay at the heart of the German bourgeois family. Here, I analyse the most uncanny of Sebald’s narratives, the All’estero sequence of Schwindel.Gefühle, to show that the Sebaldian narrator substitutes a horizontal bond of brotherhood or friendliness for the relentless vertical logic of the bourgeois Oedipus complex. Indeed, in the All’estero sequence of Schwindel.Gefühle, the figure that appears most frequently and cathected with the most affection, Kafka, is long-since dead. Sebald’s longing for him appears as an uncanny desire to reverse history and raise the dead. This is what Kilbourn calls

Sebald’s unique contribution to an erotic-salvific model predicated on a specific relation between a narrative subject and an other as embodiment of the promise – or hope – of redemption.¹

Pursuing a close affinity with the non-German Other and the dead is no straightforward mechanism of redemption. Sometimes, this pursuit of the non-German other appears as a homoerotic longing or love; sometimes, the line between redemptive brotherhood and transgressive, destructive incest is very fine. Sebald himself makes this point in his essay on Andreas:

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Homosexuality, I show in this chapter, is in Sebald’s work a phenomenon that crosses and recrosses this line between redemption and destruction. Many of Sebald’s texts either valorise homosexuality as a signal of moral resistance (as shown in the Roger Casement narrative in Die Ringe des Saturn), or depict homosexual longing as an alluring yet forbidden means to elude the imperative to integrate into bourgeois society (as when both the Sebaldian narrator and Kafka himself wander along the border of homosexuality in Schwindel.Gefühle). I show that homosexual figures are overwhelmingly coded as positive in W. G. Sebald’s work, and their homosexuality often linked not only to their melancholy, but also to their resistance to the bourgeois age.

More, the relationship between Gentile narrator and Jewish friend is often composed of a set of uncanny coincidences and correspondences of places, dates and names (as in the unplanned meetings between the Sebaldian narrator and Austerlitz), pointing to a closer identity between narrator and subject. While the Sebaldian narrator may yearn for a male friend or lover, he may instead become the victim of an uncanny haunting or persecution, represented by the sinister figure of the Doppelgänger. The idealized male-male bond becomes here transformed into an eerie haunting and doubling of the self that shows that the fractures of the bourgeois self are condemned to replicate the painful fissures that run through history. At the end of the chapter, I return to Austerlitz to show how the relationship between Austerlitz and the Sebaldian narrator also follows a pattern that is close to homosexual desire, and is also cathected with this same uncanny longing for redemption.

In my reading of Sebald’s uncanny intertextual relationships with Kafka, I have benefited particularly from the following essays: Atze’s ‘Koinzidenz und Intertextualität. Der Einsatz von Prätexten in W. G. Sebalds Erzählung ‘All’estero’; Maya Barzilai’s ‘Facing the Past and the Female Spectre in W. G. Sebald’s The

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Doppelgänger and uncanny homosexuality: The crisis of the Sebaldian subject

Emigrants', Massimo Leone’s ‘Textual Wanderings. A vertiginous reading of W. G. Sebald’, John Zilcosky’s ‘Sebald’s uncanny travels. The impossibility of getting lost’, Kilbourn’s ‘Kafka, Nabokov… Sebald: Intertextuality and Narratives of Redemption in Vertigo and The Emigrants’, Brad Prager, ‘Sebald’s Kafka’ and Gabriella Rovagnati, ‘Das unrettbare Venedig des W. G. Sebald’. All of these authors provide subtle and well-informed readings of various aspects of the uncanny Kafka figure in Schwindel.Gefühle, which are very useful for my own analysis, which focuses more strongly on the homosexual element in the Kafka figure, and draws as yet unexamined connections between the relationship between the narrator and the Kafka figure and those other homosexual relationships in Sebald’s work.

The question of Jewish messianism and secular redemption is one that returns time and again in Sebald’s work. Most often, scholars assimilate Sebald to a Benjaminian or Adornian model of redemption, which sees redemption as the task of the historian who brushes history against the grain to reveal those untold sufferings that do not appear in the grand narratives of the victor. According to Adorno, then, our ethical task is to presents things as they will appear at the end of history, in a redeemed light. Indeed, as has often been noted, Sebald’s historiography is in line with Benjamin’s vision of the task of the historical materialist, whose mission it is ‘im Vergangenen den Funken der Hoffnung anzufachen’. Ethical remembrance is, then, the ostensible mission of Sebald’s poetics, a mission both pedagogical and redemptive, as we have seen. In keeping with this mission, Kilbourn’s essay on Kafka, Nabokov and Sebald sees Sebald’s messianic model as profoundly Jewish, and bound up with exile.

10 Benjamin, ‘Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen’ (VI), in Illuminationen, p. 270.

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In this light, the Jewish messianic historical model of exile, wandering and waiting can be seen as either pre-, post or even anti-modern, depending [sic] the perspective adopted.\footnote{Kilbourn, ‘Kafka, Nabokov ... Sebald’, in \textit{W. G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma}, p. 35.}

Kilbourn, like many critics, sees death as the ultimate telos of Sebald’s messianic hope.\footnote{Kilbourn, ‘Kafka, Nabokov ... Sebald’, in \textit{W. G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma}, p. 34.} However, my analysis in this chapter shows that although sexuality and death are intimately linked in \textit{All’estero}, as they are in \textit{Andreas}, Sebald’s poetics also tend towards a hope for a metaphysical space of brotherhood or homosexual love that transcends death and removes personal guilt. Redemption, in Sebald, is not merely the promise to recover history in the light of a perfect future, as Adorno demands, or to brush history against the grain, in a Benjaminian sense. It is also the search for a home and Oedipal regression, and for a homosexual or merely homosocial and brotherly love that disrupts the linear reproduction of the bourgeois family. The subject certainly courts death and disintegration in the course of this search, not to mention ethical compromises. In this chapter, I show that redemption is not only ethical remembrance; it is the German desire to purge personal guilt and the more politically charged desire to resist heteronormative and colonising mechanisms of society.

\section*{3.1 Dizzying Doppelgänger, vertiginous homoeroticism}

The characters of W. G. Sebald’s fictions are often haunted, not merely in their frequent dizzy spells and afflictions, but more concretely, by shadows and doubles who heighten their feeling of alienation. In this section, I show that shadow is sometimes represented by the Romantic figure of the \textit{Doppelgänger}, which directly or indirectly haunts many of Sebald’s characters and narrators, and sometimes by homosexual desires, couples and figures. Although these complexes centre most explicitly on the figure of Kafka in \textit{Schwindel.Gefühle}, they are also legible in Sebald’s hagiography of Roger Casement and in the lovers Cosmo and Adelwarth in \textit{Die Ausgewanderten}. Homosexuality is a constant temptation to Sebald’s characters throughout his work, and the crises of many of Sebald’s characters are expressed by uncanny doublings and homoerotic longings. Doubling indicates the dissolution of the bourgeois self in modernity, and the omnipresence of guilt. The \textit{Doppelgänger}, further, appears not only as a figure of
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guilt, but also as the repressed other whose exclusion bolsters the bourgeois self. The Doppelgänger relentlessly persecutes its other, or, as in Schwindel.Gefühle, sometimes pairs of doubles pursue the male bourgeois self. See, for example, the way in which two sinister thieves follow the Sebaldian narrator throughout Venice; they stand staring at him in a bar, propping their heads in their hands like twin Melencholias (SG 79) and eventually attack him underneath a sign that says, appropriately, LA PROSSIMA COINCIDENZA (SG 123). Only through swinging his rucksack – which is, particularly in Austerlitz, a fetishistic guarantor of the wanderer’s identity in Sebald’s poetics – can the narrator escape with his identity halfway intact. Worse yet, the narrator tells us, Venice destabilises the self’s own sense of who is the persecutor, who the persecuted.

Geht man in einer sonst leeren Gasse hinter jemanden her, so bedarf es nur einer geringfügigen Beschleunigung der Schritte, um demjenigen, den man verfolgt, die Angst in den Nacken zu setzen. Umgekehrt wird man leicht selbst zum Verfolgten. Verwirrung und eisiger Schrecken wechseln einander ab. (SG 61)

It is not just the peculiar acoustic of Venice that produces such existential splitting and angst: later, the narrator tells us, a similarly uncanny pursuit occurred on a regular basis in W. in the 1940s. When one of the villagers lay dying, the village doctor, Dr. Piazolo, would come to tend them on his motorbike:

Übrigens hatte der Dr. Piazolo noch einen Doppelgänger oder Schattenreiter in dem gleichfalls nicht mehr zu den Jüngsten zählenden Pfarrer Wurmser, der seine Verschhänge auch die längste Zeit schon mit dem Motorrad machte, wobei er das Verschgerät, das Salböl, das Weihwasser, das Salz, ein kleines silbernes Kruzifix sowie das Allerheiligste Sakrament in einem alten Rucksack mit sich führte, der dem des Dr. Piazolo, wenn man so sagen kann, bis aufs Haar glich, weshalb die beiden, der Pfarrer Wurmser und der Dr. Piazolo, ihre Rucksäcke, als sie einmal im Adlerwirt beieinandergesessen sind, auch verwechselt haben, so daß der Dr. Piazolo mit dem Verschgerät zu seinem nächsten Patienten und der Pfarrer Wurmser mit dem Arztwerkzeug zum nächsten im Erlöschen liegenden Mitglied seiner Gemeinde gekommen sein soll. Nicht nur die Ähnlichkeit der Rucksäcke des Pfarrers Wurmser und des Dr. Piazolo, sondern die ihrer gesamten Erscheinung war derart groß [...] (SG 252)

In this labyrinthine, relentless prose, the priest and the doctor are as doubled riders of the apocalypse, so much so that even their rucksacks, which should identify their
professions and identities, are indistinguishable from each other. Who can tell, in the eerie mountain woods, whether the begoggled rider is a harbinger of death or healer? In the liminal Alpine land of W., is there a difference between the two?

3.1.1 The Doppelseiger: The Strange Case of Dr. K. and Dr. Sebald

Classically, the Doppelseiger is defined as an embodied alter ego of a literary figure who haunts him as a reminder of guilt. By extension, the Doppelseiger motif can also be expressed in the imaginative doubling of the self, the identification of the self with another individual, or the metamorphosis of the self. The Doppelseiger has, throughout its existence in German literature, been read above all as a figure that mockingly demonstrates the chronically split and unsustainable nature of the German bourgeois subject, a theme which underlies all of Sebald’s work. Indeed, the Doppelseiger narrative is perhaps itself the jeering uncanny other of the Bildungsroman. Conceived in the Romantic era, the Doppelseiger re-entered German popular culture in the early twentieth century, revived by psychoanalytic theory and the Gothic revival, with ‘a necessary sense of anachronism and pastiche.’ In Sebald’s work, the Doppelseiger also represents an upset of the linear course of history, a reversal of the history of destruction, but by no means necessarily a happy one. ‘Like all ghosts, it is at once an historical figure, re-presenting past times, and a profoundly anti-historical phenomenon, resisting temporal change by stepping out of time and then stepping back in as revenant.’ In his series of writings about the Dr K./Franz Kafka figure, Sebald transforms other classic connotations of the literary Doppelseiger figure to explore politically and sexually problematic dimensions of the crisis of the European bourgeois self in modernity. In All’estero, certain key characteristics of the Doppelseiger figure are in evidence: in particular, the Doppelseiger as symbol of the conflict between the Romantic and the real, and as symbol of the unheimlich, the conflict between the desire to return home and the fear of the return of the repressed in that very homely space. Further, all of these also display the autoscopic, or self-seeing, symptom of the Doppelseiger: the Doppelseiger is primarily a visual phenomenon, a disturbance of vision, a seeing of

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14 Webber, The Doppelseiger, p. 10.
oneself that leads to an objectification of the subject and, as a corollary, a Freudian series of anxieties surrounding eyes and the associated castration complex.

A paradoxical combination of pastiche, guilt and horror is evident in the incident in *Schwindel. Gefühle*, where the Sebaldian narrator is on the train to Riva on the trail of Dr. K., and himself has an uncanny *Doppelgänger* experience in an episode with clear Freudian echoes. Sitting opposite him, he encounters two twin boys who ‘auf die unheimlichste Weise, die man sich denken kann, den Bildern glich, die Kafka als heranwachsenden Schüler zeigt’ (SG 101). He longs to take a photograph of them, but is prevented by their outraged parents, who assume he is a paedophile on tour. Shortly after this unsettling meeting, the narrator checks into a hotel and hands his passport over to the hotel owners to be locked into a drawer. When he comes to check it out, however, it is discovered that the passport has mistakenly been given to a German traveller called Herr Doll, and the narrator must travel home on a hastily typewritten substitute. This document, as Martin Klebes points out, is reproduced in the novel with a thick line bisecting the identifying photograph, in a way that negates the supposed authenticity of the photograph, and indeed the integrity of the person depicted at all.\(^\dagger\) The Sebaldian narrator’s heterosexuality and his German identity are at once under question. This sequence reflects classic elements of the *Doppelgänger* tradition: the association of doubling with tabooed sexual desire, the repression of identity, or indeed the fact that Sebald’s unseen *Doppelgänger* Herr Doll appears to have successfully purloined his identity, leaving Sebald as the dubious copy of himself. Herr Doll’s very name is a punning reference to two key elements of Hoffmann’s *Sandman* story: the uncanny doll or puppet Olimpia, and through the German meaning of *doll* as mad, the unhappy fate of madness that befalls Nathaniel.

This episode also lays open the homoerotic elements in associated with the *Doppelgänger* figure: homoeroticism, in Sebald’s work, becomes linked both with the

\(^\dagger\) Martin Klebes, *Infinite Journey: From Kafka to Sebald,* in *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, pp. 123-139, p. 131. Klebes further argues that the vertigo caused by the uncertain photographs ‘is not a personal weakness, nothing for which anyone could be held responsible. By bringing about vertigo, the photograph does not grant us access to the narrator’s emotions.’ While this is certainly true, in that the narrator is another figment of the textual web, and cannot be said to have ‘emotions’ any more than does any other textual element, the split identity here depicted also displays a disturbance and doubling of the narrator’s subjectivity, a doubling which is, of course, yet another of Sebald’s vertiginous textual devices: neither the text nor even the attested narrator is in any way reliable.
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crisis of bourgeois identity (as in the incident above) and with radical political resistance, as I will show.
In his essay *Kafka im Kino*, Sebald tells us that, beyond pastiche, the modernist *Doppelgänger* figure expresses the chronic alienation of the individual and the disassociation of the bourgeois subject in the machine age. Sebald tells us

> Auch in Kafkas Werken finden sich überall Anzeichen dafür, daß er ein undeutliches Grauen empfand vor den mit dem beginnenden Zeitalter der technischen Reproduktion sich anbahnenden Mutationen der Menschheit, mit denen er wohl das Ende des von der bürgerlichen Kultur ausgebildeten autonomen Individuums heraufkommen sah. [...] War der Doppelgänger in der Zeit der Romantik, in der erstmals die Furcht vor den Apparaten sich rührte, noch eine spukhafte Ausnahmeerscheinung, so ist er jetzt überall. (CS 200)

Indeed, when the sinister pair of doubles attacks the Sebaldian narrator in Venice, they appear to him to waver strangely, as though they had materialized from out of one of the first cinema films (SG 124). Below, I show that in *Schwindel.Gefühle*, Kafka’s *Doppelgänger* appear as a double return, then, a return to the cinematic and modernist pastiche of the Romantic motif that is itself horribly ironized by the traumatic events of the twentieth century that separate the modernist era from Sebald. Thus, as I show below, in Sebald’s work the *Doppelgänger* and other motifs of splitting and doubling also point to the specific traumas and guilt which the crimes of the Nazis have, in the aftermath of the Nazi tyranny, caused in members of the German perpetrator community. It also evokes the spectre of the mechanized killing of Jews by the Nazis, and points to the traumatic breaches in German society caused by Nazism, not least the breach between Gentile and Jewish Germans. Homosexual desire occupies an uneasy space between a guilt-ridden haunting, then, and the desire to reverse this guilt through a redemptive brotherliness.

The *Doppelgänger* appears most explicitly in the uncanny doublings of Dr K. in *Schwindel.Gefühle.* Here, a German writer called Sebald travels to Riva in search of

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16 Prager’s essay, ‘Sebald’s Kafka’, in *W. G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma*, pp. 105-126, dealing with Sebald’s complex relationship with Kafka throughout his works, covers some of the same ground as does my research on *All’estero*, but comes to a different conclusion. For him, the Sebald/Dr. K./Kafka complex in *All’estero* is one focussed on the butterfly metaphor, which he interprets as a battle between Eros and Thanatos throughout Sebald’s writing career. Kafka’s butterfly offered the
traces of a Czech Jewish writer, and then writes a reconstruction of a journey taken by such a writer, called Dr K. The character of Dr K. shares some characteristics with the historical writer Franz Kafka, on whom the author and academic W. G. Sebald wrote a series of critical essays, returning over and over to Kafka’s biography and writings over the course of his academic career. A certain identity between the figures of Dr K. and Franz Kafka in the overall context of Sebald’s textual corpus can be assumed, although of course the exact nature of their relationship is not self-evident. Martin Klebes suggests, probably rightly, that at least in *Schwindel. Gefühle* the very question as to the nature of this relationship is in itself a dizzying literary construct. Indeed, he points out, the ostensible subject of the narrative, Franz Kafka, wrote in his diary shortly after his return from Riva that he was incapable of noting down anything for the purposes of remembering. Klebes concludes that any attempt to trace Kafka’s travels in Riva through his diary and letters to Felice, and to match them onto Sebald’s narrative, must be vain:

Hence, there is nothing inherently wrong with the construction attempted by Sebald’s narrator, as long as we recognise it for what it is: a *Schwindel* (deception) or, more precisely yet, a *Gefühlsschwindel* (a deception of the emotions, an emotional deception).\(^\text{17}\)

### a Kafka im Kino: Sebald on Kafka’s Doppelgänger

Yet whose feelings are being deceived? Kafka is, for Sebald, a figure where the lines of poetics and politics most painfully cross. In his essay ‘Kafka im Kino’,\(^\text{18}\) Sebald again draws attention to the supposed similarity between Kafka and Balduin, and postulates that the *Doppelgänger* figure – and worse, the multiple fragmentations of the self found in Kafka’s work – is a symptom of the overwhelming crisis of the bourgeois subject in the face of technology. The technology of the cinema and camera is based

auf dem Prinzip der vollkommen modellgetreuen Verdoppelung beziehungsweise der potentiell unendlichen Vervielfältigung. (CS 200)

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hope of redemption and Adornian critique, whereas homosexual desire represents a thanatic desire for death and the erotic negation of the self.


\(^{18}\) CS 193-209
This perfect replication, Sebald suggests, leads to the suspicion that that which was reproduced has a lesser grade of authenticity than the copy, which ‘hollows the original out.’ Indeed, in his essay on ‘Kafkas Evolutionsgeschichten’, Sebald goes so far as to refer to duplicated beings in Kafka’s work ‘Zwillinge, Drillinge und all die einander zum Verwechseln ähnlich Androiden’; this essay goes so far as to suggest that Kafka’s *Doppelgängers* are harbingers of the next, mechanical stage of evolution into which the misguided human belief in technological reproduction has precipitated itself. In ‘Kafka im Kino’, Sebald also reminds us that the apparition of the *Doppelgänger* also leads to the uncanny result ‘daß einer, der seinem Doppelgänger begegnet, sich selber vernichtet fühlt’ (CS 201). The use of the word ‘annihilate’ – ‘vernichten’ – is far more absolute and radical than the mortal death of which the traditional Romantic *Doppelgänger* warns. Kafka’s recurring *Doppelgängers* represent not merely the destruction of the bourgeois self in the mills of modernity, but also presages the annihilation of European Jewry barely ten years after Kafka’s death. Thus, Dr. K. is in Riva, the narrator tells us, in the very first sentence of the story, en route to Vienna to take part in a congress on ‘Rettungswesen und Hygiene’ (SG 157). These two words suggest the two poles of Jewish identity for which Dr. K. acts as a cipher in Sebald’s narratives: the messianic *Rettung* that is made more explicit in his essay on the *Schloß*, and the murderous ‘racial hygiene’ of the Nazis that destroyed Kafka’s family and culture.

The Shoah provides Sebald with a personal line of filiation to Kafka. Sebald sees Kafka as in some sense his own double, bound to him by inherited guilt. In an interview with the *Guardian*, he said:

‘I was born in May 1944 in a place the war didn’t get to,’ he says of the Bavarian village of Wertach im Allgäu. ‘Then you find out it was the same month when Kafka’s sister was deported to Auschwitz. It’s bizarre; you’re pushed in a pram through the flowering meadows, and a few hundred miles to the east these horrendous

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20 In *Nach der Natur*, too, the lyrical narrator makes reference to the Frankfurt Jewish ghetto, which was built “im Zuge der bürgerlichen / Ordnungswaltung und der damit fortschreitenden / Reform und Hygienisierung […]” (NdN 13).
things are happening. It’s the chronological contiguity that makes you think it is something to do with you.\(^{21}\)

Here, Sebald, the writer, demonstrates both an identity with Sebald the narrator of Schwindel.Gefühle, and a constructed identity with the character of Kafka, an identity which is marked both by guilt and by erotic longing.\(^{22}\) Indeed, in the essay ‘Via Schweiz ins Bordell. Zu den Reisetagebüchern Kafkas’, Sebald writes that Kafka’s diaries of his trip from Prague via Switzerland to Paris seem to him to be about himself: ‘Vieles ist mir an diesen Aufzeichnungen so nah, als spielte ich selber eine Rolle in ihnen, und nicht bloß weil so oft von Max die Rede ist’ (CS 180). As a child, Sebald writes, he travelled the very same journey through Switzerland as Kafka did before the Second World War, and, Sebald claims, his reactions to the ultra-modern, clean-scrubbed Switzerland match Kafka’s own.

In All’estero, the adult Sebaldian narrator more consciously retraces Kafka’s travels, this time through Italy.\(^{24}\) In the railway station at Desenzano, he conscientiously follows Kafka’s traces right into the twilight zone of the bathroom (notoriously a space where putatively heterosexual men feel their heterosexuality threatened by the gaze of other men – or even cross the boundary of heteronormativity into homosexual encounters). While washing his hands, the narrator tells us,

\(^{21}\) Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’.

\(^{22}\) Such identification is, of course, not unique to Sebald. The figure of Kafka exerts a particular seduction on the German writers who wrote after him, not least of which is Peter Handke. In Das Ende des Flanierens he confesses ‘[…] vor langer Zeit, als meine Welt die Welt Kafkas war und mein Held Dr. Franz Kafka. “Alle Angeklagten sind schön.” Wie habe ich mich in der Scham Kafkas wiedergefunden – nein, nicht wiedergefunden, sondern überhaupt erst einmal entdeckt…’ Peter Handke, ‘Zu Franz Kafka,’ in Das Ende des Flanierens (Frankfurt am Main: suhrkamp, 1980), pp. 153-159, p. 154.

\(^{23}\) CS 179-183.

\(^{24}\) Webber argues that, if the Doppelgänger is a figure of displacement, appearing out of place in order to displace its host, Italy is recurrently the site of displacement for the German Doppelgänger. The Doppelgänger’s function of displacement extends to the sexual agency of the self: ‘it recurrently introduces voyeurism and innuendo into the subject’s pursuit of a visual and discursive sense of self.’ Vienna, in the first part of All’estero, is the locus of the disordering of the Sebaldian bourgeois self: Italy follows as the locus of its sexual derangement, the breaking down of unitary identity into a scopophilic, fearful crisis of masculinity. Webber, The Doppelgänger, pp. 3-4.
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schaute ich in den Spiegel und fragte mich, ob Dr. Kafka, der, von Verona herüberkommend, gleichfalls an diesem Bahnhof ausgestiegen sein müßte, nicht auch in diesem Spiegelglas sein Gesicht betrachtet hatte. Es ware eigentlich kein Wunder gewesen. (SG 99)²⁵

In the homoeroticized space of the railway toilet, through the ritual of repetition, the narrator attempts to move backwards in time through the mirror, and to see Kafka as his own double. The sight of graffiti by the mirror reinforces his conviction that Kafka’s reflection must once have looked out of the same mirror: ‘Il cacciatore, stand da in einer ungelenken Schrift’ (SG 99). Sebald here inscribes himself not only into Kafka’s personal letters to Felice, but also into his literary work, by adding the words nella selva nera to the inscription, turning the fragmentary scrawl into a deliberate reference to Gracchus, the hunter from the Black Forest. And yet, this seemingly cast-iron link between the mirror and Kafka does, perhaps, require a miracle of belief: the words are scrawled in an untidy script, but Kafka’s own handwriting, as we know, was almost as lucid as print. The superimposition of Kafka’s reflection on the

²⁵ The importance of the gaze, and its relation to the uncanny, in Sebald has been extensively discussed: see particularly Jan Ceuppens, ‘Seeing Things: Spectres and Angels in W. G. Sebald’s Prose Fiction’, in W. G. Sebald – A Critical Companion, pp. 190-202, as well as the extensive list of publications that deal with the gaze of the camera in Sebald’s work. Schwindel.Gefühle is particularly rich in scopophilic motifs (eg SG 84), though here it is the lowered gaze, rather than the semi-obscured one, that is most prevalent. Zilcosky elucidates the Freudian dimension to the narrator’s gaze in Schwindel.Gefühle: he points out that, subsequent to the narrator viewing the heterosexual coupling of Romana and the huntsman in the W. of his childhood, he begins fearing knives and collapses into a grave illness, ‘which leads to a delirium reminiscent of the scene of castration/blindness that Freud observed at the end of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ (‘Fine eyes – fine eyes!’) […] whenever [the narrator] is touched by an unknown woman, he senses something ‘disembodied and ghoulish’ that makes ‘everything out of focus, as if through lenses not made for my eyes’’. John Zilcosky, ‘Sebald’s Uncanny Travels’, in W. G. Sebald – A Critical Companion, p. 108. The Sebaldian gaze, though, is not always uncanny: sometimes it is a guarantor of metaphysical truth in a post-metaphysical age. In Nach der Natur, for example, the lyrical narrator affirms that we can trust the testimony of Joachim von Sandrart, ‘denn ein Bildnis in einem Würzburger Museum | hat ihn bewahrt, zweundachtzigjährig, | hellwach und von seltener Klarheit des Blicks.’ In an essay on Roth, he further probes the nature of the metaphysical gaze, which has the power to reverse our relationship to the natural world. ‘Im Schauen spüren wir, wie die Einge uns ansehen, verstehen, daß wir nicht da sind, um das Universum zu durchdringen, sondern um von ihm durchdrungen zu sein.’ (UH 168) The metaphysical gaze, which the narrator here gains, is at once uncanny and allows nature to speak as a subject.
Sebaldian narrator's own still only occurs in the hall of mirrors that is his imagination, and in the alchemy of writing.

‘Max and Franz’, Sebald says, in the only time he refers to Dr. K. by his first name in ‘Via Schweiz ins Bordell’, ‘kommen einem [beinahe] vor wie ein von Franz selber erfundenes Paar’ (CS 181). On further reading of the essay, Sebald’s attachment to the pair suggests that Max and Franz have an imaginary relationship in another sense, too: earlier in their journey, after all, they had been been exclaiming about their joy over discovering that their bedrooms were linked via a double door, one side of which can be opened from each room – an arrangement, Max remarks, that is suitable for a married pair.26 In Paris, Sebald reports, Max and Frank seek to escape their depressed mood in a ‘rationell eingerichteten’ brothel, where the proceedings are so mechanized that one is out on the street again before one knows it, and where, Kafka writes, it is difficult to get a close look at the girls. If Sebald inserts himself into Kafka’s diary narrative via the coincidence of repetition of his chosen name, thus, almost imperceptibly, he also inserts himself into the homoerotic negotiations of Max and Franz, who seem to mediate their desire for each other through the joint visit to the heterosexual brothel that leaves so few traces on their memory. Rational modernity has dissolved the immediate sensuality more traditionally associated with brothels, but has also cut loose the bonds of traditional family, allowing the two bachelors to travel as a half-separated, half-connected pair that mirrors, if does not match, a married couple.

Sebald mentions one more incident from Kafka’s travel diary in this essay, that of Kafka’s encounter with the travelling gold worker from Krakow. In his diary, Kafka encounters the gold worker before the visit to the brothel,27 whereas in Sebald’s retelling, the meeting takes place after Franz’s ‘einsamer, langer, sinnloser Nachhauseweg’ from the brothel, and after Max has travelled back to Prague, leaving Franz alone (CS 183). In this brief essay, then, Kafka appears as a bachelor who performs perfunctory heterosexual rituals, but whose poetic wanderings take place in the company of other bachelors, including, like a ghost, the unborn Max Sebald. This libidinous portrayal of Kafka becomes more evident in Sebald’s fictional reworking of the Kafka material in Dr K.s Badereise nach Riva.

27 Kafka, Tagebücher 1910-1923, p. 388
b  Dr. K. in Riva: Romantic bachelor, uncanny Jew

Dr. K.’s journey to take the waters at Riva – which is officially no such ‘Badereise,’ but a business trip, as Sebald tells us in the first paragraph of the narrative – is a journey over the border from the German-speaking lands to Italy, a journey over the bounds of bourgeois identity. More, it is a journey along the boundaries of homosexuality. For Goethe, the Italian journey ironically reconfirmed his bourgeois identity by his return over the border to Germany; for Dr. K., no such simple return is possible. Dr. K.’s travels are, Sebald tells us, overshadowed by his inability to marry (on the doubly ill-fated date of the 13th of August 1913, Kafka had broken off his engagement to Felice Bauer, only to resume it days later), and haunted by the desire to cross the border over into the shadowland of homosexuality.

Es sei unmöglich, notiert er tags darauf, das einzig mögliche Leben zu führen [...] den einzig möglichen Schritt über die Männerfreundschaft hinaus zu tun, denn dort, unmittelbar jenseits der gesetzten Grenze, richte sich schon der Fuß auf, der ihn zertreten werde. (SG 158)

The voyage to Italy, which, when repeated by the Sebaldian narrator, far more resembles a pilgrimage in search of validation of his status as a poet, becomes for Dr. K. a wandering along this forbidden border. Sebald illustrates the hygienic ritual prescribed at the Riva baths by images impishly chosen, it seems, to demonstrate the highest degree of homoeroticism possible. In a series of three pictures on p. 170, a stern bearded doctor wields a water hose so close to a half-naked male patient’s groin that the picture resembles a masturbation scenario as much as it does hydrotherapeutic treatment. The heterosexual bourgeois culture in which Kafka lived and wrote carries within it its own uncanny repressed sexual other, a point which Sebald makes over and over again in the essays in Unheimliche Heimat.

The narrative of Dr. K. demonstrates the conflict between the (uncanny) romantic and the (modern) real in classic Gothic fashion. In keeping with the doublings and treblings that Sebald detects in Kafka’s work, Dr K. is like a tormented bachelor from a tale by Hoffmann: he suffers from disturbances in his vision (SG 158) and his days are plagued by a phenomenon of chronic dualism:

eine Verzweifachung, wie sie ihm aus seinen Träumen bekannt war, in denen auf eine furchterregende Weise alles beständig sich weiter und weiter aufspaltete. (SG 165)
Moreover, he constantly encounters uncannily doubled men in his travels, such as Ehrenstein and Pick, who wear the same moustache and could be each other’s twins. Worse, Pick himself, like Jekyll and Hyde, is an unpleasantly doubled man who

eine kleine, unangenehme Lücke in seinem Wesen hat, aus der er, wie Dr. K. jetzt feststellt, manchmal in seiner Gänze herauskriecht. (SG 159)

The narrator avers that because of Dr K.’s afflictions, he would surely have recognized his *Doppelgänger* in Balduin, the hero of *The Student of Prague*, a silent film that was released in Austria at the same time as Dr K. was visiting Riva. A dashing Romantic bachelor, Balduin is haunted by his own mirror image that he has sold to the devil. The mirror image is the ghostly shadow of his own restlessness (SG 167), which he could never and nowhere escape (SG 166). Eventually, Balduin attempts to shoot the other self, but in doing so, penetrates his own heart. Otto Rank bases his 1912 study of the *Doppelgänger* on this very story. Balduin’s murderous shadow, he theorises, is the exemplary personification of an atavistic neurosis found universally in the human psyche, namely the fear of death that finds expression in an infantile narcissism. This narcissism disrupts the male self’s ability to form love relationships with women, just as the literary *Doppelgänger* frequently disrupts love scenes between the protagonist and his beloved. For Rank and Freud, romantic love and marriage are the moral destiny of the bourgeois subject, which the narcissism represented by the *Doppelgänger* threatens to destroy.

By contrast Sebald, in an essay on Schnitzler that leans on Foucault, analyses this romantic fiction of self-fulfilment in love as one of the nineteenth-century literary myths that binds the bourgeois individual into the framework of society and utilitarian progress. Dr K.’s creation Gracchus the huntsman is, not unlike the shade of Dr. K., cursed to wander between heaven and hell in order to expiate a nameless guilt. The narrator of *Schwindel.Gefühle* tells us that it seems to him

als bestünde der Sinn der unablüssigen Fahrten des Jägers Gracchus in der Abbuße einer Sehnsucht nach Liebe [...]. (SG 180)

The figure of Gracchus, in Kafka’s *Texte zum Jäger Gracchus-Thema* is a cipher for Kafka himself: the Latin word *gracchus* means ‘raven’ or related bird, and *kavka* is

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The Czech for jackdaw. A later manifestation of the tormented hunter appears in Sebald’s posthumously published work, ‘Die Alpen im Meer.’ Here, the Sebaldian narrator reads Flaubert’s *Legende de Saint-Julien*, fascinated and revolted by the lust for killing that drives the young Prince Julien. Julien attempts to overcome his murderous lusts, but is persecuted both by images of his endless victims, and by fantasies of killing ever more animals. In the end, Julien can only find redemption in the house of a ferryman, on top of whom he must lie, pressing his body into the ferryman’s dirty, stinking flesh, in order to make the final crossing between life and death.

Drüben auf der anderen Seite muß Julian das Lager des Fahrmanns teilen, und dann, indem er das von Schrunden und Schwären bedeckte, teils knotig verhärtete, teils schmierige Fleisch unarmt und Brust an Brust und Mund an Mund mit diesem ekelhaftesten aller Menschen die Nacht verbringt, wird er aus seiner Qual erlöst und darf aufsteigen in die blaue Weite des Firmaments. (CS 48)

This motif has a precedent in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, albeit here without the abject element of revulsion, where Wilhelm Meister revives a drowned fisher boy by lying on top of him, ‘wie Kastor und Pollux’. Hartmut Böhme notes the strong homoerotic undertones to this moment, and also suggests that the body of the fisher boy, reanimated, is itself a godly text, suggesting an intimate link between the homosexual and the Gnostic cipher-language of nature.

Die ‘Sprache der Natur’ zu verstehen, heißt hier zunächst, die ästhetische Signatur des Leibes zu erfahren: dies geschieht dem pubertären Wilhelm in der ästhetisch-

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30 CS 39-51, pp. 46 ff.

31 See Gustave Flaubert, ‘The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitaller’, trans. by Michel Grimaud, in *Saint/Oedipus: psychocritical approaches to Flaubert’s art*, ed. by William J. Berg, Michel Grimaud, and George Moskos (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 231-255, p. 255. ‘Julian took off his clothes; then, naked as on the day he was born, again took his place in the bed; and he could feel against his thigh the Leper’s skin, colder than a snake and rough as a file.’

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eroticischen Urszene der Offenbarung der Leibs Schönheit des Fischerknaben, der dann ertrinkt. Daraus erwächst das Motiv zur Naturforschung, nämlich der Medizin. Nachdem Wilhelm auf dem Theater ein Vertrauter des exponierten Leibes geworden ist, die klassische und plastische Anatomie durchlaufen hat, kommt er, in der symbolischen Schlußszene des Romans, praktisch in die Lage, seinen ertrinkenden Sohn zu retten.\(^{33}\)

The Sebaldian narrator, too, undergoes a process of redemption by reading the text of St. Julian:

Nicht ein einziges Mal während des Lesens hatte ich meinen Blick heben können von der mit jeder Zeile tiefer in das Grauen eindringenden, von Grund auf perversen Erzählung über die Verruchtheit der Menschengewalt. Erst der Gnadenakt der Transfiguration auf der letzten Seite ließ mich wieder aufschauen. (CS 48)

As we have already seen, this abject resuscitation motif is also present in Der junge Mann, where Leon Pracht redeems his brother’s wife by joining with her in a bath full of faeces, like a ‘Christian knight’ to save her (DJM 163). In these complex images, an abject transition through perverse physical contact paradoxically redeems the sinner from his human perversity, and – if Böhme’s analysis also holds here – awakens the lost, alienated language of pre-modern nature. Homosexual desire, then, holds a powerful lure indeed in Sebald’s poetics, over and above that of simple proscribed lust.

In Schwindel.Gefühle, like Balduin’s Doppelgänger, Gracchus represents Dr K.’s guilt and illegitimate desire. Thus, in a post-Romantic context, unlike that of the traditional Romantic protagonists of Jean Paul and Hoffmann, Dr K.’s sin is to be caught between the desire to love queerly, and the desire to enter the bourgeois order of heterosexual love and marriage at all. Hence, Sebald claims that Balduin’s struggle with his Doppelgänger is analogous to Kafka’s short story, ‘Beschreibung eines Kampfes’, where the male narrator, after a series of hallucinogenic, homoerotic encounters with a nameless stranger – ‘da umarmte er mich, küßte meine Kleider und stieß mit seinem Kopf gegen meinen Leib’\(^{34}\) – is forced into a corner by his

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\(^{31}\) Hartmut Böhme, Natur und Subjekt (Frankfurt am Main: suhrkamp, 1988), p. 158.

\(^{34}\) Franz Kafka, ‘Beschreibung eines Kampfes’ (Fassung A) in Franz Kafka, Beschreibung eines Kampfes und andere Schriften aus dem Nachlaß (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994), pp. 47-98, p. 60.
companion and forced to say, ‘Ich bin verlobt, ich gestehe es’ (SG 167). The narrator of Kafka’s short story is both attracted to and repelled by his counterpart. The two men’s desire for each other alternates with an ostensible attraction to the phantasmagorical figure of a girl in a white dress, whom they both profess to desire:

Da sagte ich zu mir: ‘Warum gehst Du init diesem Menschen? Du liebst ihn nicht und Du hassest ihn auch nicht, denn sein Glück besteht nur in einem Mädchen und es ist nicht einmal sicher, daß sie ein weißes Kleid trägt [...]’.

These same elements of homosexual longing, mediated via a virginal young woman, whose chastity conveniently places any corporeal sexual intercourse out of the question, are also present in Dr. K.s Baderise nach Riva. Dr. K. meets a young woman at dinner who has a masculine ‘merkwürdig dunkel gefarbte Stimme,’ is, like Dr. K. himself, in frail health, and who, they later learn from a Clavdia Chavchat-like fortune teller, ‘nie in den sogenannten Stand der Ehe treten würde’ (SG 175). Dr. K. takes the uncanny mermaid, as he dubs her, out one night on a boat, and, rebelling against the bourgeois myth of love, he spins her a fantasy of ‘körperlosen Liebe, in der es keinen Unterscheid gibt zwischen Annäherung und Entfernung’ (SG 173), one where the bourgeois division between subject and nature is overcome by the dissolution of the body back into nature. Indeed, Dr. K.’s presence in the novel is ghostly throughout, and Sebald mentions him on his deathbed, weighing only forty-five kilogrammes, suspended between life and death (SG 153). Nonetheless, the body and its desires cannot be entirely dissolved, as the recurring homoerotic phantoms of the Kafkaesque Doppelgänger show; homosexuality appears as a spectral force, but, as suggested by the legend of St. Julien, one with a powerful redemptive power.


37 Rovagnati makes the point that, indeed, Casanova also represents a form of non-bourgeois, libidinous sexuality that is associated with resistance. ‘Casanova, der die Freiheit in der Liebe darstellt, läßt sich nicht für eine längere Zeit gefangen halten.’ Rovagnati, „Das unrettbare Venedig des W. G. Sebald“, in Sebald. Lektüren, p. 152.
c Dr K.’s messianic Mission: assimilation and its discontents

The messianic aura that surrounds the figure of Dr K. suggests that the sin of love may represent a betrayal of a messianic mission. In ‘Das Gesetz der Schande – Macht, Messianismus und Exil in Kafkas Schloß’, Sebald explores the idea that K in the Castle – who is to some extent Kafka’s alter ego, as are all Kafka’s characters, – represents a messiah in the Jewish tradition of messianism, whose mission is, according to Sebald, ‘die Erlösung aus dem Exil der Geschichte’ (UH 91). Kafka’s messianism is, for Sebald, the point where dialectics break down, where power and powerlessness have become almost mythical categories that make revolution impossible, and hope mandatory. Sebald focuses on the messianic elements of the Castle, in particular, in this essay, but the Gracchus thematic complex in Schwindel.Gefühle certainly contains significant messianic threads that suggest redemption from the tragic progress of history. While Sebald’s works constantly mourn the ravages created by this forward logic of modernity, also expressed in Adornian terms as the dialectic of Enlightenment, Sebald’s characters are also on a search for redemption from this destructive progression. Thus, a Benjaminian theology of messianism informs Sebald’s discussion of Dr. K, a messianism that, according to Gershem Scholem, is in itself a catastrophic theory, one which breaks the logic of history but which also is dependent upon it to unleash the disaster that will bring forth the messiah.38 This catastrophism, Sebald writes, is intrinsically inimical to the bourgeois spirit:

Der dem Fortschritt und der Ausdehnung der Ordnung verschworene bürgerliche Geist konnte sich derart extreme Gedankengänge nicht gut erlauben.39

messianism, then, provides a political or theological form of resistance to the oppressive logic of bourgeois society.

Homosexuality, as we have seen above in relation to St. Julien, has a personally redemptive force in Sebald’s work. Homosexual desire not only disrupts the German and male identities of Sebald’s characters, but also promises to disrupt the linear,

38 Sebald sets out his understanding of messianism in his early book on Döblin. See particularly pp. 59-61, where he describes the influence of Scholem’s thinking on Döblin and the expressionist movement in general after the first world war.

39 Döblin, p. 61.
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destructive progress of history. It breaks the logic of the self-perpetuating bourgeois family and the bourgeois structures of society that it props up. It is, therefore, perilously poised between an apocalyptic death wish on the one hand, and a desire for personal tenderness on the other. Zilcosky makes a similar point when he argues that the moments of homoerotic desire in Schwindel.Gefühle may offer a way out of a system of eternal heterosexual return. He concludes that, just as the Sebaldian narrator never actually manages to lose his way in the cities where he seeks release, neither the narrator nor Kafka ever finally deviate from heterosexuality.

Instead, each returns to the beaten path of his heterosexuality and, what is more, to the equally uncanny track of historical repetition.¹⁰

Thus, like a nascent messiah, Dr. K. almost experiences an annunciation in Trieste himself, without the need for a mediating virgin mother:

Also wahrhaftig ein Engel, dachte Dr. K., als er wieder Atem schöpfen konnte, den ganzen Tag fliegt er auf mich zu, und ich in meinem Unglauben weiß es nicht. Jetzt wird er gleich zu mir sprechen, dachte er und senkte den Blick. (SG 161)

When Dr. K. looks again, this angel, which the Sebaldian narrator has also been seeking out on his journey, turns out not to be the avenging clay angel who murders visitors from the North that he knows stalks Trieste, but only a wooden figurehead, part of the hotel furnishings: yet still, it is precisely in Dr. K.’s hotel bedroom that the uncanny artefact hangs.

In Sebald’s essay on the Schloß, he writes that mutability is inherent to the figure of the Jewish messiah, as it is to that of the Doppelgänger. He refers to the messiah as ‘diese[ ] derart in ständiger Metamorphose begriffenen Tradition’ (UH 91), whose only stable feature is an ahistorical, timeless hope for redemption. The Kafkan messianic angel, he writes, has nothing to do with metaphysics, but is rather an ontological apparition (UH 103). Ten years after he wrote the original English version of this essay, this wavering, spectral figure of the messiah in Kafka’s work – ‘Irisierend schwankt es zwischen dem des Königs und dem des Bettlers’ (UH 91) has retreated yet further from the physical world, indeed has all but evaporated, in the

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essay that Sebald wrote on ‘Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen – Zu Kafkas Evolutionsgeschichten.’ Here, he writes,

Dort, wo in Kafkas Texten ihrer inneren Logik nach der Messias erscheinen müßte, finden sich nur Leerstellen oder Vexierbilder.\textsuperscript{41}

Returning to \textit{Schwindel.Gefühle}, we can now see that, because of his sin of bourgeois love, Gracchus is a failed aspect of the messiah. He arrives in Riva expecting a festive reception, but is not expected by the townspeople or by its sceptical mayor. Dr K., by contrast, is awaited in Trieste as a messianic figure:

Die Leute, kommt ihm vor, bleiben auf der Straße stehen und blicken ihm nach, als wollten sie sagen, da ist er ja endlich. (SG 160)

Nonetheless, Dr. K. ignores the festive reception organized for him by the townspeople of Desenzano, and they wait for them in vain.

Einer von ihnen soll die Äußerung getan haben, daß diejenigen, in die wir unsere Hoffnungen setzen, immer dann erst kommen, wenn sie keiner mehr braucht. (SG 170)

Gracchus and Dr. K. are doubled aspects of the messiah, who suffers from ‘seiner Inkongruenz mit sich selbst’ (UH 99). Taken in the context of Sebald’s reading of Jewish messianism, Dr K.’s sin, in being betrothed, would appear to have been that he bound himself into the historical structures of German bourgeois society, rather than to the traditional Jewish principle and metaphysical homeland of hope.\textsuperscript{42}

Ironically, this anti-historical version of messianism emerged at a very particular time in European Jewish history, at the turn of the nineteenth century; when urban, German-speaking Jews were rejecting the bourgeois, assimilationist aspirations of their parents, and turning back to Hebrew tradition or its Zionist interpretation. Sebald discusses this historical moment more fully in an essay entitled ‘Westwärts-Ostwärts. Aporien deutschsprachiger Ghettogeschichten’,\textsuperscript{43} where he speaks of the ambivalence


\textsuperscript{42} ‘As Mörbus and others have noted, however, Kafka ultimately saw the voyage as an opportunity to separate himself physically and psychologically from Felice, whom he did not wish to marry’. Brad Prager, ‘Sebald’s Kafka’, in \textit{W. G. Sebald: History – Memory - Trauma}, p. 117.

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inherent in the situation of those Jews of Kafka’s father’s generation who migrated westwards within Austria-Hungary:

Die Sehnsucht nach dem neuen bürgerlichen Zuhause trägt in sich die Nachtrauer um die aufgegebene alte Welt und ein gewisses Unbehagen darüber, daß mit der Öffnung des Ghettoes, das so lange die einzige Wohnstatt hatte sein können, nun eine neue Zerstreuung sich anbahnt.  

In the literary tradition of the ghetto narrative, as Sebald reads it, the ability to demonstrate the bourgeois virtues of love and sensibility via sentimental education and participation in bourgeois marriage rituals functions as one of the key tests of a Jewish character’s assimilation into civilized society. Sebald further notes that the ‘sentimental education’ of bourgeois love is reserved for the female Jewish soul: by contrast,

Männer erlangen den Zutritt zur bürgerlichen Sozietät einzig über einen ihren Aspirationen entsprechenden Geld- und Besitznachweis.

The bourgeois rituals of contractual love, then, expressed in the conventional language of sensibility and emancipation of the emotions, may already carry with them a destabilising, feminising threat to the masculine subject.

The second generation of Jewish immigrants from the ghetto into the Western metropolis, that of Kafka, Sebald suggests, can no longer share the optimistic belief in the power of the light of bourgeois reason to drive out the shadows of ghetto superstition from the Jewish soul, nor wholeheartedly believe that such a metamorphosis would be a transformation for the better. Where earlier ghetto writers such as Kompert and Franzos glowingly describe the ability of Jewish immigrants to absorb the ‘deutscher Geisteskultur’ thanks to their tradition of Jewish scholarship, Sebald points to Kafka’s ‘Bericht an eine Akademie’ as a dark satire on such Bildungsoptimismus.

Rotpeter, the learned ape, has acquired the level of education of an average European, but his report to the academy shows that this learning has been won through a painful repression of his ape-like nature, and has left him with no

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very great conviction that those who call themselves learned humans are very far removed themselves from the apes. 48 Writing about Peter Weiss, Sebald speaks of the consequences of the movement away from the ghetto and towards ‘civilized’ bourgeois Europe, as


Rumpelstiltskin is doomed to be constantly at war with himself, divided in two and yet forced to combine both halves within one self, like Rotpeter, the ‘unselige Zwitterkreatur’, 49 both ape and human, German and Jewish, or, most literally, and therefore most queerly, male and female.

It is this very particular tension between repressed Jewish tradition and bourgeois assimilation within the German tradition of bourgeois letters that arises in the opposing pair of Dr K. and Gracchus. At the end of ‘Dr K.s Badereise nach Riga,’ Dr K. writes a letter to Felice, describing how he followed the son of a Jewish bookseller around Prague, an

armseliger Mensch, der sich, wie Dr. K. weiß, als Deutscher fühlt und darum jeden Abend, nachdem er genachtmahlt hat, ins Deutsche Haus, um dort als Mitglied des Clubs Deutsches Casino die letzten Stunden des Tages seiner Illusion zu frönen [...] (SG 181)

Dr. K. writes that he follows this man ‘geradezu lüstern’, and that he ‘mit unendlichem Genuß ihn in das Tor des Deutschen Hauses verschwinden sah’ (SG 182). At this point, the narrator comments,

Es hätte wohl nicht viel gefehlt, und Dr. K. hätte an dieser Stelle ein Bekenntnis einer, wie angenommen werden muß, unerfüllt gebliebenen Sehnsucht abgelegt (SG 182)

Rank’s analysis would suggest that this desire of the shadow for the shadowed must be homosexual, and the repetitive sly references in the tale to male nudity and the

border across which forbidden homosociality lies show that Sebald would agree with Rank. In the light of the suggestions that Dr K. is in some way the bearer of the Jewish messianic tradition, it would seem that this illegitimate, unstillled desire is also likely to refer to the paternal desire for assimilation into German culture, the tradition of Bildung and bourgeois individualism which is already crumbling under the pressures of modernity. The figure of the homosexual man thus appears in Sebald’s work as a ‘Zwitterwesen’ or doubly determined figure, one who wanders along the bounds of homosexuality and of the racial and social distinctions enforced by the mechanisms of power. In keeping with this link between the queer and the political, Sebald also ascribes the haunting of Balduin and of Dr K to the alienating effects of modernity and the traumatic progress of Jewish history.

Discussing Die Ausgewanderten, Maya Barzilai argues that Sebald’s portrayal of many of his Jewish characters draws on unreflected stereotypes also present in Freud’s theory. She suggests that, in Sebald’s work, two of Freud’s models of anxiety are present: the Oedipus complex, and that of the ‘uncanny Jew.’ In keeping with the anxieties surrounding the German male in the fin de siècle, she suggests that Sebald’s uncanny Jew is a figure that combines Jewishness with traits that are marked as ‘queer’ – ‘namely, hysteria, melancholia and passivity.’ The orthodox heterosexual Oedipal stage is designed to banish the figure of the uncanny Jew, the ‘ghostly, wandering figure, devoid of home and nation’ that disrupts the lives and homes of the settled European bourgeoisie. In Schwindel.Gefühle, the spectral Kafka haunts both his settled bourgeois alter ego and the paranoid Sebaldian narrator, threatening both of their stable masculine identities with dissolution into the land behind the mirror. The presence of the set of pictures that solemnly depict the homoerotic proceedings between doctor and patient at Riva suggests that, at least in this novel, Sebald is ironically playing with these ideas of masculinity and male anxiety that, in Austerlitz, take on a lugubriously serious tone once they are more explicitly bound in with the narrator’s inherited guilt.

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Sebald's preoccupation with the figure of Kafka the writer shows in some way a search for redemption from this guilt. A similar redemptive longing is invested in the Kafka figure, in the essay 'Kafka im Kino', where Sebald positions himself as a lonely champion of Kafka's 'verlorenengegangene[ ]s Judentum' (CS 204). Indeed, Sebald here positions himself as, in some ways, a redeemer of Kafka, for he suggests that Kafka's work has fallen prey to 'die an der Schwierigkeit Kafkas ihren höheren Scharfsinn erprobenden Literaturtheoretiker,' who are happy to erase Kafka's Jewish identity in the interests of bolstering their own intellectual identities (CS 195).

Earlier, in his essay on 'Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen – Zu Kafkas Evolutionsgeschichten', he had formulated these attacks on the German Kafka industry in the terms of a dialectic of Bildung, castigating his colleagues for having erected 'einen panoptischen Turmbau' on the 'aus eigenen Ausgezehrtheit schon leidende Werk' of Kafka.

Kafka scholarship, here, becomes just one more example of the punitive Bildungsideal enforced upon the unhappy migrants from the Jewish ghetto into enlightened German bourgeois society, a panopticon trained on the suffering body of Kafka's prose.

Thus, it is true that, as Taberner suggests, Sebald's narratives contain within them a certain German nostalgia for German-Jewish symbiosis, but at the same time Kafka (and Peter Weiss) function as the suffering symbols of the negative aspects of that symbiosis for Judaism. If Weiss is a Rumpelstiltskin who cannot quite tear himself in two, so Kafka, Sebald reminds us, became a supporter of the nascent Zionist movement, which promised a redemptive utopia for militant Judaism on earth, which was in this respect

nicht anders als in der seit dem Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts sich formierenden deutschnationalen Ideologie, an der der Zionismus von Anfang an sich ausrichtete. In dem Selbstbild, das sie von sich projizieren, gleichen die beiden aus langer

52 CS 193-209.

53 Sebald's championing of Kafka against the egocentric intellectualism of the German literary establishment, as he perceived it from exile, is of course not dissimilar to his championing of Peter Handke.


Unterdrückung beziehungsweise aus vermeintlicher Hintansetzung erwachenden Völker einander beinahe zum Verwechseln [...] (CS 205)

This is the German-Jewish symbiosis in dystopian form, where Zionism preaches a quasi-Nazi ‘Gedanke der körperlichen Ertüchtigung und physiologischen Erneuerung des Volkes’ (CS 205), a superhuman physical ideal which Sebald juxtaposes, without needing to make the contrast explicit, to his own ghostly physical idea of Kafka, ‘gewichtlos, knochenlos, körperlos’. 56 Sebald concludes, not without reason, that these mirrored ideals of two chosen people are dizzying to contemplate (CS 206). Kafka remains exiled from both peoples, Sebald emphasises, ‘er sei vierzig Jahre aus Kanaan hinausgewandert’ (CS 208) – but these passages make it clear that the negative side of the German-Jewish symbiosis is at all times present to Sebald. If Weiss and Kafka had to suffer the coexistence of two salvatory phantasies in their own body, so Sebald’s narrators suffer a mirrored doubling of their vision, and Kafka suffers inexplicable headaches. Sebald and Kafka discover in their own flesh the wound where the Jewish half of the symbiosis once dwelled. The kind of reconciliation that Sebald’s narrators tend towards is defined against these vast dystopian or racist ideals, as a far more intimate, erotic one, which nonetheless carries within it the echo of the politics of post-war Germany. What Sebald says of Kafka in this essay reflects his own poetics:

Der für Kafkas Schreiben so bezeichnende Übergang ins Phantastische [...] hat oft darüber hinweggetäuscht, daß das anscheinend hoffnungslos exzentrische Bewußtsein dieses Autors die gesellschaftliche Problematik seiner Zeit genauestens reflektierte. (CS 204)

In Sebald’s work on Doblin, he suggests, intriguingly, that Döblin views homosexuality, in an almost monastic fashion, as a ‘purer’ instinct, that renounces procreation, and hence as a form of protest against bourgeois norms.

Mit dem ‘Reineren’ ist hier, wie die Metaphorik verdeutlicht, die homosexuelle Beziehung gemeint, die sich im Einklang mit der Teleologie der naturphilosophischen Sehnsucht der Prokreation verweigert. (Döblin, p. 126)

In Sebald’s work, too, the sexualized form of affiliation that is homosexuality – or the hint of it – also functions as a strategy, overt, occluded or forbidden, against the Oedipal imperative of bourgeois society. Homosexuality appears as a tenderer, more

56 CS 202, citing Kafka’s own notes.
individual mode of reconciliation than the apocalyptic messianism that appears throughout Sebald’s work (as demonstrated by, for example, the recurrence of fires and ruins in his work.\textsuperscript{57}) It attempts to resist the pressures of the bourgeois age and to find shelter for the individual from the progress of history, rather than to bring it to an apocalyptic end. Homosexual love – or same-sex desire – is eventually subject to the same negative forces of destruction that sweep through all of Sebald’s work.

\textbf{3.1.2 Homoeroticism as political resistance}

Nonetheless, as homosexual love does offer a form of minor resistance to bourgeois subjectivity, Sebald often links it to secular political resistance, as in, for example, the Matthias Grünewald narrative in \textit{Nach der Natur}. This is most clearly shown in his hagiography of Roger Casement, whom Sebald canonises for his political resistance to empire.\textsuperscript{58} In \textit{Die Ausgewanderten}, Sebald also devotes the only narrative on a non-Jewish figure to his homosexual uncle, Ambros Adelwarth, who serves as a reconciliatory figure by having a love relationship with his Jewish employer, Cosmo. In this section, I explore Sebald’s connection of homosexuality with political resistance and utopian political reconciliation in more detail.

\textit{a Mathias Grünewald}

The encounter with the uncannily similar other, in Sebald’s work, can also point towards a desire to escape the Oedipal chain of inheritance by affiliating oneself with a chosen beloved male, in a manner that is sometimes fraternal, sometimes homoerotic. Many of Sebald’s figures, including his narrators, tread a perilous line between sanctioned, sometimes doomed, heterosexual love, and forbidden homosocial

\textsuperscript{57} See here, for example, Gabriella Rovagnati’s ‘Canetti, Sebald und die Quellen des Feuers. Zum apokalyptischen Schluß von W. G. Sebald’s Erzählung ‘Il ritorno in patria’’, in \textit{Sebald. Lektüren}, pp. 116-121, or Fuch’s research on Sebald, which diagnoses an overwhelming catastrophism throughout his work.

\textsuperscript{58} Casement is only one of a series of homosexual figures in \textit{Die Ringe des Saturn}, others being, for example, Swinburne, who is looked after in neurotic old age by an officious male companion, Theodore Watts Dunton, and Edward Fitzgerald, who is in love with his friend William Browne. These figures are not directly associated with political resistance, and more with a hypersensitive poetic sensibility that is combined with a general horror at the destruction of history. Homosexual desire, here, is more an inadequate refuge from destruction than a direct protest against it.
or homosexual identification. Matthias Grünewald, in *Nach der Natur*, has a better eye for men than for women, and himself has an elective affinity with Holbein, who paints him into one of his pictures:

> Ja, es scheine, als hätten im Kunstwerk
die Männer einander verehrt wie Brüder,
einander dort oft ein Denkmal gesetzt,
wo ihre Wege sich kreuzten. (NdN 8)

This affiliation, in the Grünewald section of the poem, is at once an aesthetically productive relationship, not dissimilar to those of the Sebaldian narrator for his chosen artist kin, and a love that outshines the love of women. The affection of German men for each other, in the section set in the sixteenth century, is a pendant to ‘die furchtbare / Separation der Geschlechter’ enforced by the church (NdN 9) and of the sexual segregation of Jews and Christians (NdN 12). Although Grünewald overcomes these strictures to marry a Jewish convert, the marriage is unhappy. Perhaps because of Grünewald’s ‘besseres Auge für Männer’, the poetic narrator suggests,

> ist die Grünewald Anna
darum händelsüchtig, krank, ein Opfer
der bösen Vernunft, des Kopffiebers
und des Wahnsinns geworden. (NdN 15)

Thus, the marriage of German artist and beautiful Jewess does not provide any founding genealogy for a ‘German-Jewish symbiosis’ in Sebald’s work. Instead, Anna’s unhappy marriage exposes the cruelty of early German anti-semitism, and demonstrates that the nascent modern German state, represented in the institution of the bourgeois family, merely perpetuates rather than fighting the oppression of Jews by Germans. Grünewald’s ‘eye for men,’ which culpably ignores his wife, is an attempt to subvert the restrictiveness of bourgeois masculinity and of the German state at its outset.

More, in the poem, Grünewald, like Kafka/Dr. K, remains a doubled figure: the text throws up the question as to whether two painters, Mathis Nithart and Grünewald, hide between the name of Matthias Grünewald. The speaker, puzzling out this riddle,
suggests that the obscure Nithart may be depicted on the Isenheim altar, and have contributed to his own portrait as the homoerotic Saint Sebastian:

Hier haben zwei Maler in einem Körper,
dessen verletztes Fleisch ihnen beiden gehörte,

die Natur ausstudiert. (NdN 17)

Their relationship contains both the homoerotic and the abject aspects of the uncanny Sebaldian male friendship, ‘eine [...] Männerfreundschaft / schwankend zwischen Entsetzen und Treue’ (NdN 18). In a secondary male-male affiliation, the Sebaldian speaker even inserts a distant link between Grünewald and himself, via a sixteenth-century namesake: Sebald Beham, an engraver, heretic and friend of Grünewald. Claudia Albes suggests that Nach der Natur is a triptych like the Isenheim altar, a triple portrait of the Sebaldian narrator himself in three historical guises. The biographical data that she presents – the coincidences of dates and places in the biographies of Grünewald, Steller and Sebald – certainly point to an affinity between the three, but the appearance of a second double, Sebald Beham, disrupts any absolute identity. Indeed, the heretic Sebald Beham is a marker for the Unheimlich and exile from self, having been banished from his home town along with his brother:

[...] Barthel und Sebald Beham,
Kupferstecher und Zeichner aus Nürnberg,
die, am 12. Jänner als gottlose Maler
verhaftet und wegen Ketzerei
aus ihrer Heimatstadt ausgewiesen
vorläufig bei dem Windsheimer Meister logierten. (NdN 29)

In exile, the painters discuss the lure of resistance promised by the Thomas Münzer uprising. This uprising, though, is horribly put down, and the news of the defeat

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reaches Grünewald on 18 May, W. G. Sebald’s birthday. The oppressing classes put out the eyes of the rebels, and Grünewald covers his own in empathy:

Er hörte aber das Augenausstechen,
das lang noch vorging
zwischen dem Bodensee
und dem Thüringer Wald.
Wochenweis trug er damals
eine dunkle Binde
vor dem Gesicht. (NdN 31)

All the elements of the Sebaldian homosexual uncanny are present in this early sequence: distrust of bourgeois marriage and the domestic sphere, frustrated longing for a German-Jewish symbiosis, aesthetic affinity, scopophilia, political resistance and martyred male flesh.

b Roger Casement

The link between queerness and the politics of resistance is made most clearly when Sebald writes about Roger Casement, the Irish freedom fighter, in Die Ringe des Saturn:

Der einzige Schluß, der daraus gezogen werden kann, ist der, daß es möglicherweise gerade die Homosexualität Casem ents war, die ihn befähigte, über die Grenzen der gesellschaftlichen Klassen und der Rassen hinweg die andauernde Unterdrückung, Ausbeutung, Versklavung und Verschrottung derjenigen zu erkennen, die am weitesten entfernt waren von den Zentren der Macht. (RdS 162)

Casement is another Zwitterwesen, being, as Sebald points out, the son of a Catholic mother and an Ulster Protestant father. Sebald makes it clear, though, that his sympathies are on the side of the group that he calls Catholics (more properly speaking, nationalists) in the 1916 uprising: he dismisses Ulster Unionists as merely being interested in shoring up their own privilege (RdS 157) – from a historian’s perspective, an excessively simplistic pronouncement. Sebald’s assertion that
homosexuality, which doomed Roger Casement to execution, enabled a politically transgressive vision is one claimed by queer activists today. Here, Colm Tóibín’s essay on Casement in the *New York Review of Books*, whose starting point is this very moment in *Die Ringe des Saturn*, is particularly relevant: ‘Afterward, when Sebald, intrigued by his own vague and twilit memories of the program, sets about finding out what he can about Casement, his imagination is fired by the relationship between Casement and Joseph Conrad.’ Later, Tóibín writes,

we all bring our own concerns to Casement’s story: Sebald is interested in the literary connections; Dudgeon is interested in the gay Casement; McCormack entertains the idea of the text as shifting and unstable.

Yet there is more to Sebald’s interest than merely the literary affiliation between the strange bedfellows Conrad, the Polish English colonialist writer, and Casement, the Protestant, Irish British human rights activist. Tóibín, although he supports Sebald’s view by suggesting ‘It is possible that his nocturnal activities with the very people he was trying to save gave him tenderness for them,’ also includes quotes from Casement’s writings that show him sharing unpleasant Edwardian colonialist views that Sebald excludes from his hagiography. On the inhabitants of Brazil, Tóibín cites Casement as follows:

‘Heavens! what loathsome people they are! A mixture of Jew and Nigger, and God knows what; altogether the nastiest human black pudding the world has yet cooked in her tropical stew pot.’ He also, complicated figure that he was, had views on the homosexual question as though it had nothing to do with him.

Barzilai’s analysis also introduces the suspicion that Sebald is once more using the politically marginalized other to frame the anxieties of male identity. If the Jew represents the repressed colonized other of the German bourgeois self, so the colonized Irishman was constructed, throughout English discourse in the nineteenth century, as feminine, queer, unmanly. In the period following the publication of Casement’s ‘Black Diaries’ in 1994, during which *Die Ringe des Saturn* was written, ascribing secular sainthood to Casement became fashionable among left-wing Irish historians and critics, after a period during which, as both Sebald and the novelist

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Colm Tóibín write, Casement’s homosexuality was vigorously denied by the Catholic Irish establishment, as being incompatible with his holy status as nationalist martyr. However, when such sainthood is ascribed by a German narrator who is self-confessedly eaten up by historical guilt, rather than by a gay Irish writer such as Tóibín seeking to brush his own country’s history against the grain, Sebald appears to be reversing the process of orientalism to project on the queer Irish other all of those politically resistant virtues that the Germans lack. In other words, Sebald in part reinstates those boundaries across which Casement is supposed to have wandered. Interestingly, Tóibín writes that

As his dislike of England increased, so did his admiration of Germany. He admired ‘the honesty and integrity of the German mind, the strength of the German intellect, the skill of the German hand and brain, the justice and vigour of German law, the intensity of German culture, science, education and social development.’ When the war broke out, he had no difficulty supporting Germany.61

Of course, Casement was hanged before the Nazi regime came to power, and before the concept of the inherent value in ‘German culture’ had become horribly called into question; moreover, after spending time in Germany, he described the German officer class as ‘lower than the Congo savages.’62 Thus, Casement, by Tóibín’s account, in no way saw any clear historical teleology that already foresaw the roots of National Socialism in nineteenth-century German bourgeois culture. More, Sebald’s uncritical retelling of the Casement narrative in no way addresses Casement’s own sexual tourism in the Congo: the Black Diaries mentioned by Sebald document a decade-long series of sexual encounters with underage South American and African boys. Fuchs, correctly, writes that Casement’s historically verifiable attitudes are not to the point inDie Ringe des Saturn, since

es nicht hier um eine kritische Aufarbeitung der Komplexität der Figur Casements geht, sondern um die Kreierung eines affektiv aufgeladenen Gedächtnisortes.63

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61 Tóibín, ‘The Tragedy of Roger Casement’.
62 Tóibín, ‘The Tragedy of Roger Casement’.
63 Fuchs, Die Schmerzszspuren der Geschichte, p. 200. Fuchs herself is interested, in keeping with Tóibín’s remark that Casement provides a space to which analysts bring their own concerns, with establishing Casement as one of Sebald’s many lieux de mémoire.
The figure of Casement goes beyond that of a *lieu de mémoire*, though, as I have shown: it is also one around which Sebald’s complex surrounding historical resistance and queer desire can crystallise.

### Cosmo and Adelwarth

In his next novel, *Die Ausgewanderten*, the Sebaldian narrator inserts himself into the matrix of homosexuality, resistance and Jewish messianism in a way that is at once reminiscent of his adoption of Robert Walser as a chosen grandfather, but also containing the cathexis of homosexual desire present in the figures of Kafka and Casement. Here, in the story ‘Ambros Adelwarth’, he creates for himself a homosexual great-uncle, Ambros, who becomes the lover of his Jewish master Cosmo Solomon. In interview, Sebald asserted that Ambros was indeed his great-uncle – he just had another name in real life⁶⁴ – but that his story had been repressed owing to his family’s stern Catholicism:

> Denn aber, sobald ich dieses Photo sah, wußte ich die ganze Geschichte [...] In einer katholischen Familie wird all dies unterdrückt. Es wird nicht mal ignoriert – es wird nicht gesehen, existiert gar nicht. Es paßt nirgendwo hinein.⁶⁵

Yet this coherent picture of a real existing uncle whose queer history had been repressed by bourgeois orthodoxy is complicated as soon as the interviewer presses Sebald as to the authenticity of the documents, supposedly in Adelwarth’s hand, that are reproduced in the text of *Die Ausgewanderten*. ‘Ah. Der ist aber eine Fälschung. Ich habe ihn geschrieben’, Sebald admits. Everything that is important is real, he insists, merely the details are faked, to create *l’effet du réel*. Adelwarth, then, like the other three figures in *Die Ausgewanderten*, is a phantasm, composed of certain ‘real’ elements and those invented elements that the Sebaldian narrator considers more real than the real, because of their persuasive value – the diary entry in English, for instance, but perhaps also the queer desire and fidelity with which Sebald invests the figure. In this way, Adelwarth is in a sense also a doubled figure, crossing the border between the fictive and the historical, as well as between the Old and New World. He

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is also another of Sebald’s liminal figures by reason of his titular status as an exile and wanderer, and, in his position as manservant – only in the finest households of New York, of course – shares something of the subaltern status of those Bohemian Jewish immigrants into Vienna and Berlin.

Like Casement, Adelwarth appears with an aura of instantly recognisable nobility:

eine hochvornehme Erscheinung, durch die sich alle anderen Anwesenden […] in ihrem Selbstwert bestätigt und gehoben fühlten. (DA 98)

Like Kafka, and all those other elected fellow-writers who are enmeshed in Sebald’s prose, Adelwarth is, in the narrator’s memory, a literary figure –

[ich] entsinne mich doch, zutiefst beeindruckt gewesen zu sein von der Tatsache, daß er anscheinend mühllos nach der Schrift redete und Wörter und Wendungen gebrauchte, von denen ich allenfalls ahnen konnte, was sie bedeuteten. (DA 98)

The fleeting resemblance to Kafka continues in the manner of Adelwarth’s patient, silently suffering death, fading away in a sanatorium in Ithaca with an attack of melancholy brought on by the death of his lover (DA 162 ff). His perfectly groomed yet increasingly frail and pain-wracked body is caught between life and death (DA 163), reminiscent of that of the hunter Gracchus. It is also reminiscent of the dying Kafka mentioned in Schwindel.Gefühle, whose concerns are not precisely those of his ambitious friend Franz Werfel who beleaguered him on his deathbed (SG 153). Further, indeed, it is like the ‘suffering body’ of Kafka’s written work which Sebald defends against the attacks of his ambitious fellow-Germanists. Adelwarth’s eventual death is ascribed to the brutal electroconvulsive therapy that he undergoes to cure his melancholy, an exemplar of those technological innovations of the industrial age, omnipresent in Sebald’s work, that dialectically destroy humanity as they aim to...

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66 Cosgrove suggests that Adelwarth’s ‘self-annihilation many years after Cosmo’s death is an allegory of the ethical demands of Ressentiment’ (Cosgrove, ‘The Anxiety of German Influence in Sebald’s Work’, p. 245). In her reading, Adelwarth immolates himself in imitation of Cosmo, in an attempt at German atonement for Jewish suffering. It seems to me that this immolation is less an act of ethical will on Adelwarth’s part, and more one of emotional sympathy. Nonetheless, if this is true, then the Sebaldian narrator’s desire to retrace and reappropriate his great-uncle’s memory is even more self-evidently a desire for personal redemption by proxy.
Adelwarth is thus both another of Sebald’s melancholy bachelors who function as alter egos for the Sebaldian narrative persona, but also a chosen ancestor, the only one of his relatives – imagined or historically verifiable – about whom Sebald writes so much. By comparison, the extent to which even his father, mother and sister are almost completely elided from the accounts he gave in interview or from his prose narratives becomes evident.

Adelwarth, then, is a blood relative of the Sebaldian narrator in Die Ausgewanderten, who creates an intimate relationship with the Jewish community. He becomes the valet and travel companion of the Jewish Cosmo Solomon. If Casmount’s political martyrdom is as a direct result of his homosexual behaviour, Adelwarth’s martyrdom is more tangentially associated with his sexuality. In his nephew Kasimir’s account, delivered on the seashore and on the edge of darkness (DA 129), Adelwarth’s sexual orientation and his physical decline are mentioned side by side, in a way that implies that they may have a causal relationship to each other, yet refuses to draw a direct connection:

Er ist natürlich, wie jeder leicht sehen konnte, von der anderen Partei gewesen, sagte der Onkel Kasimir, auch wenn die Verwandtschaft das immer ignoriert beziehungsweise verbrämt oder zum Teil vielleicht wirklich nicht begriffen hat. Je älter der Adelwarth-Onkel geworden ist, desto hohler ist er vorgekommen, und wie ich ihn das letzte Mal gesehen habe […] war es, als werde er bloß noch von seinen Kleidern zusammengehalten. (DA 129)

Adelwarth’s relationship to Cosmo is one suspended between ‘Freund und Führer’, as he solicitously takes care of the mentally imbalanced Cosmo at the gaming tables of Europe in the fateful year of 1913. The Sebaldian narrator sees them seated together at the gaming table and hears the rumours going around about the couple:

Indeed, the doctor who performs the treatment on Adelwarth, Dr. Abramsky, a man originally from Lemberg, is only persuaded to do so by the Austrian accent of his boss, Fahnstock, who is eager to try out the new therapy. ‘Er mahnte mich an meinen Vater, der aus Kolomea stammt und wie Fahnstock nach dem Zusammenbruch des Habsburgerreiches aus Galizien nach dem Westen gewandert ist’ (DA 167). Although Adelwarth has emigrated to the United States, his dying years are spent as a an experimental subject of European doctors. Thus, far from emigrating from European systems of control and colonialisation, he is bound in to a European chain of paternal influence and medical paternalism.
Cosmo, for his part, treats Adelwarth as a companion and equal, in Kasimir’s account, and is never far from his side in the haunts of high society, including the privé, the exclusive gambling room to which only men in suit jackets have the entré. Together, also, they travel to the earthly Jerusalem, the only time that the physical city, rather than its literary or artistic reproduction, appears in Sebald’s works. Adelwarth’s family know nothing of this journey; they possess no transmitted narrative of the Jerusalem time, only a photograph of Adelwarth in Arab costume and Adelwarth’s supposed travel journal whose tiny script can only reveal its meaning to the Sebaldian gaze (DA 138). Cosmo’s psyche is broken, not by the horrors of war, from which as a rich American he is insulated, but by his no less ghastly imaginings of those horrors (DA 139). Like Gerald, Austerlitz’s fag and friend, he is obsessed with flying machines, which here form an airy counter-weight to the downward tug of the destructions that European history wreaks in his psyche. Cosmo makes enough of a recovery to travel to Egypt with Adelwarth in 1923, replaying the journey of Joseph out of the Promised Land into Egypt. However, his mental health is destroyed once more by another of those early films that, like Der Student von Prag, is obsessed with mirrors and collective hallucinations (DA 141). His eventual descent into misery commences when Adelwarth finds him looking out of his childhood bedroom window, looking out for his brother – a brother he never had (DA 142). In this image, a host of complexes surrounding the doubling of male identity in Sebald’s work coincide – the imaginary lost brother (who haunts Austerlitz), the intimate Jewish male friend, and the homosexual lover.

The key to the Cosmo and Adelwarth episode lies, as with so many of Sebald’s figures, in a diary. This is the travel journal that only the Sebaldian narrator can decipher, a 1913 volume filled with dense script, like a cousin to Roger Casement’s Black Diaries. Here, he writes that he travels further than Italy, the testing-ground of the poet; he leaves Mitteleuropa altogether and goes to the land fetishized by German scholars, Greece (“Kaum glaube ich, daß ich derselbe Mensch und in Griechenland bin,” DA 190), to Constantinople and finally to the earthly Jerusalem. “Oft weitäb vom

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68 This was the year of the opening of the tomb of Tutankhamen, and hence of a resurgence in interest in Egyptology and quasi-Egyptological necromancy and fortune-telling.
Doppelgänger and uncanny homosexuality: The crisis of the Sebaldian subject

Weg, schreibt Ambros, durch das Hl. Land' (DA 202). Jerusalem itself, in contradistinction to the Holy City of Jewish theology and messianic hope, is as afflicted by the ravages of history as any other place that Ambros or indeed the Sebaldian narrator visit: ‘Im großen und ganzen furchtbarer Eindruck’ (DA 203), writes Ambros, shuddering at its unhealthy climate, lack of industry and swarms of competing European churches at every corner. These churches, of course, bear witness to the colonising of the Jewish homeland by European Christian crusaders and missionaries. After the ravages of the Roman emperors, little remained of Jerusalem’s former glories

und von dem unvergleichlichen Reichtum des Gelobten Landes nichts mehr [war] übrig als der dürre Stein und eine ferne Idee in den Köpfen seiner inzwischen weit über die Erde hin verstreuten Bewohner. (DA 210)

Just as Ambros goes through the mirror to engage in homosexual love, he crosses the boundary between German and Jew by having a love affair with Cosmo, and the boundary between the real and the imaginary by seeking out the Promised Land of Jerusalem. Yet homosexual love brings him only a brief idyll in an exoticized Arabia, represented, in particularly questionable fashion, by the photo of a twelve-year-old dervish. Cosmo and Ambros make a particular point of returning to take a photo of the ‘unsusually beautiful boy’ (DA 200), and the ensuing photo brings to mind the spectre of sexual tourism, not dissimilar to Oscar Wilde and André Gide’s infamous sexual adventures in the Maghreb, and repeats the twentieth-century cliché that equates homosexuality and paedophilia. Jerusalem itself proves itself no paradise, but

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70 Jonathan Long suggests that the act of appropriation represented by the photograph is ameliorated by its status within the text as a whole. ‘The images themselves are understood in terms of their function within the economy of the family album, which marginalizes their erotic or political import and constitutes the images as evidence of a familiar ritual: tourism.’ (Long, ‘History, Narrative, And Photography in W. G. Sebald’s Die Ausgewanderten, The Modern Language Review 98 (2003), pp.
instead it is ‘dry stone and a far-away idea.’ While this touristic disillusionment in part is a demonstration of Sebald’s poetics, whereby only writing, not earthly places or relationships, can carry the metaphysical burden of hope, in part it also replays cultural clichés that associate homosexuality with unhappiness, sickness and death. None of Sebald’s emigrants, of course, come to happy endings, yet it is clear that Ambros’s long martyrdom is caused less by his exile from the hated W. in Allgäu, and more by his pining after his lover, himself dead of homosexual melancholy. Homosexual desire, then, in Sebald’s works ultimately proves too fragile a vessel to bear a redemptive charge; but it does prove a means to break the bounds of the German bourgeois self. In the next section, I look at the complex relationship between narrator and narrative subject, and how it reflects this uneasy link between fraternal affection, homosexuality and redemption.

3.2 Narrator and narrated

The homoerotic subtext of Sebald’s narratives extends beyond a fascination with homosexual subjects and literary Doppelgängers; in his last novel, it also appears in the relationship between narrator and narrative subject. The intimacy between Austerlitz and the Sebaldian narrator who transcribes his life story contains elements of all the affiliative moments that appear in his other narratives: an elective affinity with a scholar of a previous generation, an intimate identification with a subject who is a victim of history, not its perpetrator, uncanny hauntings and, ultimately, a fraught hope for redemption.

3.2.1 Generational identification: 1913/1944/1968

As has often been noted, Sebald’s preferred historical territory is neither that of his own generation, nor the Nazi period of his father’s, but rather the pre-World War One period around the date that constantly recurs in his writings, 1913. His attachment to the date is reflected not only in the historical periods to which he returns in his fictions, but also in his generational affiliations. I have already shown that his

117-137, p. 131). However, the domesticisation and trivialisation of acts of colonial appropriation is precisely one of the mechanisms through which orientalisation functions. The picture of the small sexualized boy, pressed between the elaborate covers of a family picture album, is surely the very pattern of the post-colonial uncanny.
affective attachment to the figure Ambros Adelwarth demonstrates an investment with his grandfather’s generation. In interview, instead of identifying with the legacy of his father, or with his own age cohort, when talking about his childhood, he says that it was his grandfather who was the most influential:

Sebald doted on his grandfather, an ‘exceptionally kind man’, who took care of him. ‘As a boy I felt protected. His death when I was 12 wasn’t something I ever quite got over.’

Sebald binds the figure of this grandfather into his narrative prose and narrative personae. In *Schwindel.Gefühle*, when the Sebaldian narrator returns to his home village after an absence of forty years, Lukas Seelos mistakes him not for his father, but for his grandfather, because of his identical way of walking and of crossing a threshold (SG 230). Further, the narrator binds the grandfather figure into his network of literary figures on loan. He says that the schizophrenic bachelor Herbeck’s way of tucking his trilby hat under his arm is ‘genauso wie mein Großvater das beim sommerlichen Spazierengehen oft getan hatte’ (SG 46), and in *Logis in einem Landhaus*, in an essay entitled ‘Le promeneur solitaire’, Sebald identifies his grandfather with Robert Walser:

Doch nicht bloß äußerlich, auch in ihrem Habitus waren der Großvater und Walser sich ähnlich [...] Mag das nun so gewesen sein oder nicht, unzweifelhaft ist, daß beide gestorben sind im selben Jahr, 1956, Walser bekanntlich auf einem Spaziergang am 25. Dezember und der Großvater am 14. April, in der Nacht auf Walsers letzten Geburtstag [...] *

Was bedeuten solche Ähnlichkeiten, Überschneidungen und Korrespondenzen? Handelt es sich nur um Vexierbilder der Erinnerung, um Selbst- und Sinnestäuschungen oder um die in das Chaos der menschlichen Beziehungen einprogrammierten, über Lebendige und Tote gleichermaßen sich erstreckenden Schemata einer uns unbegreiflichen Ordnung? (LL 136-7)

Paradoxically, the coincidence of dates places disparate figures such as Kleist and Walser, and hence also Sebald’s grandfather, in a relation beyond time and space, according to Sebald (LL 163). By the double substitution of making his grandfather stand for his father, and then making his grandfather interchangeable with the writer

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71 Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’. 
Walser, Sebald dislodges the biography of his literary persona from a specific historical context, and binds it into a timeless metaphysical space. Commenting on this passage, Fuchs argues that it demonstrates a baroque concept of the natural order:

 Während die Korrespondenz zwischen Walser und dem Großvater zunächst noch in der autobiografischen Erinnerung des Essayisten gründet, scheint das Ende der Passage auf einen kosmologischen Ordnungsbegriff zu verweisen, von dem aus das Leben in einer Art barocken Allegorie als Scheinwelt eines verborgenen, aber lesbaren Sinns zu verstehen wäre.\(^{72}\)

Fuchs’s reading suggests that the autobiographical memories of the narrator in their own turn function as allegories within the essay, which break through conventional chronology and are released from their historical context. This form of autobiographical allegory is related to the Goethean hermetic procedure described by Hartmut Böhme, which archives memory traces of antiquated natural-philosophical lore that has become repressed by the ratiocentric consciousness of contemporary sciences. According to Böhme, these contents become a subtext in Goethe’s prose, waiting for future deciphering.

Goethe [verlangte] sich einen Gegendiskurs ab, der die Last bewahrender Erinnerung, trauernder Verabschiedung und utopischen Offenhaltens zu tragen vermochte.\(^{73}\)

In Sebald’s critical work, he frequently casts himself as a reader who is able to interpret such archived anti-rational traces in the writings of neglected or misread authors, thereby creating a gnomic link between himself and the lost writer. In his fictional work, he restructures these transhistorical connections and mythical ‘Gegendiskurse’ to structure a web of anti-rational elective affinities. As Sara Friedrichsmeyer says, Sebald’s elective affinities echo Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften in several ways, particularly in the way that

the forces unleashed by the elective affinities in that novel of 1809 [are] primal and elemental, and the death and destruction […] ensue as a warning to those who believe that they can resist or even control them.\(^{74}\)

\(^{72}\) Fuchs, *Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte*, p. 78.

\(^{73}\) Böhme, *Natur und Subjekt*, p. 147.

\(^{74}\) Sara Friedrichsmeyer, ‘Sebald’s Elective and Other Affinities’, in *W. G. Sebald. History – Memory – Trauma*, pp. 77-90, p. 84.
Friedrichsmeyer argues that Sebaldian elective affinities both ‘defy reason and deny humans control of their own destiny.' A closer examination of Sebald’s elective affinities, though, reveals that in choosing them, the Sebaldian narrator precisely tries to control, if not his own destiny, his own subjective cohesion and identity.

3.2.2 The narrator as messenger and pupil

Jonathan Long has suggested that the Sebaldian narrator is often a therapeutic narrator who helps the protagonist to ‘work through’ his historical traumata. If this is true, then, I suggest, the therapy is in the mind of the narrator more than in the interaction between narrator and protagonist; Taberner is surely right when he suggests that it is the Sebaldian narrator, bereaved of a German-Jewish symbiosis, who is most in need of consolation, or at any rate, who believes that the absence of this intimacy can be alleviated by hearing the tale of his interlocutor’s loss. I return to this point later. The ‘Sebaldian narrators,’ haunted, melancholic, attentive, obsessive, determines the narrative in each of his novels, and yet Sebald claimed to intend that it should not be the narrator but the subject of the narrative who is foregrounded in his novels:

I try to let people talk for themselves, so the narrator is only the one who brings the tale but doesn’t install himself in it. There’s still fiction with an anonymous narrator who knows everything, which seems to me preposterous. I content myself with the role of the messenger.

At the same time, he acknowledges the need for the narrator to mark his position in the narrative, discreetly but noticeably. Flagging the mediating activity of the narrator thereby becomes a way to grant a greater authenticity to the narrated material:

Authentizität des Schreibens hat etwas damit zu tun, das man den Filter, durch den geschrieben wird, mit ins Bild bringt, daß man also etwas erfährt über den, durch dessen Kopf das alles vermittelt wird.

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77 Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’.
The intricacies of the Sebaldian narrative strategy demand that the reader also become an active participant in the narrative, rather than the passive observer of the protagonist’s progress:

You need that tension between documentary evidence and questioning in the reader’s mind: ‘Can it really have been so?’ To read with vigilance is to question authority. In contrast to 19th-century novelists, who were ‘at pains to tell you this was a true story’, Sebald layers his narration; we learn things indirectly, unreliable

The intricate mechanisms of Sebald’s narrative scrupulousness have been discussed extensively by other critics, with earlier, intrigued decipherings of his methodologies giving way to accounts that build on these to interrogate the ethics that inform these methodologies. Juhl, for example, notes that Sebald’s radical privileging of biography cannot allow the narrator to remain neutral, but instead compels him also to consider the biographical and historical implications of his own position in the narrative, while refusing to allow himself the catharsis of empathy. This is a position is supported by Fuchs, who argues that Sebald’s method of transcription is concerned neither with an identificatory mechanism, nor with documentation, but with an ethical model of witness that seeks to restore the witnessing function of the narrator that the Nazis attempted to make impossible. Long suggests that the burden of postmemory causes the Sebaldian narrator to move somewhat closer to his subject than Juhl suggests, thereby inhabiting a position between historiography and emotional attachment. For Long, the narrator’s relationship with his subjects is characterized by the kind of emotional proximity and overt affective investment that history as a discipline strives to avoid, suppress or marginalize. Fuchs goes further, pointing out that, at least in the ‘Paul Bereyter’ narrative, the Sebaldian narrator’s attempt to necromantically conjure up Bereyter’s feelings prior to his suicide leads to a self-admitted ‘Ausuferung des Gefühls’ (DA 45), which in turn can only be interpreted as an attempt at identification that traverses the absolute boundary between self and other, and thereby usurps the historical locus of the Other. Fuchs therefore draws attention to the

79 Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’.
82 Fuchs, Die Schmerzenspuren der Geschichte, p. 31.

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methodologies whereby the Sebaldian narrator constantly reflects on the relationship between himself and the object of his narration, always noting the time and place of every conversation. This leads, she suggests, to an aesthetic strategy of what LaCapra calls ‘empathic unsettlement’ that allows responsiveness to the traumatic experience of others without the appropriation of their experience. Fuchs agrees with Long that Sebald feels something in the nature of a moral necessity to bear witness to the historical suffering of others, on behalf of others who may not be able to articulate this sufferings.

The nature of bearing witness, and of such ethically motivated strategies of narrative approximation, becomes yet more complex in Austerlitz, Sebald’s last prose text and the one that most explicitly declares the fictional nature of the character whose historical sufferings inform the text. Given this complexity of positions that the Sebaldian narrators inhabit in Sebald’s various prose texts, and the controversial nature of his self-positioning, it is unsurprising that the narrator of the web of documentary and self-declared fiction that is Austerlitz reveals himself to be far more than Sebald’s disingenuously simple ‘messenger’ within the narrative. Stuart Taberner notes that Sebald treads a dangerous line in this novel, and may – albeit unintentionally – identify, or be identified, with his Jewish subject,’ but concludes that ‘Sebald appears to be determined to ensure that the gulf between the German and the Jewish experience of the Holocaust and its aftermath is consistently restated rather than bridged in Austerlitz.’ I am not so convinced that this is the case. The narrator may attempt to ‘insinuate an ethical principle into his retelling of the Austerlitz’s account of his past’ [sic], but the narrator is nonetheless the familiar Sebaldian traveller, who, in writing down and transmitting Austerlitz’s life story to the reader, both goes through the process of moral education himself, and leads the reader of the novel through it after him. This narrator has elements both of the self-effacing narrator of Die Ausgewanderten, who lets the narrative of the victims of history seep into and all but obliterate his own, but the narrative still contains motifs of doubling, affiliation and poetic education that inform Schwindel.Gefühle, in particular. Thus, the narrator of Austerlitz is, like all of Sebald’s narrators, an unstable figure, at once

83 Fuchs, Die Schmerzenspuren der Geschichte, p. 34.
84 Taberner, ‘German Nostalgia’, p. 196.
85 Taberner, ‘German Nostalgia’, p. 198.
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unreliable, given to attacks of dizziness86 (A 38) and nameless fits of melancholy (A 54), and a person invested with trust. Austerlitz and the narrator are chance-met strangers, but the traumatic process of recounting and listening to Austerlitz’s memories creates an uncannily intimate bond between narrator and reader. Their sporadic meetings are never planned, yet they seem to be organized by an irrational synchronicity: Austerlitz says

Wenn er mich nun hier angetroffen habe in der Bar des Great Eastern Hotel, die er zuvor noch nie betreten hatte in seinem Leben, so sei das, entgegen jeder statistischen Wahrscheinlichkeit, von einer erstaunlichen, geradezu zwingenden inneren Logik. (A 68)

Although the narrator seems to be an unassuming, almost invisible presence in the narrative, Austerlitz deliberately seeks him out as being the only suitable listener that he can imagine for his life story. Fuchs suggests, indeed, that in the twenty-year gap between their first and subsequent set of meetings, the narrator must qualify himself as Austerlitz’s interlocutor by educating himself in the history of architecture through which Austerlitz himself attempts to make sense of his own biography.87 Yet, reflecting Sebald’s other male-male friendships, affinity is also linked with a hint of redemption: here, this is indicated when Austerlitz is reminded of the narrator while in the freemason’s temple in Liverpool Street, looking at a picture of the dove returning to Noah’s Ark with an olive branch:

Sonderbarerweise, sagte Austerlitz, habe er heute nachmittag, als er mit Pereira gestanden sei vor diesem schönen Motiv, an unsere so weit schon zurückliegenden belgischen Begegnungen gedacht und daran, daß er bald für seine Geschichte, hinter die er erst in den letzten Jahren gekommen sei, einen Zuhörer finden müsse, ähnlich wie ich es seinerzeit gewesen sei [...] (A 68)

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86 Dizziness, in Sebald’s poetics, is a signifier for the unreliability and consequent inauthenticity of memory, a connection that is explored more fully in Schwinkel.Gefühle. See, for example, Henri Beyle’s feeling of dizziness when he realises that his memories of the battles of his youth are unreliable: ‘Die Differenz zwischen den Bildern der Schlacht, die er in seinem Kopf trug, und dem, was er als Beweis dessen, daß die Schlacht sich wahrhaftig ereignet hatte, nun vor sich ausgebreitet sah, diese Differenz verursachte ihm ein noch niemals zuvor gespürtes, schwindelartiges Gefühl der Irritation’ (SG 21).

87 Fuchs, Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte, p. 42.
The narrator is nominated in Austerlitz’s mind as a messenger of rescue, related to the dove by means of spontaneous association.

The sequence of spaces where Austerlitz and the narrator meet initially takes the shape of a journey away from European modernity to secular salvation; it has the outward shape of a homecoming, from the post-colonial dystopia of Belgium through the neutral space of London to Austerlitz’s home. This is a slow, interrupted journey undertaken over twenty years, a counterpoint to Austerlitz’s odyssey in search of himself. Austerlitz and the narrator commence their meetings in spaces that are emblematic of the dark side of modernity in Europe. Twenty years later, the narrator recognizes Austerlitz again in the Salon Bar at Liverpool Street Station (A 58). After they have had a long conversation in the McDonald’s there, Austerlitz invites him to his home some months later, where he tells the narrator the story of his discovery of his origins. Nonetheless, the narrative continues on past this seeming homecoming, and on to the Parisian Bibliothèque Nationale, where the narrator loses sight of Austerlitz for ever.

**a Austerlitz as moral educator**

In keeping with the paedagogic lineage and structure of *Austerlitz*, Austerlitz becomes an exemplary teacher for the narrator during their journey together.88 Precisely because he is a damaged victim of history, the narrator tells us that he is to be trusted as a teacher even after other institutions of education have revealed their complicity in the crimes of modernity. The narrator tells us:

> Austerlitz ist ja für mich, der ich zu Beginn meines Studiums in Deutschland von den seinerzeit dort amtierenden, größtenteils in den dreißiger und vierziger Jahren in ihrer akademischen Laufbahn vorangerückten und immer noch in ihren Machtphantasien befangenen Geisteswissenschaftlern so gut wie gar nichts gelernt hatte, seit meiner Volksschulzeit der erste Lehrer überhaupt gewesen, dem ich zuhören könnte. (A 52)

This experience in higher education mirrors Sebald’s own, as he describes it in interview:

> Aus den Lehrern dort [in Freiburg] konnte ich nichts herauskriegen. Das war völlig unmöglich, weil sie alle zu der Generation gehörten [...] Bloß, daß später herauskam,
The Sebaldian narrator thus undergoes a form of sentimental or moral education at Austerlitz’s hands: listening to Austerlitz’s life story allows the narrator imaginatively to enter into the sufferings of the victims of the Nazis, a vicarious experience that he had previously been unable to repeat. ‘Es war mir undenkbar,’ he tells us about his visit to Breendonk,

wie die Häftlinge, die wohl in den seltensten Fällen nur vor ihrer Verhaftung und Internierung je eine körperliche Arbeit geleistet hatten, diesen Karren, angefüllt mit dem schweren Abraum […] schieben konnten. (A 37)

The narrator of *Austerlitz* is from beginning to end of the novel intimately identified with Austerlitz’s pain, and with Austerlitz himself. The disturbance of the narrator’s vision before he meets Austerlitz again points to a further play of identities. ‘Ich hatte mir eine dunkle Ecke ausgesucht, denn es war mir inzwischen tatsächlich zweierlei geworden in meiner gelben Haut,’ says the narrator, as he waits in Liverpool Street and Austerlitz appears out of his peripheral vision for the first time in twenty years (A 61). The uncanny way in which Austerlitz meets with the narrator at chance but opportune moments, and in which Austerlitz recreates and reinterprets the narrator’s descent into his past, suggest that to a certain extent, Austerlitz can be seen as the narrator’s *Doppelgänger*, the return of his guilty conscience about his German background and heritage. The latent continuity between the subjectivity of the narrator and that of Austerlitz becomes manifest at the end of the novel, when Austerlitz gives the narrator the memoir *Heshel’s Kingdom* by Dan Jacobson, a gift which suggests that the narrator has now been appointed to carry on the exegesis of Austerlitz’s search for his origins. In this text, Jacobson describes tracing his grandfather’s existence in pre-war Lithuania, but cannot find his gravestone or the buildings where he lived or preached. ‘Kaum irgendwo findet Jacobson auf seiner litauischen Reise eine Spur seiner Vorfahren, überall nur die Zeichen der Vernichtung’ (A 420). Instead, Jacobson travels to a fortress near the town where Heshel was photographed (A 420). Here, in midsummer, Jacobson visits the basement cells where Jewish prisoners were kept prior to being shot, in a sequence mirrored by the visit of the

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89 Angier, ‘Wer ist W. G. Sebald?’, p. 45.
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narrator of *Austerlitz* to the torture chamber in Breendonk. For Jacobson, this journey is a quest to find out what happened to the relatives of his grandfather who did not survive the Shoah; the narrator of *Austerlitz*, by contrast, visits Breendonk because Austerlitz mentioned to him at their initial meeting that he had studied its fortifications –

Wäre nicht tags zuvor im Gespräch mit Austerlitz der Name Breendonk gefallen, so würde mich dieser Hinweis, vorausgesetzt, ich hätte ihn überhaupt bemerkt, kaum veranlaßt haben, die Festung an denselben Tag noch zu besuchen. (A 33)

The narrator here becomes Austerlitz’s proxy, approaching the abyss where no beam of light can enter in Austerlitz’s place (A 420). As Katja G atloff has noted, this is a ‘potentially problematic gesture of identification. At their final meeting, Austerlitz confesses that he himself could not face entering the fortress of Theresienstadt, to find out what had eventually happened to his mother:

vielleicht drängte ich mir nun deshalb beim Anblick der Registraturkammer die zwanghafte Vorstellung auf, daß dort, in der kleinen Festung von Terezin, in deren naßkalten Kasematten so viele zugrunde gegangen wären und daß ich ihn nicht eingenommen habe aus eigener Schuld. (A 401)

As Garloff notes, in these fortifications, Jacobson finds a date scratched on the wall: ‘Max Stern, Paris, 18.5.44’ (A 421).

Supposedly this is the signature of one of the Jewish inmates who thereby meant to mark his presence in the camp, but what we read here are also the second middle name and the birth date of the author of the book […] The camp seems to become here the birthplace of the author, or at least the site of an uncanny proximity between

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91 The image of the shaft and the mine is, in German Romantic literature, traditionally a metaphor for the unconscious mind. The narrator, here, is approaching his abyss of the self; the spatial metaphor of the mine coincides here with the Mitscherlichian theory of the return of repressed German guilt. See, for example, Hartmut Böhme, ‘Geheime Macht im Schoß der Erde. Das Symbofeldes des Bergbaus zwischen Sozialgeschichte und Psychohistorie’, in Hartmut Böhme, *Natur und Subjekt*, (Frankfurt: suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 67-144.
him and his narrative subjects, thereby investing him with a new kind of authority to speak for the victims of the Holocaust.\(^2\)

This is, indeed, an ethically problematic position, which I explore further below.

**b Austerlitz as figure of guilt and redemption**

Austerlitz is unable to come to any personal conclusion by narrating his life story: instead, he can only pass on the bare facts of his life to the narrator, like the names and dates Jacobson finds scratched on the walls of the fortress at Kauna, which the narrator then passes on to us. The narrator becomes the sole heir to Austerlitz’s property, before Austerlitz’s final descent into the Bibliothèque Nationale:

> [er] überreichte mir die Schlüssel seines Hauses in der Alderney Street. Ich könne dort, wann immer ich wolle, sagte er, mein Quartier aufschlagen und die schwarzen und weißen Bilder studieren, die als einziges übrigbleiben würden von seinem Leben. (A 414)

By giving up his stake in bourgeois, propertied life, as exemplified by his London house, Austerlitz here abandons any personal project of integration into bourgeois society, or of completing a process of Bildung. The Sebaldian narrator also inherits Austerlitz’s search for meaning, which previously Austerlitz had pursued through endless attempts to read the photographs at his kitchen table. Earlier, he tells the narrator

> daß er hier manchmal stundenlang sitze und […] die Bilder hin und her und übereinanderschiebe, in eine aus Familienähnlichkeiten sich ergebende Ordnung […] bis er sich, erschöpft von der Denk- und Erinnerungsarbeit, niederlegen müsse […]. (A 176)

It is left to the Sebaldian narrator to trace the ‘family resemblances’ and create an order out of the fragments of Austerlitz’s life for the reader. Returning to the pattern of the Bildungsroman, Swales suggests that this interpretation of the protagonist’s life for the readership is the true reconciliation between the Bildungsroman hero and the bourgeois community, which is not mimetically depicted in the novel but:

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intimated through the conceptual cohesion of the novelist’s fiction, through the writer’s collusion with his artistic community of notional readers. In other words, it is the reader who is initiated into the wholeness and complexity of Bildung; the hero and the world through which he moves are only redeemable through the symbolic transformations made possible by an artistic labor of love.\textsuperscript{93}

In Austerlitz, the narrator’s interpretive ‘labor of love’ is more than a metaphor: although Austerlitz cannot restore the lost bond of love between himself and his parents, he creates an intimate link to the narrator. The narrator is not only given Austerlitz’s worldly legacy, but also his emotional one. Before Austerlitz leaves the narrator his final bequest, he already sends him a photograph of himself as a schoolboy ‘ohne weiteren Kommentar,’ which had sealed a bond of friendship between himself and his closest childhood friend Gerald (A 115). With Gerald long-dead, the photo is passed on again to the Sebaldian narrator, implying that this symbolic transaction places the narrator in the position that Gerald left vacant, that of the adoptive younger brother or, indeed, romantic friend. After all, Gerald is Austerlitz’s fag and ‘ging mir in der Dunkelkammer gerne zur Hand’ (A 117), he stands in a privileged relationship’ to the older Austerlitz, whom he idolises (A 118): he, too, is another figure on the border between friendship and homosocial attraction.

Though his friendship with Austerlitz cannot save Austerlitz from lifelong loneliness, Gerald’s death in a plane crash is, in a sense, a homecoming: Austerlitz says that

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

Gerald not only manages to soar over the heaviness of earthly existence with Austerlitz in his plane, but he also is clear-sighted enough to develop an astronomical theory about the the ever-expanding nature of the universe under the influence of gravity, about the ‘riesigen Regionen interstellaren Gases [...] in denen, in einem unter dem einfluß der Schwerkraft ständig sich intensivierenden Verdichtungsprozeß, neue Sterne entstünden’ (A 171). Despite his devotion to the little dog Toby – a well-recognized symbol of melancholy in Sebald’s work – Gerald manages both to elude

gravity and to transform it, through his intellectual work, into a nursery of new stars, sign, perhaps, of another universe where entropy and decay do not reign. It is this mantle that the narrator, too, inherits. Later Austerlitz hands over to the narrator the only photograph of his mother in existence (A 361), the sole evidence that Austerlitz’s childhood memories and Věra’s oral narrative coincide with any historical person without a shadow of a doubt. These gifts suggest that the narrator becomes more than Austerlitz’s messenger: he becomes his intimate friend and heir. Just as Austerlitz becomes de facto Elias’s heir by inheriting the few photographs left from his drowned childhood village, along with his breviary, by taking on the legacy of Austerlitz’s mother, the Sebaldian narrator also becomes the heir of his Jewish family.

Stuart Taberner claims that it is Austerlitz himself who invites the narrator to ‘perhaps re-establish a German-Jewish symbiosis that Austerlitz himself invokes.’ In Taberner’s reading, the narrator constantly refuses these moments of identification, instead remaining caught in an ethically informed state of melancholy. He suggests that Austerlitz’s narrative ‘contains at least the possibility of some relief, or even release, from the historical limbo into which he had been cast.’ By contrast, Taberner argues, the narrator’s own story is circular, beginning and ending in the Antwerp train station. Austerlitz’s possible peace of mind is, as we have seen, questionable, and the narrator’s refusal of identity is reversed – possibly even dialectically reversed – by his appropriation of Austerlitz’s life story, even with the rhythmic and distancing refrain of sagte Austerlitz, which allows him to ascend to the status of poet. In the end of the novel, the narrator is left reading Heszel’s Kingdom, which, Taberner rightly suggests, mirrors aspects of Austerlitz’s experience. ‘There is some hope for Austerlitz,’ Taberner argues, as


95 Taberner, ‘German Nostalgia?’ p. 198. Cosgrove suggests something similar when she says, ‘the spirit of resistance and the sense of outrage that are so central to Améry’s concept of Ressentiment are lacking in Sebald’s prose, as solidarity with the victims continually lapses into wistful sentimentality. The ‘resentful’ desire to turn back time mutates into the desire for a world unspoiled by the caesura of the Holocaust, a longing that is expressed in the many idealized images of German-Jewish symbiosis in Austerlitz and Die Ausgewanderten.’ Mary Cosgrove, ‘The Anxiety of German Influence: Affiliation, Rejection, and Jewish Identity in W. G. Sebald’s Work’, in German Memory Contests pp. 230-252, p. 239.
Jacobson discovers a date, a place, and a name, and even a place in which their remains are concealed. For the narrator, on the other hand, precious little has changed. Precious little has changed in terms of his melancholy mental state, indeed. On the level of plot mechanics, Taberner's reading holds true, but a transformation is suggested on the level of aesthetic form. Cosgrove suggests that a German-Jewish symbiosis has been entirely restored:

The narrator has been enlightened through his extended encounter with the enigma of Austerlitz and the latter has been restored to his true identity. Both have thus undergone a healing process of sorts – with the help of the other [...] By the end of the novel the narrator has unlimited access not only to Austerlitz's house, but also to the adjoining Jewish cemetery [...] the alternative identity open to the German at the end of a two-way therapy is an appropriately sepulchral Jewish identity.

I would suggest that Jacobson's intertext provides a further possible reading: a symbiosis has not been restored, but rather the narrator's notorious acts of identification with Austerlitz invest him with a status as his poetic heir. The book was given to him by Austerlitz at their initial meeting in Paris, but only now that he has heard Austerlitz's narrative does he open it. The act of reading is another means of affiliation in Sebald's poetics, as we have seen, and the narrator follows Jacobson to the abyss that symbolises Jacobson's family history. Jacobson's grandfather, a Lithuanian rabbi, dies of a weak heart that, in a mysterious symmetry, it would appear that Austerlitz has himself inherited –


Austerlitz, then, is bound into the family line of the Jacobsons by virtue of his weak heart, but the narrator also becomes bound into the narrative of loss and remembrance.

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96 Taberner, 'German Nostalgia?', p. 199.
98 Sebald, too, inherited a weak heart from the maternal grandfather whom he idolized. 'Whereas Sebald's paternal grandfather had fought in World War I, Egelhofer had a coronary defect, never fought in combat, and, in fact, was never a soldier. (Sebald inherited this same heart ailment and was exempted from military service in the 1960s.)' Anderson, 'Fathers and Son'.

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by inheriting *Heshel's Kingdom* from Austerlitz. Only once he has heard Austerlitz's story to its (provisional) end, and has read *Heshel's Kingdom*, does the Sebaldian narrator take ownership of Austerlitz's narrative as writer as well as reader and listener. Austerlitz becomes not merely a haunting figure of reproach, whose forgotten story the narrator must pass on, but also a figure of semi-redemption, who, by handing on to the narrator his life story and the relic of his mother, is making him heir to a lost European Jewish past. If, as Andrew Webber suggests, the *Doppelgänger* figure is a sign of the German Jew's status as a 'constitutionally displaced person, a cultural political alien', a 'displaced or shadow identity on home territory', then the narrator's intimate identification with Austerlitz can be read as another attempt to purge himself of his German perpetrator guilt by identifying with a Czech Jewish survivor of the Shoah. Writing about *Die Ausgewanderten*, Morgan suggests that Sebald's generational status means that he

shares the concerns of his generation in using these Jewish and peripheralised lives as an alibi for his own. He cannot talk about postwar German identity, and hence about his own identity, other than in terms of Auschwitz and the European Jews.

It is the narrator who becomes heir to Austerlitz's oral narrative, and transforms it into a poetic text, written in a prose that makes Austerlitz's own voice indistinguishable from that of the narrator, and which interweaves Austerlitz's textual, architectural, historical and artistic associations with those of the narrator. Bianca Theisen invokes Thomas Browne's concept of 'metempsychosis' to characterise this act of textual identification.

Stripping away the religious overtones from Browne's belief in metempsychosis, Sebald infuses the idea of a recurrence of similar, if not identical minds with the more recent assumption that the writer's I is but a tissue of citations from other texts.

Through interpreting Austerlitz's textual production, and binding it into another text, the Sebaldian narrator creates his own textual persona. When he retires in 1991,

99 Webber, *The Doppelgänger*, p. 16.
100 Webber, *The Doppelgänger*, p. 4.
Oppelgänger and uncanny homosexuality: The crisis of the Sebaldian subject

Austerlitz destroys his *magnum opus*, his personal *Passagenwerk*, by burying it in the back garden of the house in Alderney Street that the Sebaldian narrator subsequently inherits (A 176). The buried sediment of Austerlitz’s creative work becomes one more layer in the textual strata of the novel, Austerlitz’s personal history transformed into the narrator’s poetry. Despite Sebald’s stated intention not to appropriate the subject position of the victim, it is the narrator, not Austerlitz, who attains to the position of poetic author of the narrative, who manages to arrest the erasures of history by employing Austerlitz’s ‘historical metaphysic’ and binding his fragmented memories into a text. Poetic interpretation and creation does indeed become a redemptive act, but one which aims at a redemption of the narrator as much as the erased past. Once more, LaCapra’s words about the dangers of bearing secondary witness to trauma are pertinent:

[...] But a difficulty arises when the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to become an identity. And a post-traumatic response of unsettlement becomes questionable when it is routinized in a methodology or style that enacts compulsive repetition, including the compulsively repetitive turn to the aporia, paradox, or impulse.¹⁰³

Such a repetitive pattern of identification occurs, LaCapra argues, when a narrator or historian mistakes loss – a loss such as Austerlitz’s – for an absence that was always present.

[...] losses cannot be adequately addressed when they are enveloped in an overly generalized discourse of absence, including the absence of ultimate metaphysical foundations. [...] When loss is converted into absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.¹⁰⁴

Both Austerlitz and the Sebaldian narrator who records his story evidently suffer from this very impasse: a brooding melancholy, an inability to work towards the future. Yet, in moments such as that which I analysed in the previous chapter, where Austerlitz’s mother reappears to him as an alluring and intimate phantom, or in the


moment when Austerlitz’s native Czech is restored to him in one miraculous instant (A 219), authentic origins and even a pre-oedipal unity with the mother are restored.

If, due to the catastrophes of history, Austerlitz cannot overcome his melancholy at the loss of his childhood, and the German narrator can describe no such untainted origins for himself, I have shown the narrator can at least encode Austerlitz’s origins in poetic language, and hint at an identity between himself and the subject of his narration that esoterically links him to Austerlitz’s guiltless origins. As for Strauß, then, poetic language emerges as the key to redemption; however, for Sebald, poetic language creates the conditions for the redemption of the past, whereas for Strauß, it is an end in itself. In the next chapter, I return to Austerlitz’s status as Bildungsroman, this time in comparison with Handke’s Die Wiederholung, to explore further the origins and political implications of this poetic redemption. I also return to the ideal of homosocial love as a means to evade the destructive logic of history. As I have shown in this chapter, although Sebald hints at the utopian potential of homosocial love in his own writings on Grünewald, Casement and Adelwarth, and indeed in the relationship between Austerlitz and the Sebaldian narrator, he always hedges it about with the dialectic of Enlightenment. In the next chapter I show how, in his critical writings on Handke, Sebald affectively transfers this utopian homosocial and poetic potential to Handke’s texts, and sees in them the possibility for the reconciliation of the Doppelgänger problematic that he explored in Schwindel.Gefühle. I also show, however, that the historical and post-colonial uncanny that plagues his accounts of Roger Casement and Ambros Adelwarth reappears both in his discussions of Die Wiederholung, and in those sections of Austerlitz that most nearly resemble the epic quest of Handke’s protagonist Kobal, across the borders of the German-speaking lands into an idealised Slavic space.
4 Langsame Heimkehr: *Die Wiederholung and Austerlitz*

In the introduction to *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*, Sebald claims that the border separating Germany and Austria also separates the way in which the literatures of the two countries address the theme of Bildung. If Austria is an uncanny homeland, its writers act as its guilty conscience, forcing the return of its repressed pedagogical and literary heritage:

Mit dieser Parabel von der Buchstabenbrücke zwischen Unglück und Trost sind wir bei dem in der literarischen Tradition Österreichs, im Gegensatz etwa zur reichsdeutschen, so wichtigen Kategorie der Lehre und des Lernens, auf die, soviel ich weiß, noch niemand verwiesen hat, wahrscheinlich, weil sie in eklantantem Widerspruch zu der um vieles auffälligeren und, allem Anschein nach, definitistischen Schwermut steht. Stifters pädagogische Provinz, [...] und die immer wieder um ein Stück verlängerte Lehrzeit Peter Handkes, das alles sind Facetten einer Haltung, die dafür einstehen kann, daß es einen Sinn hat, etwas weiterzugeben. (BdU 13)

In this passage, Sebald inscribes Handke himself as a hero of a metatextual Bildungsroman, a Lehrling whose poetic progress can function as a model for the reader’s own development. Sebald states that the novel demonstrates the development of a melancholy form of resistance – ‘Die Beschreibung des Unglücks schließt in sich die Möglichkeit zu seiner Überwindung ein’ (BdU 12). Demonstrating a classically Sebaldian slippage between narrator and author, that is omnipresent in his biographical criticism, Sebald blurs the distinction between a series of discrete protagonists in Handke’s novels, and Handke the author himself.¹ Three of Sebald’s essays accompany Handke along his ‘Lehrzeit,’ suggesting that Handke, as poet, is at once the inheritor and transmitter of a peculiarly Austrian literary dialectic of melancholy and ‘das Gegenteil von Unglück’ – an entity that Sebald does not further define in the introduction, but which reveals itself variously as utopia, hope or

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redemption in the essays that follow in the volume. This confusion of author and narrators is common in Handke criticism. For example, commenting on Handke’s novel *Der Chinese des Schmerzes*, Jürgen Manthey writes

> Bevor einer sich, wie Handkes Protagonisten dies nun schon seit längerem tun, mit einer kulturellen Ahnenreihe seine eigene *geistige* Genealogie zulegt, hat er sich jedoch der tatsächlichen Väter zu erledigen. Er muß diesen Akt offenbar von Buch zu Buch erneuern [...].²

In this chapter, I examine the way that Sebald views Handke as a literary brother figure, and analyse the political and poetic implications of this brotherhood. I show how, in writing about Handke, Sebald addresses the same identity complexes of the *Doppelgänger* figure, brotherly love and the boundaries of the German subject that he explored in his literary fiction, as I discussed in the previous chapter. In particular, Sebald’s essay on Peter Handke’s *Die Wiederholung*, ‘Jenseits der Grenze: Zur Peter Handkes Erzählung *Die Wiederholung*’,³ departs from a simple criticism of Handke’s text and develops into a sketch of a utopia of freedom, based on brotherly love. This utopia lies beyond both a patriarchal norm of inheritance and the regressive lure of incest to a platonic matriarchal order. As Sebald’s essay suggests, *Die Wiederholung* contains many of the same themes of family, *Heimat*, wandering, exile, homecoming and utopia that preoccupy Sebald’s own works. I therefore compare *Die Wiederholung* and Austerlitz, guided by Sebald’s essay on *Die Wiederholung*, and reveal the profound indebtedness of the Sebaldian text to the structure, tropes and material of Handke’s earlier novel. I analyse Sebald’s critical essays on Peter Handke, and show how Sebald’s reading of Handke moves from a critique of what Sebald saw as

² Jürgen Manthey ‘Franz Kafka, der Ewige Sohn’, in *Peter Handke*, ed. by Raimund Fellinger (Frankfurt am Main: suhrkamp, 1985), pp. 375-386, p. 378. In *Der Chinese des Schmerzes*, the protagonist Loser repeats the act of murdering his father by killing an elderly man who is defacing the holy mountain of Salzburg with swastikas. Peter Handke, *Der Chinese des Schmerzes* (Frankfurt am Main: suhrkamp, 1986), p. 102. By the time he wrote his next book, *Die Wiederholung*, Handke’s narrators had moved from some explicit acts of violence against the perpetrator generation to a more complex means of negotiating guilty ancestry, elective affinities and the inheritance of tradition, strategies that I elucidate in more depth in this chapter. Sebald, by the late 1980s, when he began to publish fiction, had already reached an age where demonstrative rebellion and symbolic father-murder could no longer suffice to purge the German narrator-subject of his inherited guilt.
³ UH 162-178.
Handke’s excessively ‘helle Bilder’ to an affirmation of his model of redemptive metaphysics once he can interpret it in a Jewish messianic light. I show how comparison between these texts, and analyses of Sebald’s readings of Handke, cast light first on Sebald’s model of the family, the lost tradition of Naturphilosophie, and secondly on Sebald’s conception of secular redemption. I also examine the extent to which Handke’s novel Die Wiederholung shares certain tropes with Austerlitz, particularly familial loss and homecoming, and the utopian function of Germany and Austria’s Slavic others, Bohemia and Slovenia. Whereas my readings of Sebald and Strauß in Chapter Two, and of uncanny homosexuality and Doppelgängers in Chapter Three demonstrate the precarious status of the Sebaldian uncanny between a hope of redemption and a melancholy pessimism, here I show that while Sebald precludes the possibility of hope in his own works, he still holds it open in his reading of Handke.

4.1 Die Wiederholung and Austerlitz: structural and thematic similarities

Sebald claims that Handke’s Die Wiederholung

mir bereits bei der ersten Lektüre 1986 einen großen und, wie ich inzwischen weiß, nachhaltigen Eindruck gemacht hat. (UH 164)

A close reading of Austerlitz suggests that this ‘lasting impression’ of Die Wiederholung has left traces in Sebald’s novel. The plot arc of Die Wiederholung, in which a young Austrian man travels to Slovenia in search of his brother, who disappeared there during the Second World War, is immediately reminiscent of that of Austerlitz. Further comparison reveals that the Spurensuche of Filip Kobal contains many structural and thematic elements that reappear in Austerlitz. Here, I will briefly outline some of the most significant similarities between the two novels, before embarking on a wider discussion of Sebald’s interpretation of the themes of homecoming, brotherliness, subjectivity and redemption in Die Wiederholung, and showing how these themes reappear uncannily and laden with guilt in both Austerlitz’s return to his Heimat, and the Sebaldian narrator’s own.

4.1.1 Structural similarities

Die Wiederholung, like Austerlitz, is a novel in German recalling the protagonist’s journey across the border between Western Europe and Eastern Europe, into a
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Slavonic-speaking country, in order to recover the traces of a life that were lost in the second world war. Narrated twenty years in retrospect, Die Wiederholung also contains many aspects of the Bildungsroman trajectory that reappear in Austerlitz. Like Jacques Austerlitz, Filip Kobal feels alienated from his family and the structures of oppressive religion in which he is educated; like Austerlitz, he first gains a sense of self through a close mentor-student relationship with a teacher in his boarding school:


Both protagonists are haunted by an alter ego throughout their childhoods, a Doppelgänger that mocks them with the suspicion that they are not entirely grounded in the language and landscape that they see around them. Kobal is haunted firstly by his lost brother, and secondly by another child at school, his ‘Todfeind’ (WH 22).

Eventually, the crisis of subjectivity creates in both protagonists a sense of loss that eventually develops into a crisis of language. This crisis is only reconciled when, in adulthood, both protagonists leave Western Europe, equipped only with a sea sack on their backs, and recover the inheritance of the Slavonic languages spoken by the lost family member (Austerlitz’s parents spoke Czech, and Filip’s brother Gregor learned Slovenian, his father’s mother tongue).

The novels both follow the trajectory of a classic Bildungsroman in depicting the youth and education of the protagonist, but refuse a plot closure that would integrate the protagonist into a bourgeois society that no longer exists. Instead, the two novels both become more esoteric, retrospective narratives, encoding the specific poetic and political concerns of each novelist as the protagonist seeks to discover memories and

4 This experience is, again, close to Handke’s own biography: Handke himself went to a religious boarding school, away from his village, and was mostly miserable there. ‘Die scheinbare AUSSENWELT, in der ich lebte, das Internat, war eigentlich INTERN, eine äußerlich angewendete INNENWELT, und das eigene Innere war die einzige Möglichkeit, ein wenig an die AUSSENWELT zu gelangen.’ Peter Handke, ‘1957’, in Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms (Frankfurt am Main: suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 11-16, p. 16. Unlike Austerlitz, though, Filip becomes disillusioned with his teacher towards the end of his schooling, making of him another Todfeind.
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the past. According to Mayer’s taxonomy, Die Wiederholung is one of the few post-war novels to consciously engage with the Bildungsroman model, although Mayer agrees with the New Subjective reading that claims that Handke emphasizes the inner development of the protagonist at the expense of depicting social forms. Die Wiederholung, like Der junge Mann and Austerlitz, refuses the classic Bildungsroman telos of integration of the self into society in favour of an exploration of memory, which, for Handke, begins with repetition.

4.1.2 Jenseits der Grenze: Sebald’s reading of Die Wiederholung

In the essay ‘Jenseits der Grenze’, Sebald retells the simple plot arc of Die Wiederholung, which, as I indicated above, in its barest form is not dissimilar to the retrieval narrative of Austerlitz: Filip Kobal leaves his family home in Austria in search of his brother Gregor, who disappeared in Slovenia during the second world war. In the course of the quest, Sebald maintains, Filip comes to the realization that his own family, at home in Austria, was the utopian society that he sought all along. Close comparison with Handke’s novel reveals the places in which Sebald’s ecstatic reading departs from Handke’s own treatment of the Kobal plot. Thus, contrary to the mixed Austro-Slovenian Kobal family depicted in the novel, Sebald claims that the Kobal family enjoys the privilege of having no part at all in a German inheritance:

Ihr Privileg und Fürstenpatent ist es, die anderen zu sein, die keinen Teil hatten an der von der Angst der Väter ihren Ausgang nehmenden und über ganz Europa sich ausbreitenden Gewalt. (UH 170)

Instead of the prevailing European patriarchal order, Sebald claims that the Slovenian Kobal household was a model in nuce of an ideal society, ‘in der die Väter allenfalls eine untergeordnete Rolle spielten,’ and where the tainted inheritance of German history or blood cannot disturb the peace of a state that is at once utopian – a

redeemed world – and archaic. Sebald sketches a blissful state reminiscent at once of Bachofen’s imaginary matriarchy and the Book of Isaiah (11:6):

Ist unter der patriarchalischen Ordnung ein jeder so allein, wie der Erzähler seiner besseren Einsicht ungeachtet sich offenbar stets noch fühlt, so wäre unter einem matriarchalischen Regime, in welchem die Verwandtschaftsverhältnisse viel lockerer und weitläufiger gewoben sind, ein jeder fast der Brüder des anderen. (UH 170)

This asexual model of fraternity and of a redeemed Golden Age is still precariously close to the incestuous desire for regression to a pre-Oedipal stage, or indeed to homosexual desire for another man, the Sebaldian subtext that I examined in more detail in the previous chapter. As such, this fraternal utopia is related to the many occurrences of the uncanny that recur in Sebald’s work, including those of the Doppelgänger. Sebald blurs the distinction between brotherliness and identity, other and double, within the very same essay on Die Wiederholung.

Beinahe ist es darum, als sei er, den wir einzig an seinen Worten erkennen können, der verschollene Bruder selber, dem nachzufolgen der junge Filip Kobal sich aufmacht. (UH 164)

In his essay on Die Wiederholung, Sebald detects in Handke an encoding of personal experience into the ciphers of writing, which is, according to Sebald, a metaphysical procedure:

In den letzten Jahren ist es vollends auf den Punkt gekommen, wo neue von Handke erscheinende Werke wohl zwar noch rezensiert werden, die Rezensionen in der Regel aber bestimmt sind von offener oder verhohelter Feindseligkeit […] Unerörtert geblieben ist bei alledem die in den neueren Büchern Handkes entwickelte Metaphysik, die das Gesehene und Wahrgenommene übertragen will in die Schrift. (UH 163).

For Sebald, Filip Kobal’s journey from Austria to Yugoslavia and back again in Die Wiederholung contains a ‘dialektische Vermittlung von Metaphysik und Politik’ (UH 166). The political aspect of the novel, according to his reading, lies in a ‘deutliches Ressentiment gegen Österreich,’ which is opposed to a utopian Slovenia: the Kobal family’s ‘slowenische Heimat’ is a ‘vorschwebende Land des Friedens’, one which is

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6 Sebald’s concern for the metaphysical aspect of Handke’s narrative will be discussed further in the chapter.
Langsame Heimkehr: Die Wiederholung and Austerlitz

‘sowohl ein metaphysischer als ein politischer Begriff’ (UH 166). Filip’s escape from Austria into his ancestral homeland is thus an escape not only from his family’s historical exile in Austria, but also ‘[die] Durchbrechung des Exils in der ganzen weittragenden Bedeutung dieses Begriffs’ (UH 168). The ‘dialectic’ between historical Austria and ahistorical Slovenia resolves itself, in Sebald’s reading, through collapsing certain precarious distinctions contained in the novel into a series of identifications. Thus, in keeping with many other critics, Sebald identifies Gregor, the lost older brother, with the middle-aged narrator Filip Kobal, as well as with Gregor Kobal, their seventeenth-century rebel ancestor.

Sebald’s reading does not just blur the boundaries between narrator, character and author. It is further problematic in that it erases the historical specificity of Slovenia and of Filip Kobal’s post-war Spurensuche, by assimilating it into a Jewish messianic narrative. According to Sebald, Slovenia represents Jerusalem, and Filip Kobal a messianic figure, a poet who wears the mantle of the Benjaminian historian, fulfilling the messianic hopes of previous generations.

Der Weg aus dem Exil ist der nach Jerusalem, und derjenige, der ihn gehen soll, der junge Filip Kobal, hat ein Unschuldiger zu sein. (UH 169)

Sebald also identifies the Kobals with the Barnabas family in Kafka’s Schloß (UH 168), and Filip – somewhat illogically – with the wanderer K., whom as we have seen Sebald has already identified as a messianic figure. Now, to enforce a Jewish messianic schema on Die Wiederholung is to ignore the very specific geopolitical dimension to Handke’s narrative, not to mention to impose an affirmatively salvific ending on a novel that, in fact, maintains the tensions within Filip Kobal, between a mythical salvation through art – through writing – and his historical inheritance of Austria’s Nazi past, to the very end. It also ignores Handke’s ambiguous relationship with the figure of K.: ‘Ein Landvermesser werden, aber anders als Kafkas K.: ein wirklicher, kein angeblicher’ writes Handke in Phantasien der Wiederholung, a collection of aphorisms on his own writing, published three years prior to Die Wiederholung.\(^7\) This simultaneous identification with K. and distancing of himself from him suggests a commitment to the material and a rejection of the metaphysical aspect of the Schloß, in contrast to Sebald’s emphasis on its Jewish, metaphysical

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\(^7\) Peter Handke, Phantasien der Wiederholung. (Frankfurt am Main: suhrkamp, 1983), p. 49.
nature. Later, Handke claims that the figures in Kafka’s short stories have lost, through description, the openness, the ‘mächtige Leere (etwa des Odysseus, und später des Joseph K. oder des Valentin S.)’.\(^8\) His equation of these three figures, as ‘göttlich-menschliche Jedermann’\(^9\) suggests that the emptiness they describe does have a metaphysical or mythical component, but it is to be grounded in a concrete natural landscape. Having opened up this gap in Sebald’s reading of Handke’s text, in the next section I will briefly summarise Sebald’s more conservative and more negative reading of Handke’s earlier text, *Langsame Heimkehr*.

### 4.1.3 ‘Helle Bilder und Dunkle’: *Langsame Heimkehr*

*Langsame Heimkehr* and *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire*, together with *Kindergeschichte* and *Über die Dörfer*, preceded *Die Wiederholung*, and initiated Handke’s neo-Romantic literary project. *Langsame Heimkehr* describes the existential journey of its protagonist Valentin Sorger from the Arctic wildernesses, where he works as a geologist, flying across America in what Sebald describes as a series of ‘shamanistic trances,’ home to Austria. *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire* shifts to a first-person perspective, and describes a Sorger-like protagonist’s pilgrimage to the Mont Sainte-Victoire in search of Cézanne and Cézanne’s artistic vision. Thus, in keeping with Handke’s commitment to being a ‘real’ land surveyor, in the *Langsame Heimkehr*, Valentin Sorger’s long homecoming is not only a metaphysical one, but also an attempt to unite historical time and personal memory with space, through a precise, exact measurement of the landscape:

> Er glaubte nicht etwa an seine Wissenschaft als an eine Art Weltreligion, sondern die immer gemessene Ausübung seines Berufs („Maßarbeit“ war Sorgers Vorgangsweise für die daneben chaotischen und oft auch liebenswert sprunghaften Lauffer) geschah zugleich als eine Weltvertrauens-Übung, wobei die Gemessenheit in den technischen und auch den alltäglichen Handhabungen ein steter Versuch zur Meditation war [...].\(^{10}\)

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\(^{8}\) Handke, *Phantasien der Wiederholung*, p. 70. Valentin Sorger is the protagonist of Handke’s *Langsame Heimkehr*.

\(^{9}\) Handke, *Phantasien der Wiederholung*, p. 70.

If, in Sebald, landscape is a signifier of the destructive processes of history, and the small details of nature are the often-overlooked inscriptions of that destruction, for Sorger (and Handke), attention to nature allows for reconciliation with history. At the end of his odyssey, Sorger looks over his nature writings, to discover that he has, through describing natural space, also determined its intersection with historical time.

Es wurde ihm dabei deutlich, wie sehr sich seine Vorstellungen von der geplanten Abhandlung geändert hatten; in das Interesse an den langzeitigen Naturräumen hatte sich eine Betroffenheit durch Raum-Formen eingemischt, die gleichwohl (nicht allein in der Natur) sich bloß episodisch bildeten, indem „ich, Sorger“ sozusagen „ihr Augenblick“ wurde, der sie zugleich zu Zeit-Erscheinungen machte.  

This procedure successfully rescues those encrypted traces of the cipher-language of nature which modernity has overlooked, while rescuing them into historical time. From the evidence of his essays, Sebald appears to have revised his opinion of Handke’s metaphysics between 1984 and 1995. His earlier, otherwise brilliant essay on Stifter and the *Langsame Heimkehr/Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire* seems still to echo the opinion of mainstream Handke criticism in the early 1980s; thus, it emphasizes and condemns the abstract, metaphysical aspects of the narratives at the expense of their historical and natural grounding.

Der weitgespannte Bogen, den Sorger in seiner langsamen Heimkehr um die halbe Welt durchläuft, erinnert in vielem auch an die Exkursionen, die die Praxis des Schamanismus dem Adepten einer über die Logik des erdenschweren Daseins sich erhebenden Metaphysik vorschreibt. (BdU 180)

Whereas in his later essay on *Die Wiederholung*, Sebald’s Jewish messianic reading of Handke’s novel leads him to affirm the secular metaphysics of Handke’s poetic vision, his earlier reading of *Langsame Heimkehr* is another of Sebald’s Austrian pathographies. Here, he aligns Handke with Stifter, and suggests that *Langsame Heimkehr* is analogous to Stifter’s *Nachsommer*, an attempt to circumvent the bad conscience of bourgeois literature by marginalizing and excluding everything that does not sit easily with a utopian vision of nature and literature (BdU 176). Sebald condemns Sorger’s status as prophet within the text of ‘Langsame Heimkehr’ as one that is ‘privileged,’ haunted by a bad conscience about the suffering, less privileged

11 *Langsame Heimkehr*, p. 155.
natural Other, and which therefore seeks a transcendent vision of reconciliation as a means to soothe that bad conscience. For Sebald, such a transcendent vision can only be pathographic:

die Literatur [verwandelt] auch das Fleisch und Blut der Wirklichkeit in eine ohne Beschweren verzehrbar Speise vermittels eines Rituals der Transsubstantiation und dient zur Beschichtigung eines schlechten Gewissens, das, wie wir am Fall Stifters sehen konnten, weniger im Herzen als im Magen des Autors seinen Sitz hat. (BdU 180)

For Sebald, Stifter and Handke’s ‘bright images’ are only the reverse side of the dark images of their childhoods, which, like Austerlitz’s and indeed like Sebald’s own, were spent in provincial obscurity, overshadowed by oppressive Christian imagery and excluded from the light of bourgeois culture (BdU 167).

Das Aufhören des Schreibens wäre gleichbedeutend mit einem Rückfall in die Panik der Kindheit, während die fortgesetzte Erfindung der richtigen Wörter die Transzendierung eines von unguter Erinnerung beschwerten Lebens in Aussicht stellt. (BdU 168)

Sebald claims, then, that the poetics of Stifter and of Handke merely attempt to ward off the uncanny irruption of childhood memories into the enlightened bourgeois order that they so strongly defend. Yet Sorger’s aesthetic epiphanies – the blinding vision of the Alps (similar to the one that Sebald later approached in Nach der Natur), the ‘hellere[r] Begriff von der Endzeit’ (BdU 183) – are won not by ‘soaring over the logic of earthly existence,’ but by acknowledging that very heaviness. Sorger experiences an epiphany in a coffee shop in New York (ironically, in the heart of a modern city, rather than in the Arctic Circle whence he came) wherein he experiences a ‘geschichtlicher Augenblick’, one which allows him a vision of a salvific, rather than an apocalyptic, end to human history: ‘es trug mich (über alle Hoffnung) ein Hochgefuhl – nicht meiner, sondern menschlicher Unsterblichkeit.’ Sebald identifies this moment as one where Handke’s prose

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12 Langsame Heimkehr, p. 137.
13 Langsame Heimkehr, p. 138.
ausschwenkt aus der endorientierten Dynamik der erzählerischen Literatur, und ein Schriftbild verwirklicht, anhand dessen ‘die Wahrheit des Erzählens als Helligkeit’ erfahrbar wird. (BdU 179)

However, he condemns Sorger’s epiphany for leading him to a falsely reconciliatory vision and even into a Sunday mass, which, for Sebald, is another frenzy of flesh-eating not unlike Stifter’s horrendous gluttony. As Sebald describes it, the transformation which Sorger undergoes in this minute moves him from his Goethean project of describing nature as it appears to him to a truly Romantic path, ‘weniger der des Kandidaten in den Bereich des Jenseits als der des Künstlers zur Kunst’ (BdU 181). Sebald is sceptical about this enterprise, suggesting that it is one of aesthetic restoration and self-legitimization in terms of bourgeois art, and that Stifter and Franz Sterbald are Handke’s sponsors – literally, ‘Paten’ – on his journey to the ‘Mittelpunkt der Welt’ (BdU 181). Significantly, though, it is precisely Handke’s insistence that a personal recognition of historical responsibility is required before one can pass to a metaphysically redeemed state that Sebald does not mention in this essay, just as he glosses over Filip Kobal’s personal stake in history in Die Wiederholung. ‘Was ich hier erlebe, darf nicht vergehen’,\(^\text{14}\) cites Sebald (BdU 179), but does not continue Sorger’s meditation, which goes on:

\[\text{Es ist zugleich mein geschichtlicher Augenblick: ich lerne (ja, ich kann noch lernen), daß die Geschichte nicht bloß eine Aufeinanderfolge von Übeln ist, die einer wie ich nur ohnmächtig schmähen kann – sondern auch, seit jeher, eine von jedermann (auch von mir) fortsetzbar, friedensstiftende Form.}\]

It is highly likely that Sebald did not cite this passage because it so precisely contradicts Benjamin’s view of history, with the rubble of destruction piling ever-upwards in front of the horrified angel. Sebald does acknowledge, ‘Handke hat immer wieder darauf verwiesen, daß es mit der Evokation des Schreckens allein nicht getan sei’ (BdU 183), but is deeply sceptical as to the aesthetic and ethical value of Handke’s vision of the blinding white Alps. Matthias Grünewald in Nach der Natur, of course, receives a vision of pure white in the Alps, but this vision is associated with blindness and catastrophe:

\[\text{So wird, wenn der Sehnerv}\]

\(^\text{14}\) Langsame Heimkehr, p. 137.
This traumatic vision of perfect white is, one must assume, different to Handke’s ecstatic one, which allows the author and the reader to enter, almost physically, into the always strange nature of all things (BdU 184). Sebald’s profound ambivalence about *Die Lehre der Sainte Victoire* is grounded, it seems to me, in an uneasy recognition of the similarity of Handke’s poetic mission to his own: a profoundly scrupulous journey to the metaphysical meaning of the past and of nature, which takes poetic forebears as its guide and is rooted in an ethical acknowledgement as to the catastrophes of history. Sebald criticises Handke’s conclusions while at the same time acknowledging the validity of his methodology, which both acknowledges the immateriality of his vision and ‘subjunctively’ recognises the terror of the flesh as the negative principle of all metaphysics, ‘das hinter dem kunstsinnigen Panorama der Utopie sein Wesen treibt’ (BdU 177). Read in the context of the later essay, Handke appears here as an uncanny Other to Sebald’s own poetic project, from whom Sebald must distance himself in as many ways possible while being compelled to acknowledge the closeness of their poetic vision and methodologies.

Despite the different attitudes taken to Handke’s texts in his two essays, the gap in Sebald’s otherwise complex and profoundly erudite essay ‘Helle Bilder und dunkle’ matches the gap in his reading of *Die Wiederholung*: that place where the protagonist must first face their specific, twentieth-century guilt, and next accept their own position in history, before they can enter any transcendent realm of redemption. Sebald’s *Wiederholung* shows the path to a promised land beyond the curse of history to which, in his own fiction, he feels compelled constantly to return. Handke, by contrast, had already managed to leave behind uncanny returns to the dark side of history in favour of a poetic return, as shown in *Langsame Heimkehr*:

Die Nacht dieses Jahrhunderts, wo ich zwanghaft in meinem Gesicht nach den Zügen der Despoten und Weltherrscher forschte, hat für mich damit ein Ende genommen. Meine Geschichte (unsere Geschichte, ihr Leute) soll hell werden, so wie der Augenblick hell war; – sie durfte bisher ja noch nicht einmal anfangen;als Schuldbewußte, zu niemandem gehörend, auch nicht zu den anderen Schuldbewußten, waren wir außerstande, in der friedlichen Menschheitsgeschichte mitzuschwingen,
Langsame Heimkehr: Die Wiederholung and Austerlitz

This is a transcendent vision of history, but it is not a weightless one. Such redemption is achieved first by an initial passage through a period of personal and generational guilt, and subsequently by an acceptance of a specific personal responsibility to enter into history – to be ‘ein Zeitgenosse von euch Zeitgenossen [...] und ein Irdisher unter Irdischen’.

Whether or not this epiphany is morally or poetically sustainable is, of course, another matter. Equally, I would here suggest that one of the significant differences, for Sebald, between Langsame Heimkehr and Die Wiederholung is that the Langsame Heimkehr steps suspiciously close to a Catholic mode of redemption – witness Sorger’s return to Sunday Mass – which is bound up for Sebald in the provincial uncanny and the bourgeois age. Handke, by contrast to Sebald, has always counted himself as a Catholic, albeit a cultural, critical one (though he officially left the church in the wake of his intervention on behalf of Serbia, as I discuss in the final chapter). Die Wiederholung, though, is more easily assimilable to a Jewish messianic model of redemption, and hence more sympathetic to Sebald’s Adornian poetics.

This excursus into Sebald’s reading of Handke’s earlier fiction shows the ways in which he circumscribes the ambiguous, guilt-ridden aspect of Handke’s poetics, by dismissing them as an irruption of the uncanny. Later, in a not dissimilar but opposite move, he avoids the Austrian aspect of Filip’s cultural inheritance, by reading him as a ‘pure’ Slovene. The ‘provincial uncanny’ of Handke’s Austrian childhood is here, in Sebald’s reading, banished in favour of a redemptive Slav childhood identity. In Die Wiederholung, Filip feels burdened by his Austrian mother’s claim that he counts as the ‘heir to the throne’ within the Kobal family, now that his brother has disappeared:

In ihren [his mother’s, HF] Erzählungen von meinem Bruder trat dieser auf als der um seinen Thron betrogene König. Und ich galt bei ihr als der rechtmäßige Thronfolger. (WH 20)

No sooner is Filip over the border, though, than the metaphorical nature of his kingship and inheritance becomes apparent. Describing his struggles to start telling

15 Langsame Heimkehr, p. 138.
16 Langsame Heimkehr, p. 138.
stories, he identifies what his mother had seen as his inner ‘kingship’ as a drive to narrate. This drive first reveals itself to be a burden not unlike the burden of inheritance laid upon him by his mother:

Der Erzähler in mir, eben noch wahrgenommen als der heimliche König, schufte [...] als stammelnder Zwangsarbeiter [...]. (WH 109)

Sebald’s reading favours the mother’s original family myth, and extends it to make Filip not only the heir to the Slovenian hope for redemption from exile, but also equates the Slovenian people with the Jewish people, and makes Filip their messiah.

Ihrer Familienmythologie zufolge sind die Kobal die ausersehenen Stellvertreter des slowenischen Volks, das wie das beispielhafte Exilvolk der Juden aus Menschen sich zusammensetzt, die ‘durch die Jahrhunderte Königslose, Staatenlose, Handlanger und Knechte gewesen waren’. (UH 173)

Through a series of creative interpretations, Sebald makes of Handke’s narrative a messianic plot in which Filip overcomes the burden of historical inheritance not only to recover the past, but also to escape into Slovenia, which becomes ‘unsere[,] natürliche[,] Heimat’ (UH 178), a universalized paradise into which Filip leads the reader. Here, Scott Abbott’s provides a useful key to understanding why Sebald interprets Die Wiederholung in so redemptive a way. Writing about the rebellious Kobal ancestor, he says

In the context of the epigraph from the Zohar about defunct, mystical, mythical kings, I interpret this eighteenth-century turn from the Kaiser and his authority as the modern age’s turn from metaphysics (beginning in the eighteenth century with Kant). That leaves the Kobal family (and Handke’s readers) without a comforting philosophical home. Whether the new condition is to be lamented or praised depends on perspective and personal taste.

Once again, the hinge of Enlightenment is one on which Sebald’s poetics turns. Sebald’s perspective mourns the turn from metaphysics imposed by Enlightenment, and fears the destruction that it ushers in. His reading, then, shows a determination to return to the lost land of meaning that Handke’s text frames.17

4.2 Austerlitz and Die Wiederholung: Zugleich als Erziehungsgeschichten lesen

Sebald’s messianic reading of Die Wiederholung does not just serve as a testing-ground for his own poetics; it also is extremely similar to the way in which he resolves Austerlitz’s life story into an unexpected epiphany. Here, as I did with Der junge Mann, I examine two recurring motifs in these two Bildungsromane that seem to me key to their understanding of the way in which poetic vision can negotiate the curse of history, here those of the phantom mother and of blindness. Much work has already been done, of course, on the larger areas of memory and vision in Sebald’s work, and it is not my intention here to give a full account of these complex theoretical fields. Rather, though, the recurrence or indeed repetition of these two motifs suggests that the authors share a poetic approach to the same problems of memory and the historical uncanny. While the phantom mother represents a spectre of guilt that disrupts subject formation in both novels, the trope of blindness fulfils different poetic functions for Sebald and for Handke. Both privilege the motif of partial sight as a more poetic and more ethical mode of seeing than the direct vision of Enlightenment. However, where for Handke blindness allows for a poetic space of productivity that allows childhood to be redeemed and integrated into his poetic project of ‘Kindschaft,’ for Sebald blindness serves as a continuation of the spectral uncanny that was heralded by his phantom mothers.

4.2.1 Inheritances maternal and paternal: Family constellation

Both the Kobal and the Austerlitz families have been devastated by the progress of history, and both heirs to the families – Filip and Jacques – are haunted by a sense of guilt for their inadequacy to legitimize their positions as survivors in the family constellation. As with Austerlitz, Filip’s early youth is marked by a sense of loss caused by the erasures of the Second World War, and haunted by the spectre of a lost brother. However, Filip’s lost brother is historical, not spectral; the Kobal family consciously commemorates the lost son, in contrast to the way in which the Elias family represses Austerlitz’s past self in Bala. Where in Austerlitz, repression of his personal and of collective memory leads to retardation and disintegration of the self, in Die Wiederholung, Filip’s lack of ownership of the memory of his brother fuels his guilt and alienation. Filip himself has no personal memory of his lost brother Gregor,
but ‘in meiner Kindheit war so viel von ihm die Rede, daß mir jetzt ist, er sei die ganze Zeit dabeigewesen’ (WH 184). The loss of an intact family haunts both novels; both protagonists only experience familial wholeness and togetherness in disjointed visionary states. Filip writes,

Und auch nur so, unter Tränen, kreuz und quer irrend, ohne sich einander nähern, ohne einander berühren zu dürfen, mit hängenden Armen, konnten wir Kobals eine Familie sein; und eine Familie konnte man überhaupt nur im Traum sein. Aber was war ‘nur im Traum’? (WH 90)

Austerlitz’s brief visions of an intact, genetically linked family are vertiginously distant; as in the Rembrandt painting of the Holy Family on the flight to Egypt that he views in Amsterdam,

auf dem er wieder das hochhelle Paar noch das Jesuskind, noch das Saumtier habe erkennen können, sonder nur, mitten in dem schwarzglänzenden Firnis der Finsternis, einen winzigen, vor meinen Augen, so sagte Austerlitz, bis heute nicht vergangenen Feuerfleck. (A 177)

Here, too, the family in exile is only visible through a series of displacements, via ekphrasis, in a borrowed painting, and only through a detailed negative description of the individual figures in their absence from the artistic portrayal, a description that relies on the mémoire volontaire of learned topoi of art history as much as on (involuntary) memories of his own infancy. As Fuchs points out, in his memory Austerlitz even erases the family figures from the picture, which in the original image are relatively easy to make out.

Der Logik von Sebalds Text nach hält das Gemälde jedoch aufgrund der Intensität des nicht vergehenden Feuerflecks weiterhin ein eschatologisches Versprechen als Zitat bereit.¹⁸

Family wholeness, then, and ‘eschatological’ or redemptive promise are linked in Austerlitz’s account. Later, though, in a dream, his birth family appears to him in a spectral constellation that is as uncommunicative as Filip’s family:

Einmal träumte es mir, ich sei nach langer Abwesenheit zurückgekehrt in die Prager Wohnung […] Ich weiß, daß die Eltern bald aus den Ferien eintreffen werden und daß ich ihnen etwas Wichtiges geben muß. Davon, daß sie seit langem tot sind, habe ich

¹⁸ Fuchs, Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte, p. 59.
The reappearance of his family in the dream, and their inability to notice him, leads him to conjecture that it is, in fact, the living who are unreal in the eyes of the dead. As for Filip, it is he, the son, who is the outsider and stranger in this image of family wholeness, which is overlaid with a sense of guilt for the ‘etwas Wichtiges’ that he is incapable of giving them. Where for Austerlitz the absence of an inheritance of family memory prevents the formation of a secure subjectivity, for Filip Kobal the rites of familial memory and the burden of inheritance delegitimize his sense of self. Filip’s mother has designated him the heir of the family, a role that he feels inadequate to fulfil. The presence of his dead brother displaces him from a secure place in the family constellation – ‘Nein, seit ich die Blicke der Mutter entziffern konnte, wußte ich: Da ist nicht mein Platz’ (WH 22). Thus, Filip’s journey in search of a family member whom he knows is most likely to be dead, (as Austerlitz knows must be the case with his parents), is undertaken as much as a wandering in search of his own self and self-determination as is Austerlitz’s journey.

Handke consciously reworked his own autobiographical family history for Die Wiederholung. Jörg Friedrichs provides evidence to note that, like Sebald, Handke has shifted his identification back a generation: the figure of the older brother and godparent Gregor corresponds to Handke’s Uncle Gregor, his mother’s brother (born on 21 November 1913, a date with many Sebaldian resonances). As Gregor was fighting in the German army at the time, Handke’s aunt Ursula acted as proxy for Gregor at Handke’s baptism. Handke’s grandfather, Gregor Siutz, was of Slovenian origin and a farmer and carpenter, characteristics that are given to Filip’s father. The Handkeian protagonist thus is not only displaced back a generation from Handke himself in a quest to recover traces of the ‘lost generation,’ but also inherits his Slovenian ancestry from his father, rather, as for Handke, from his mother (and maternal grandfather).20

19 Friedrichs, p. 158.

20 Just as Sebald at times affiliates himself with both his maternal grandfather and with his grandfather’s generation of writers, so the narrator of Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire shares this yearning for a teacher from his grandfather’s generation:
An autobiographical moment runs through both novels: if Austerlitz, a Czech Jew, functions as proxy and redeemer for the Sebaldian narrator, a figure who shares many characteristics with Sebald himself, so Filip’s position in his family constellation makes him in part Handke’s alter ego, also translated into a figure with a more Slavic, less Germanic heritage. Both the Austrian Handke and the German Sebald share their generation’s revulsion against all things German: ‘Deutschland ist gefährlich, Deutschland ist brutal, undurchschaubar’,^21 Handke said in interview in 1992. Filip seeks to escape his mother’s sphere in search of his rightful Slovenian patrimony, in a conscious echo of Telemachus, who leaves his mother Penelope behind in Ithaca and goes out to bring Odysseus home.

Kein Jesus soll mehr auftreten, aber immer wieder ein Homer; und es soll auch kein Auftreten sein, sondern ein Ertonen.\(^22\)

Thus wrote Handke, programmatically, in the year before Die Wiederholung was published, and indeed, Filip’s first night in the tunnel between Austria and Slovenia, wrapped in his brother’s overcoat, appears to him like the safe sleep of Odysseus: ‘Als solche Geborgenheit stelle ich mir immer jene Flocke des Schlafs vor, worin im Epos der erschöpfte Odysseus ruht’ (WH 111). Filip fulfils the journey that Austerlitz only plans, crossing the mountains to the south by foot, in search of his lost relative.

Dann wiederum dachte ich, daß Maximilian Paris gewiß rechtzeitig verlassen haben wird, daß er südwärts gefahren, zu Fuß über die Pyrenäen gegangen und irgendwo verschollen ist. (A 366)

Austerlitz’s journey is a repetition of his unhappy obsession with trains: the Sebaldian narrator sees Austerlitz setting off on his train journey, but has no way of knowing whether or not he arrives. From Il Ritorno in Patria, we can surmise that, for Sebald, the wanderer’s journey on foot, in keeping with Romantic practice, is the only


^22 Handke, Phantasien der Wiederholung, p. 7.
possible way to cross the mountains and re-enter the homeland. Thus, unlike Austerlitz, Filip completes his journey on foot. ‘Ich wollte weiter nach Süden’ (WH 232), he says, and shortly after,

Ich entschloß mich in diesem Moment, das Gebirge zu Fuß zu überqueren, und machte mich schon auf den Weg. (‘Nicht wieder einen Tunnel!’ und ‘Ich habe ja Zeit!’) (WH 234)

By going on foot through the train tunnel, Filip manages to transcend the negative progress of history that, in Austerlitz, is manifested in and perpetuated by the train network. Thus, like Austerlitz, Filip is burdened with the negative inheritance of history; unlike Austerlitz, he finds a means to transcend it through close correspondence with nature. In the next section, I show how Filip negotiates the other pole of Minden’s Bildungsroman matrix, incest.

4.2.2 Phantom mothers: fetishism and guilt

Filip and Austerlitz are both haunted by the phantoms of their mothers, who appear even more life-like once they have crossed the border. Weigel extends her examination of contemporary discourses of trauma to the figure of the phantom, as delineated by Nicolas Abraham, which arises to haunt the second and third generation in the spaces left by trauma:

Insofern bezieht es sich auf Lücken nicht nur der individuellen Wahrheit, sondern auf Lücken der kollektiven und familialen Wahrheit: auf das Verdrängte (der Schuld) bzw. das Begrabene (der Trauer) von Vater und Mutter der persönlichen Vorzeit.23

These phantoms, Weigel argues, are at times libidinously cathected, and add an eroticized element to the discourse of literature ‘after Auschwitz.’ Eroticism, in Austerlitz as in Schwindel.Gefühle, is both a manifestation of the historical uncanny, and a desire to escape from the logic of history through access to subjective fulfillment. A tabooed eroticism is most certainly attached to the memory of Austerlitz’s mother, who appears in a veil of scented powder and undresses before her son, as well as to the other maternal figures in Austerlitz. Austerlitz’s adoptive mother appears to be little more than a ghostly reflection of this ‘real’ mother. She surrounds herself by the same clouds of powder, here transformed into a ghastly grey ectoplasm,

and finally dies under a bricked up window. Only when she herself passes over into
the realm of the dead does she appear as a sexualized figure: she arches her back while
dying - ‘dann wölbte sich Gwendolyn ein wenig nach oben, ehe sie wieder in sich
zusammensank’ (A 98) - in a deathly parody of sexual ecstasy, and is then buried in
her bridal gown and gloves. The gloves are furnished ‘mit vielen kleinen
Perlmutterknöpfen’ (A 99), a fetishist’s delight, which nonetheless inspire only tears of
mourning in the pubescent Austerlitz. The sublimated eroticism of the buttoned gloves
is made manifest in a brief passage in Die Ausgewanderten, where the narrator
encounters a feathered lady on a train, who presents him, through the smoke that tends
to encircle such ladies in Sebaldian narratives, with a castrating erotic challenge. The
shy Sebaldian bachelor, who, the previous night was attracted by a ‘blondes Mädchen
mit noch sehr kindlicher Stimme’, is incapable of meeting the challenge of the cigar-
wielding lady, and instead focuses his gaze on her gloves.

Austerlitz responds to the erotic lure of the glove in Věra’s narration of his childhood,
where she tells of the infant Jacques’s fascination with her aunt Otýlie’s glove shop.
The glove shop represents a feminine order: it is one of many archives and systems of
knowledge that point towards a transcendent order in Austerlitz, constructed as it is
along a

von ihr geschaffene, Jahrzehnte hindurch über alle Wechselfälle der Geschichte
hinweg aufrechterhaltene und nur von ihr allein wirklich verstandene
Handschuhordnung und Hierarchie[...]. (A 233)²⁴

This private system of order is opposed to the brutal Enlightenment systems of
knowledge that haunt Austerlitz, much as the Wunderkammer in Andromeda Lodge
represents a personal, occult system of knowledge and secret correspondences that is

²⁴ The significance of the archive and the orders of knowledge has been extensively researched in
Sebaldian secondary literature. See particularly Helmut Lethen, ‘Sebalds Raster. Überlegungen zur
ontologischen Unruhe in Sebalds Die Ringe des Saturn’ in W. G. Sebald. Politische Archäologie und
Foucaultschen Sebald-Lektüre,’ in the same volume, pp. 219-240.
in opposition to such institutionalized systems as the Bibliothèque Nationale. The glove shop combines, then, a positive order of things with a sexual charge and the prospect of, perhaps, a positive inheritance. Otýlie lets Austerlitz try on the gloves, Věra says, ‘ganz so als sächte sie in dir bereits ihren präsumtiven Nachfolger im Geschäft’ (A 234). More, the gloves also provide a humane system of education: Věra tells Austerlitz that Otýlie taught him to count in Czech

an einer Reihe kleiner, schwarzglänzender Malachitknöpfchen, die angenäht waren an einen halblangen, samtenen Handschuh, der dir besonders gefiel [...]. (A 234)

In the Czech sphere of memory, the fetish of the buttoned glove becomes charged with the idea of a benign transcendent order and with a feminine inheritance. It is Věra, not Austerlitz, who conjures up this picture of completeness: however, through a chain of correspondences, it is Věra’s account of the visit to the glove shop that leads her to tell him of Agáta in the role of Olimpia, and directly leads Austerlitz to the vision of the blue shoe.

Earlier, in the Andromeda Lodge sequence of Austerlitz’s childhood, Gerald’s mother, Adela, is also described as being preternaturally young and beautiful, and also appears to Austerlitz in a vision not unlike that of Max Aurach’s recurring dream of a mysterious German-speaking spectre. Aurach’s spectre appears as ‘eine elegante Dame in einem Ballkleid aus grauer Fallschirmseide und mit einem breitkrempigen, mit grauen Rosen besteckten Hut’ (DA 271). Here, Barzilai notes, the elegant woman – also fitted with erotic fencing gloves – is the alluring phantom of Aurach’s German memories, combining both death and eroticism.25 In Austerlitz, spectral mothers invoke the desire to return to pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic wholeness. Just as Agáta is dumb in Austerlitz’s memories, Adela appears to Austerlitz silently through a similar shadowy shroud, also bearing flowers:

Als ich von dort wieder zurückkam – es dämmerte bereits, sagte Austerlitz, und ein feiner Sprühregen hing, anscheinend ohne niederzusinken, in der Luft –, trat mir aus der nebligen Tiefe des Gartens Adela entgegen, in grünlichbraune Wollsachen genummmt, an deren hauchfein gekräuseltem Rand Millionen winziger Wassertropfen eine Art von silbrigen Glanz um sie bildeten. In ihrer rechten Armbeuge trug sie einen

The act of passing her hand across Austerlitz’s forehead is later called to his memory as a gesture of his own mother’s, Agáta (A 237), such that the text maintains an ambiguous relationship between the spectres, refusing to disclose whether Adela is a foreshadowing spectre of Austerlitz’s ‘real’ mother, or whether Adela’s unforgettable gesture has so imprinted itself in Austerlitz’s memory that he can only retrospectively remember his ‘real’ mother repeating the action taken by Adela. The spectral mothers here suspend time and causality within the otherwise linear structures of the text, and also appear either as avatars of each other or as interchangeable Doppelgängers. Once again, they offer the promise of perfect retrieval of memory, perfect tenderness and a compassionate maternal order that exists outside the self-replicating structures of bourgeois society. Their dumbness, though, precludes the possibility that they can serve as poetic muses. Thus, in Austerlitz, phantom mothers also serve as spectres of generational guilt for the impossibility of being able to witness for the lost maternal generation.

In Die Wiederholung, Filip’s mother is already suspended between life and death, from the very beginning of his journey. Her sickness changes her from a wrathful avatar of the Kobals’ rightful heritage into a patient, almost saintly figure.

Es war uns zwar mitgeteilt worden, daß die Kranke nicht mehr lange zu leben hätte, aber wie konnten wir das wissen? Sie war ohne Schmerzen und lag oder saß still in ihrem Bett, ganz unauffällig geworden, so anders als die Gesunde, aus der bei manchen Tätigkeiten ein grundloses Gejammere gekommen war. (WH 86)

Like Gwendolyn, it is in this liminal state of sickness that she becomes the centre of the household: ‘Das Wohnen lernte der Vater erst mit der Krankheit der Mutter’ (WH 83). Filip’s mother combines the functions of Gwendolyn and Agáta, at once the false (Austrian) mother from whom Filip feels estranged, and the phantom spectre of guilt, who both recalls an imaginary heile Welt prior to the Kobal family exile in Slovenia, and saturates Filip with guilt for not being able to save her from death. His mother’s
sickness disrupts the paternal order, and levels the generational hierarchy between Filip and his father –

der heranwachsende Zuschauer sah sich selber, die die Karten vom Tisch fegende Grauhaarige und den triumphlachenden Vater da als Gleichaltrige. (WH 86)

Attending the bed of his dying mother, like Austerlitz, Kobal is transported into a realm of the uncanny. However, for him, the spectral apparitions about his mother’s bedtime are not the harbingers of grief and loss, like Gwendolyn’s ghastly talcum powder: instead, they are angels that delimit a maternal sphere where he can embark on his coming-of-age as a poet, by narrating his wishes to his mother.

Ich trat in die Zeremonie – wehe, wenn jemand aus seiner Rolle fiel! – auf als der Erzähler, konnte, endlich unausgefragt, mich an das Bett setzen, an dessen Mitte, da ja, nach dem Aberglauben, an Kopf- und Fußende die Todesengel standen, und diese zum Haus hinauszerzählen. (WH 87)

Filip’s mother’s deathbed is thus more like Véra’s couch than Gwendolyn’s narrow chamber, a space beyond time, ‘denn es gab im Haus keine Uhr’ (WH 89) and beyond the fracturing of identity, ‘Es war auch kein Spiegel zerschellt – denn in unserm Haus hing kein Spiegel’ (WH 89). At Filip’s mother’s deathbed, language, desire and identity are united. Thus, the deathbed moment, when Filip speaks to his mother, includes the promise, excluded from Austerlitz, of continuing this unity through the creative act of narrative.

As soon as Filip crosses the Slovenian border, moving away from the historical sphere where age has overtaken his mother, an erotic phantom of the mother appears to him. Sitting in the café in Jesenice railway station, gazing through half-closed lids, he sees his mother in the figure of the barmaid.

Das Träumen ging erst weiter, als hinter der Theke, in der triiben Beleuchtung, die Kellnerin erschien, mit einem schattigen Gesicht, in dem das Deutliche nur die aucli beim Geradeausschauen fast augenbedeckenden Lider waren. Im Betrachten dieser Lider bewegte sich unversehens, gespenstisch leibhaftig, die Mutter vor mir (WH 19).

The vision of the barmaid, swinging her hips and crowned with a ‘Haarturm,’ only appears to Filip through half-closed eyes, similarly to the reversed, liminal sight which the narrator of Austerlitz must first develop in order to be able to gaze in to Austerlitz’s past (see the previous chapter.) In the beginning pages of Austerlitz, too,
the imperial figure of a barmaid at the railway station presides over the initial recovery of lost time: she is ‘enthroned’ with towering hair (‘[ihre] wasserstoffblondes Haar [war] zu einem vogelnestartigen Gebilde aufgetürmt’) behind the bar, and, behauptete Austerlitz beiläufig, sie sei die Göttin der vergangenen Zeit. Tatsächlich befand sich an der Wand hinter ihr, unter dem Löwenwappen des Belgischen Königreichs, als Hauptstück des Buffetsaals eine mächtige Uhr [...]. (A 16)

Here, the association of the clock and the royal coat of arms links the passage of time with a critique of Belgian colonial ambitions, an image of the disastrous progress of history which destroyed Austerlitz’s mother. As Sebald warned in his essay on the Schloß, the barmaid can also be the sinister figure of Frau Welt:

Die Wirtin als Frau Welt, als Schankmädchen eines Gasthauses, welches dem Tod und dem Teufel gehört, ist ein Topos der mittelalterlichen Literatur, der auch in der bürgerlichen Epoche bisweilen noch auftaucht. (BdU 90)

For Sebald, this figure – which he traces through quotes from Kafka and Bernhard that closely resemble his descriptions of Adela and Aurach’s ghostly vision – is unambiguously a figure of death, ‘wie ein Arzt, der fürchtet, zu spät zum auslöschenden Kranken gekommen zu sein’. In Handke’s novel, the ‘herrisch’ (WH 20) appearance of the waitress leads Filip down a chain of associations to his ‘herrschcherlich’ mother, his status as heir to the dispossessed family throne, and the narrative of his childhood to date. If the phantoms of Austerlitz’s mother are erotic phantoms that are charged with mourning, this phantom is laden with inherited guilt and shame.

Namenloses Erschrecken, als mich momentlang ihr Blick traf, spöttisch, nicht zu durchdringen; Erschrecken, das eher ein Ruck war, ein Entrücken in einen größeren Traum. (WH 19)

The sexy barmaid represents an idealized transformation of his biological mother, who is currently lying sick in Austria.

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26 The cathected figure of the sexy barmaid has already appeared in *Schwindel.Gefühle* as the barmaid at the station in Santa Lucia, and as Romana, the object of the Sebaldian narrator’s childhood desire. See SG 77 and 256-7.

27 BdU 91, citing ‘Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande’.
In diesem *Traum, HF* war die Kranke wieder gesund geworden. Springlebendig durchmaß sie, verkleidet als Kellnerin, die verzweigte Gaststätte [...] Was für stämmige Beine die Mutter bekommen hatte, was für einen Hufschwung, was für eine Haarturm. Und obwohl sie doch, anders als die Mehrzahl der Frauen im Dorf, nur ein paar Wörter des Slowenischen konnte, sprach sie es hier, in der Unterhaltung mit einer unsichtbaren Männergesellschaft in der Nachbarnische, ganz selbstverständlich, fast herrisch. Sie war also nicht das Findelkind, der Flüchtling, die Deutsche, die Ausländerin, als die sie sich immer ausgegeben hatte. (WH 19)

If in *Austerlitz* the narrator’s yearning for a guiltless, Slavic maternal inheritance is latent, here it is explicit. The maternal phantom that is projected onto the barmaid is cleansed of his mother’s guilt for lacking a Slovenian heritage and for the taint of German ancestry. In creating this phantom, and negating in a ritual liturgy all the shameful elements of his mother’s German identity, the young Filip also acknowledges that it *is* nothing but a phantom. Not only does this ideal mother not exist in reality, but his German ancestry can only be momentarily left behind by a journey through the looking glass to Slovenia, never erased. Indeed, Filip’s mother, for all her philoslovenian tendencies, has never even been to Yugoslavia, and her mythical tales of the family origin are constructed from her husband’s – German – narratives:

Dabei war die Mutter nie über die Grenze gekommen. Die jugoslawischen Orte kannte sie vor allem aus den Erzählungen ihres Mannes, und für diesen verkörperten die Namen, immer noch, einzig den Krieg. (WH 75)

In interview, Handke later said that he tried to base the figure of the mother on his own mother, who had killed herself in 1971. He had attempted to create an epic, depersonalized female figure by combining his memories of his own mother with those of other women. The process of literary transformation, however, led him to an unexpected intimacy with the long-dead figure of his mother:

In meinem Kopf ging alles durcheinander, denn ich war mir bewußt, daß meine Mutter eine Slowenin war und ich in diesem Buch aus ihr eine Deutsche machen mußte. Aber es geschah auch etwas Umgekehrtes – über diese Figur habe ich wieder meine Mutter gefunden...28

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28 Noch einmal vom Neunten Land, p. 12.
Langsame Heimkehr: Die Wiederholung and Austerlitz

The translation of his mother from Slovenian to German allows him to come closer to a mother whom in Wunschloses Unglück, he describes as an uncanny spectre. The narration of her history, he wrote then, had to do with ‘sprachlosen Schrecksekunden’ (WU 46) that set his hair on end, ‘immer wieder Zustände aus einer Gespenstergeschichte.’

Höchstens im Traumleben wird die Geschichte meiner Mutter kurzzeitig faßbar: weil dabei ihre Gefühle so körperlich werden, daß ich diese als Doppelgänger erlebe und mit ihnen identisch bin [...]. (WU 46)

The intimate, somatic moment of identification, which makes of the narrator’s own guilt-ridden body a haunted house after his mother’s suicide, is, ironically, exorcized by translating the mother to the guilty German nation. The affirmative act of translation is intimately bound up with the interplay of language, specifically the German and Slovenian languages, which will be discussed more fully in the next section.

Kobal’s acknowledgement of the persistence of his maternal German ancestry is missing in Sebald’s assessment of Handke’s transformation of his biography:

es geht in der Umschreibung vielmehr um die Eliminierung eines ganz bestimmten Elements, um eine möglichst weitgehende Entfernung von der deutschen Abstammung väterlicherseits, die, so scheint es mir, zu den größten Beschwerdennissen in dem psychischen und moralischen Entwicklungsprozeß des Schriftstellers Peter Handke gehörte. Die Kobal haben mit den Deutschen nichts, nicht einmal mit den Österreicichern haben sie im Grunde etwas gemeinsam. (UH 170)

This procedure of eliminating all traces of Germanness, as described here, rather, would seem far more to relate to the moments of identification that Sebald has with his subjects, particularly to the complex interrelation between the Sebaldian narrator and his Doppelgänger, Jacques Austerlitz. Filip writes at the beginning of his quest,

ich gehörte mit meinem Spiegelbild zu diesem Volk, das ich mir auf einer unablässigen, friedfertigen, abenteuerlichen, gelassenen Wanderung durch eine Nacht vorstellte, wo auch die Schläfer, die Kranken, die Sterbenden, ja sogar die Gestorbenen mitgenommen wurden. Ich richtete mich auf und wollte diesen Traum wahrhaben. (WH 18)

The ‘heile Welt’ where the dead and the sick walk, and where Filip belongs to the Slovenes, is a deliberately-created illusion, a poetically productive illusion, but, in
political and historical terms, as much an illusion as Austerlitz’s belief that he can reawaken the ghost of his mother through replaying the fragmented fourteen minutes worth of film taken in the Theresienstadt ghetto. Handke manages to translate his guilt both for his mother’s suicide and for his Austrian ancestry into a poetically productive image of reconciliation, a procedure that Sebald condemned in the Langsame Heimkehr but applauds in Die Wiederholung.

Maya Barzilai points out that in Die Ausgewanderten, women often perform the function of mediating both gaps in memory and homosocial desire, between the Sebaldian narrator and the male protagonists, while Bonn notes in Handke’s work of the 1980s, women appear as ‘funktionalisiert zum kurz befristeten Hebammendasein eines ramponierten Selbstverständnisses der ‘Helden’. Perhaps the guilt associated with the figure of the mother is not merely due to the illegitimate phantoms of redemption and retrieval; guilt may also surround the fact that female figures are almost always only accorded phantom status in Sebald and Handke’s works. The spectral mother both negotiates and reinscribes, then, the political uncanny in both Sebald’s and Handke’s works.

4.2.3 Blind windows: poetic insight, memory and uncanny voyeurism

If the phantom mothers in the two novels are spectres of the past that point towards generational guilt, the motifs of blindness and blind windows also reappear in both novels as models of memory. The blank window is a key allegorical image in Die Wiederholung, associated with the interplay of memory and poetic productivity. In both novels, blindness is another spectral phenomenon: blind seers see things with an occluded gaze inaccessible to direct vision, and blind windows signal death. As we have seen with the spectral figure of the mother, though, where Handke’s spectral uncanny points the way to a vision of reconciliation and poetic productivity, in Austerlitz, blindness is associated with a complex system of guilt, amnesia and the uncanny. Here, Ceuppens’s comment on Die Ausgewanderten is pertinent:

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Something within a system of meanings and categories turns out to resist categorization, it leads a life of its own within that system, or again: it is the uncanny, an appearance of the unfamiliar within the familiar. It would seem that this uncanny only appears when the reader adopts a different perspective on the image presented, when he looks at it obliquely.  

The uncanny, is, of course, the intrusion of the familiar repressed in the familiar, too. Thus, the stubborn closure of the window in the Elias’ manse, despite the choking yellow smoke of the coal fires that burn in Gwendolyn’s room, in part signifies the stubborn resistance of Austerlitz’s adoptive parents against informing him about his biographical narrative. Towards the end of the novel, the windows of the monstrous Bibliothèque Nationale are also covered with blinds –

Die vier gläsernen Türe selbst […] machen auf den, der an ihren Fassaden hinaufblickt und den größtenteils noch leeren Raum hinter den geschlossenen Lichtblenden erahnt, tatsächlich einen babylonischen Eindruck. (A 395)  

In Paris, too, the blind windows suggest narratives withheld and knowledge imprisoned, by the megalomania, the narrator suggests, of Mitterand and the desire for a ‘Perfektion des Konzepts’ (A 398). Again, a domestic image at the beginning of the novel is dialectically reflected in a political context at its end, where a humane tradition of knowledge is destroyed by the hypotrophy of Enlightenment and the imperial ambitions of a French ruler. The closed windows show only a deathly simulacrum of nature, which lures birds to fly into the panes that mirror the trees outside the library. Just as Austerlitz is associated with a series of melancholy birds – the far-seeing owl, the homecoming pigeon, the mourning parrot – so the library baffles the path of the searching melancholic.

In Austerlitz, the blank window allegorically represents his occluded past, the perspective that his Welsh parents close off both from him and from themselves. Dying, Gwendolyn asks, ‘What was it that so darkened our world?’ (A 97). This is a question that of course has many answers, some of which relate to the overall Sebaldian-Benjaminian melancholy that informs the book, and indeed Gwendolyn’s decline is ushered in by the end of the second world war and the end of the traditional, hermetically sealed world of Bala: the ‘darkening’ of their world refers both

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metaphorically and literally to the closed windows behind which the family has imprisoned itself (A 89).

As a pendant to Gwendolyn’s fatal self-immurement, Austerlitz mentions a tale he has read of a Russian author’s grandmother who was gripped by an ‘ähnliche[ ] Pudermanie’ (A 94):


(A 95)

The literary comparison with the life-giving open window – a reference to Nabokov’s paternal grandmother, Maria von Korff32 — reaffirms Gwendolyn’s function as an uncanny and pale reflection of the eroticized Slavic mother.

In Die Wiederholung, by contrast, the ‘blind window’ is elaborated into a complex allegory of narrative and freedom: ‘Die Bedeutung des blinden Fensters blieb unbestimmbar, aber wurde, einmal, zum Zeichen’ (WH 97). Indeed, the whole first section of the novel, describing Filip’s circumscribed childhood in Austria, is entitled ‘Das blinde Fenster.’ At the end of this section, Filip finally leaves Austria for Slovenia in search of greater clarity. As he waits at the train station, he sees a blind window reflecting the light: ‘Das Fenster bekam keine Sonne mehr, empfing aber von irgendwo ein Reflexlicht und schimmerte’ (WH 96). The blind window reminds Kobal of his half-blind brother, Gregor, and in turn of a family story dating back to

32 ‘In a flowing silk gown and net mitts, a period piece rather than a live person, she spent most of her life on a couch, fanning herself with an ivory fan. A box of boules de gomme, or a glass of almond milk were always within her reach, as well as a hand mirror, for she used to repowder her face, with a large pink puff, every hour or so, the little mole on her cheekbone showing through all that flour, like a currant. Notwithstanding the languid aspects of her usual day, she remained an extraordinarily hardy woman and made a point of sleeping near a wide-open window all year round. One morning, after a nightlong blizzard, her maid found her lying under a layer of sparkling snow which had swept over her bed and her, without infringing upon the healthy glow of her sleep.’ Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: London, 1967), p. 155.
before the time of his birth, to 1920, of a desperate last-minute rush to the train station to save Gregor’s eye from fever. The window sends him back to his home, to revisit his family, in one of the novels most significant repetitions.

Similarly, in *Austerlitz*, this image of the blinded window demonstrates Austerlitz’s occluded view of his own past, which has been elided by the passage of time and the inexorable erasures of modernity; the only ways in which to regain vision are via painful repetition, and this vision is as indirect as the reflected light from ‘irgendwo’ that catch the blind window in Mittlern. In the poetics of *Die Wiederholung*, the blind window signifies at once blindness and insight, loss of memory and a creative passage towards subjective fulfillment. Thus, on arrival in Slovenia, Filip sees a second blind window, which brings him the message, ‘Freund, du hast Zeit!’ (WH 97). Slovenia now appears to him as a ‘Reich der Welt’ which ‘mir in die Augen sprang’ with horror. (Interestingly, the loci of this ‘Reich der Welt’ that confuse Filip are topoi that also have their place in Sebald’s writings: not only the old Kakanian writings on the Austro-Hungarian buildings, but also a garage that ‘an ein, nur im Traum erlebtes, China erinnerte, und eine gleichermaßen fremdartige Sinaiwüste öffnete sich hinter den Hochhausblöcken’ [WH 135]). The blind window provides the key to this strange landscape:

Gebündelt wurde die Unbestimmbarkeit von einem blinden Fenster, zu dem es meinen Blick nun hinzog wie zu der Mitte des Weltreichs. (WH 136)

This blind window grounds Filip in the new, foreign country. „Und auch seine Wirkung kam aus dem fehlenden Üblichen“ (WH 136): it provides a mirror in which an aesthetic wholeness is reflected. The Schillerian potential of this window-mirror is suggested by the figure of a child which Filip sees on the steps of the house where the window blinks: ‘Es wirkte unbewohnt; das Kind stand auf den Stufen nicht auf einem Zugang, sondern auf einem Spielplatz’ (WH 136). The figure of the child points at once towards the potential for completing the gaps in Filip’s family history, and towards the awakening of the Schillerian *Spieltrieb*, that drive which does not tend towards a ‘Zugang’ to any metaphysical truth, but rather allows the subject to become
The second blind window, then, presides over both the retrieval of childhood wholeness and productive poetic play. Further, the blindness of the window is then disrupted to show a scene that unites those uncanny elements associated with the blind window in *Austerlitz*. The ‘seeing’ window beside it is torn open to reveal the deathbed of an old woman whose eyes are wide open with horror:

Und doch genügte dann schon ein Seitenblick, und das Licht, das davon ausging, war erloschen: Das Fenster nebenan – sozusagen das ‘sehende’ – wurde aufgestoßen und wieder geschlossen, und zwar von Händen, die zwei verschiedenen Menschen gehörten, zuerst einer uralten, dann einer jüngeren Frau. Die Greisin, das erkannte ich in dem einen Moment, war mehr als nur alt, sie war eine sterbende, und sie hatte sich gerade mit einem letzten Aufbäumen aus dem Raum, wo man sie festhielt, vor dem Tod ins Freie flüchten wollen, durch das vergitterte Fenster; ein vom Grauen verzerrtes Gesicht mit eingezogenem Unterlippe und aufgerissenen Augen, die sich von selber nie wieder schließen würden. (WH 137)


Filip asserts, ‘Nein, immer noch, wo ich auch bin, muten die blinden Fenster und die leeren Viehsteige mich an als die Wasserzeichen eines Reiches der Wiederkehr’ (WH 222). Fuß ascribes two latent meanings to the blind window in Handke’s novel:

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Zum einen weist es auf die Kindheit als einen blinden Flecken der eigenen Biographie; zum anderen steht es für Kobals Verfahren der Wiedergewinnung der Kindheit, wenn es einen leeren Rahmen setzt, der mit Bildern aufzufüllen ist, welche die Erinnerung wieder sichtbar machen muß.\textsuperscript{36}

This concept of the empty window as a productive empty frame is not taken up in \textit{Austerlitz}, where Sebald’s Benjaminian reading of history locates meaning and poetic insight exclusively in the past. Fuchs comments on the inherent contradictions in such a position:

\begin{quote}
Obwohl Sebald im Gefolge Benjamins darauf abzielt, Geschichte im Paradigma des Verlusts zur Anschauung zu bringen, läßt sich in seiner Prosa immer wieder die Tendenz ausmachen, vor allem die Vorkriegszeit nostalgisch zu verklären.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

If a blind window indicates personal and historical repression, then, as seen in the previous chapter, the darkening of a person’s sight in \textit{Austerlitz} often precedes the return of a privileged kind of vision that calls back to memory those things that the Sebaldian narrator is seeking to discover behind the occlusions of history, the ‘diorama’ (A 232) of the past. Blindness suggests, perhaps, that, there is indeed an occluded meaning to a history of destruction that can, in fact, have none. After Gwendolyn’s death, Elias manages only to stumble through a single biblical text in the Bala pulpit and then stands, without delivering his usual fire and brimstone commentary on it, ‘und schaute über die Köpfe seiner vor Schrecken gelähmten Gemeinde hinweg, mit den unbeweglichen Augen eines Erblindeten’ (A 100). The savage insights of Calvinist eschatology are blind in the face of his wife’s death.

As Iris Radisch notes\textsuperscript{38} in her initial review of \textit{Austerlitz}, the opening scene of \textit{Austerlitz}, set in the Antwerp Nocturnama, can be read as an elaborate allegory for the rest of the novel, where the ‘Waschbär der falschen Welt,’ whose eyes see only in the dark, sits by a little stream repeatedly washing an apple slice, in an apparent attempt to escape ‘aus der falschen Welt, in die er gewissermaßen ohne sein eigenes Zutun geraten war’ (A 11). The Sebaldian narrator continues,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[36]{Fuß, \textit{Bedürfnis nach Heil}, p. 62.}
\footnotetext[37]{Fuchs, \textit{Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte}, p. 19.}
\footnotetext[38]{Radisch, ‘Der Waschbär der falschen Welt’.
}\end{footnotes}
Von den in dem Nocturama behausten Tieren ist mir sonst nur in Erinnerung geblieben, daß etliche von ihnen auffallend große Augen hatten und jenen unverwandt forschenden Blick, wie man ihn findet bei bestimmten Malern und Philosophen, die vermittels der reinen Anschauung und des reinen Denkens versuchen, das Dunkel zu durchdringen, das uns umgibt. (A 11)

Throughout the novel, the intertwined motifs of semi-blind windows and semi-blind/semi-visionary eyes reappear, particularly the half-blinded eyes of the victims of history, who try, with their hypersensitive eyes – useless in the daylight – to see back through the obscured past. Direct apperception and cognitive thought, such as Austerlitz’s ‘pure’ academic research, are classed as inadequate compared to the melancholy, approximate gaze of the half-blind poet or artist. Such an artist is Gerald’s great-uncle Alphonso, who paints watercolours while wearing ‘stets eine Brille, in welcher an Stelle der Gläser ein graues Seidengewebe eingespannt war’ (A 132).

In Austerlitz, insight gained by semi-blindness can only peer backwards into history to gain a fragmentary view of the past marred by the lacunae of history, never, as in Handke’s euphoric metaphysics, create a productive or utopian poetic vision. In Austerlitz’s history class he learns that even this obscured retrospective gaze is inadequate to gain any meaningful overview of a historical event: here, his history teacher ‘malte uns ein Bild aus von der Anordnung der Regimenter’ at the battle of Austerlitz, ‘die sich im Verlauf der Schlacht zu immer neuen Mustern vermischten wie der Glaskristalle in einem Kaleidoskop.’ This kaleidoscopic perspective, reminiscent of Nathaniel’s disordered use of a telescope at the end of the Sandmann, is incapable of ‘in irgendeiner gar nicht denkbaren systematischen Form, berichten, was an so einem Tag geschehen war, wer genau wo und wie zugrunde ging’ (A 108). Hilary concludes that all that the historian with the kaleidoscopic gaze can manage is ‘das, wovon man nichts wisse, zusammenzufassen in dem lachhaften Satz ‘Die Schlacht wogete hin und her’ oder einer ähnlich hilf- und nutzlosen Äußerung’ (A 109) – no poetic narrative, but a laughably inadequate stock phrase. So that Austerlitz can memorize what fragmentary images he can of the battle, he tells the narrator that he must enter a chain of substitutions, renouncing his own identity in favour of that of a historical actor, and adopt a perspective at once periscopic and blind:
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Austerlitz, like the rest of Sebald’s works, privileges a miniaturized, dioramic view of history over the sweeping view from the heights of history, or, indeed, that of an aviator. Again, an obscured window offers a view onto such a perspective. Thus, behind the closed window of Gwendolyn’s bedroom, the teenaged Austerlitz peers through encrusted snow into a hallucinatory landscape:

Ich stand Stunden am Fenster und studierte die wunderbaren Formationen der zwei bis drei Zoll hohen Eisgebirge, die sich über den Querleisten gebildet hatten durch das an den Scheiben herabrinnende Wasser. Aus der Schneelandschaft draußen tauchten ab und zu einzelne Figuren auf. (A 96)

This miniaturized frozen world is reminiscent of the snowy landscape of van Valckenborch that he had previously described to the Sebaldian narrator (A 124). For Austerlitz, the perfection of such a miniaturized vision of the past lies in its ability not only to arrest time, ‘als sei der von Lucas van Valckenborch dargestellte Augenblick niemals vergangen,’ but also in its ability to arrest the moment of a tiny but significant accident – the tumbling of a woman onto the ice ‘als hörte es nie mehr auf und als sei es durch nichts und von niemandem mehr gutzumachen’ (A 24). For Fuchs, the significance of this moment lies in its ‘hyperbolisch zugespitzte Interpretation der metaphysischen Bedeutung des dargestellten Unfalls’, that accords to the small incidents of history more significance than to its grands récits. This reading is certainly accurate. Moreover, there is another element to the particularity of the image chosen by Austerlitz as an allegory for the wounds of history. In his description, Austerlitz describes the lady and her position in relation to her companion in vivid detail:

Sie trägt ein kanariengelbes Kleid; der Kavalier, der sich besorgt über sie beugt, eine rote, in dem fahlen Licht sehr auffällige Hose. (A 24)

39 Fuchs, Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte, p. 183.
It is the colourful clothing and intimate position of the two that Austerlitz emphasizes, not any traces of pain in the painting; moreover, although Austerlitz does not refer to the fact, in the original painting, it is clear that the right leg of the fallen lady is exposed up to the thigh. The painting may, as Austerlitz claims, capture an allegory of eternal historical tragedy; indeed, just below the horizon of the painting looms a star-shaped fortress, but Austerlitz, strangely, omits this object of his fascination from his description. In his myopic view, the meaning of the painting is concentrated in an intimate, erotic moment that stands out in unusually vivid colours, like the sky-blue shoe, in the overwhelmingly gloomy palette of Austerlitz’s landscapes. Here, the half-blinded gaze of the melancholic becomes akin to the prurient peeping of the voyeur: once more, historical repetition is not merely the repetition of pain, but also of sexual fascination.

Věra, also, regains her memories of the past through a modification of vision, though her memories contain no such directly erotic component. When Věra recalls the past, and recounts it to Austerlitz, she describes it as another diminutive diorama, visible only through half-blind eyes:

Wenn einem die Erinnerung kommt, glaubt man mitunter, man sehe durch einen gläsernen Berg in die vergangene Zeit, und wenn ich jetzt, da ich dir dies erzählte, sagte Věra, die Lider senke, so sehe ich uns beide, reduziert auf unsere krankhaft erweiterten Pupillen, von dem Aussichtsturm auf dem Petřínberg hinabschaue auf den grünen Hügel, wo sich soeben der Funiculaire gleich einer dicken Raupe bergaufwärts bewegt, während weiter draußen, auf der drüben Stadtseite, zwischen den Häusern am Fuß des Vyšehrad der von dir immer sehnschlich erwartete Eisenbahnzug herkommt und langsam, eine weiße Dampfwolke hinter sich herziehen, die Flußbrücke überquert. (A 232)

By half-closing her eyes, Věra achieves a doubly modified vision, at once distorted and hyper-sensitized, which allows her to recover a view into the past as in an eerily miniaturized diorama, but which also metonymically reduces herself and the child Austerlitz to their eyes. Fuchs, in her analysis of a description of Jacob von Ruisdael’s View of Haarlem, in Die Ringe des Saturn, theorizes that such a dizzying perspective over a world in miniature, which recurs throughout Sebald’s works, allows the Sebaldian narrator a quasi-transcendent view over a landscape of nature and culture

40 RdS, 102ff.
reconciled together, a reconciliation which is effected through a Schillerian act of aesthetic perception.  

Als gestaltete Natur umfasst Landschaft bei Sebald damit sowohl die konkrete historische Prägung des Naturraums durch den Menschen wie auch deren Symbolisierung im kulturellen Gedächtnis.  

Once again, Sebald’s comments on *Langsame Heimkehr* come to mind:

Die [...] Idee der Schwerelosigkeit wird für den Autor konkret freilich nur erfahrbar, wenn er, auf einer seiner vielen Flugreisen, die Erde unter sich ausgebreitet sieht in dem anscheinend unversehrten Farbenspiel, das dem Naturforscher von seinen geologischen Karten her vertraut ist. Doch der Leser begreift wohl, daß Sorger eine Zeitlang zumindest in einer ganz und gar anderen Welt gewesen ist, wenn er den Bericht seiner Rückkehr nach Europa beschließt mit den Worten: ‘Dröhndend brach das Flugzeug durch die Wolken.’ (BdU 181)

Panoramic visions of the world are associated with the panopticon and with geological maps, which impose a schematic order on the world. Views from the aeroplane, in Sebald’s poetics, are illusory because they soar over the tiny details of the natural, suffering world, just as panoramic views, such as the panorama of the battle of Wellington in *Die Ringe des Saturn* are illegitimate: ‘Wir, die Überlebenden, sehen alles von oben herunter, sehen alles zugleich und wissen dennoch nicht, wie es war’ (RdS 152). The Prague landscape, as Věra constructs it in a moment of active memory is just such an illusory reconciliation, of the woods and the funicular – here transformed into an organic caterpillar, with all its Sebalbian connotations of moths and silkworms as the bearers of history – and the train, which is here an object of longing, not of fear for the infant Austerlitz. The vision also, nonetheless, contains elements of the classically uncanny; both the reduction of the memory figures to their eyes alone, and the position on top of a viewing tower, reminiscent of the unhappy end of Hoffmann’s *Sandmann*. Such a moment of vision represents not only a reconciliation between nature and history, as in the description of the Ruisdael painting in *Die Ringe des Saturn*, but also a recovery of a lost golden age of

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41 Fuchs, *Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte*, p. 220.
42 Fuchs, *Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte*, p. 223.
childhood, and lost intimacy between teacher and infant. The double half-blindness/hyper-vision is not an aesthetically productive ‘Nachbild’; it does not contain within it any promise of poetic productivity or personal liberation, as it does for Filip Kobal in Die Wiederholung. Instead, this vision is denoted as ‘krankhaft,’ and appears only through the uncanny annihilation of the bodies of Vera and Austerlitz; they are reduced to their distorted eyes alone. The story of the half-blind revenant Colonel Chabert further supports this link between fevered half-vision and death: like the hunter Gracchus, his death is not completed, and he wanders between life and death through Germany only to appear with news from the dead.


The uncanny is not just the return of the dead; it is the return of the erotic, and in particular the erotic desire for the other, in the sphere of mourning and history. As well as the reappearance of the political in the personal sphere, it is the intrusion of the private and shameful into the public and tragic.

4.3 Grenzengänger and language: the politics of return

Both Die Wiederholung and Austerlitz are plotted around a return to a Slavic familial homeland, a repetition or retracing of a journey back from exile in search of a subjective redemption. Exile and redemption are marked by shifts in language in both Die Wiederholung and Austerlitz; which are both written in German but describe an affective investment in non-German languages. In both, the Slavic language of the homeland has a tantalising lure of ethical and subjective authenticity. Furthermore, Austerlitz speaks at least three other languages, all of which have a particular poetical and political function. The complex political and poetic values assigned to each language provide further insights into the complex demarcation of the Sebaldian

43 In Schwindel.Gefühle, too, the infant narrator expresses an erotic desire for his teacher, whom he desires to entrap in a web of writing and ciphering. See SG 262, 275.
subject. As Noam Elcott notes in his essay on layout and translation in W. G. Sebald, language traces the marks of pain in his works:

Foreign cadences roam his German texts. Spoken by Sebald’s leading figures, they are at once mother and foster tongues. Calculated lapses into alien languages plot a nostalgic logic: the painful return to the sites of cultural and physical oppression is coupled with the impossibility of ever fully returning.\(^{45}\)

As elsewhere in Sebald’s work, the lines of pain also are the lines through which the subject is fragmented, but also the lines that mark the sites of *Heimat* as well as the ‘sites of cultural and political oppression.’ Language provides stages of return for the Sebaldian subject, adrift as it is between Freud’s map of the psyche and the imagined boundaries of the German-speaking territories.

### 4.3.1 Slovenian and German: Filip Kobal

Like Jacques Austerlitz, Filip undertakes a solitary voyage away from the linguistic sphere of his youth across the border with the Germanic-speaking world into a semi-mythologized Eastern European country to search for his lost family member. His companion on his travels is here, as it is for Austerlitz, a sea sack, here one that he inherited from his brother. Austerlitz’s rucksacks are inseparable from him – the rucksack he bought just before starting his studies is ‘das einzige wahrhaft Zuverlässige in seinem Leben’ (A 63), the childhood rucksack with which he crossed the borders from Czechoslovakia to Germany to England to Wales is an item which seems to sum up his entire life (A 253). Monica Körte notes that the rucksack becomes ‘ein verdinglichtes Exil’, which may even become a determining force in Austerlitz’s existence, indeed ‘verschmilzt mit seinem Träger’.\(^{46}\) Filip’s rucksack is equally emotionally invested as an inherited object, and also appears to contain, in a mystical way, the essence of loss: here, the spirit of his lost brother. While asleep in a cave in the Karst, he is awoken by an intimate touch, which proves to emanate from the rucksack:

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Plötzlich auf seinem Gesicht Fingerkuppen, eine Berührung, wie sie wärmer und wirklicher nicht sein konnte, und eine vertraute Stimme, die sagte, ‘Mein Lieber!’ Doch als der im Finstern die Augen aufschlug, war um ihn niemand; nur ein sich verstärkendes Knistern, welches sich näherte und, nach einem Krach, statt des wilden Tiers der gekippte Seesack war. (WH 238)

The act of crossing the border, clutching onto the rucksack, brings both narrators into the realm of ghosts, just as it also brings about a shift in their mother tongues. As Austerlitz does in Prague, Filip experiences a miraculous recovery of language in Slovenia, discovering in himself a facility in the language he had previously disliked.

es ergriff mich nur ein zweiter, von der eigenen Lunge ganz unabhängiger Atem, ein begeisternder Hauch, mit dem ich plötzlich die Überschrift einer an mir vorbeigetragenen Zeitung lesen konnte, im Slowenischen keine Schlagzeile, wie in meinem Deutschen, sondern, erfrischend wie die fehlende Trachtenbuntheit, reine Nachricht. Auch vieles, was in der Menge geredet wurde, verstand ich auf einmal. (WH 132)

Slovenian is in this passage revealed as a mythic language where there is no disruption between signifier and signified, ‘reine Nachricht,’ a direct revelation which is reminiscent of the miraculous way in which a perfect knowledge of the Czech language returns to Austerlitz once he meets Věra in Prague. Indeed, in this initial ecstatic encounter Handke describes Slovenia as not only untouched by the particular history of Nazi Europe, but the ‘pure’ nature of the Slovenian language is preserved by the absence of the alienating signification process used by marketing in capitalist societies: ‘An dem Milchladen stand so im Gegensatz zu der Marktschreierei im Norden oder Westen nichts als das Wort für die Milch’ (WH 133). The poetic potential of the blind window reappears in the context of the unalienated text of the socialist Slovenian streetscape:

Die Bank, banke, die dem folgte, war schon wieder das übliche, doch auch sie erschien dann als etwas Ursprüngliches, indem ihre Fenster keine Schaufenster, keine Auslagen darstellten; indem da die Stelle, wo mich in meinem Geburtsland zum Beispiel eine Pyramide aus bunten Sparbüchsen ansprach, leer blieb. Es war eine Leere, die mir offenstand, und an die ich mich wenden konnte, ebenso wie an die leeren Gesichter der Passanten. (WH 133)
Kobal’s idea of the ‘purity’ of Slovenian culture is distinct from the conservative affectation of a constructed ‘romantic’ national identity that is prevalent in Kobal’s Austrian homeland:

Das wahrhaft Wohltätige an dieser Menge war zunächst, was in ihr, verglichen mit der mir bekannten, nicht vorkam, was fehlte: die Gamsbärte, die Hirschhornknöpfe, die Lodenanzüge, die Lederhosen, überhaupt jede Tracht. Nicht nur ohne Tracht war das Straßenvolk, sondern auch ohne Abzeichen ohne Kastenmerkmale [...]. (WH 131)

Kobal here implies that the *Trachtlerische* elements in south German and Austrian culture are encoded in the German language itself, and that the Slovenian language reflects a primal innocence of the Slovenian people, who are unmarked by the taint of Austrian history. The Nazis banned the use of the Slovenian language in Carinthia, and Slovenian speakers in Carinthia were still discriminated against in Handke’s own lifetime. Bonn notes that this Nazi ban may well have contributed to Filip’s initial loss of language.\(^{47}\) Indeed, Handke himself admits to having bullied Slovenian-speaking children at school: ‘Einer Minderheit bei uns, die eine slawische Sprache von Kind auf gelernt hatte, wurde von uns andern geraten, doch in das Land zu gehen, wo die Mehrheit diese Sprache spreche.’\(^{48}\) If Filip to a certain extent does represent aspects of Handke’s biography, *Die Wiederholung* thus, by rescuing Slovenian as an authentic language of childhood, represents a partial redemption of Handke’s own childhood self from the bullying Austrian German-speaking collective. As discussed in the previous chapter, precisely this sort of folksy or *trachtlerische* clothing of the German ‘Straßenvolk’ distresses Austerlitz (‘die große Zahl grauer, brauner und grüner Jägermäntel und Hüte’ [A 322]). Commenting on the above passage from *Die Wiederholung*, it is not surprising that Sebald theorizes that Handke here reveals the ‘trachtlerisch’ as a dialectical reversal of *Heimat*.

Das Trachtlerische ist ja – dieser Kommentar sei erlaubt – keineswegs identisch mit einer auf die Bewahrung der Heimat ausgerichteten Einstellung; sondern es ist das untrügliche Indiz für einen Opportunismus, der die Propagierung des Heimatbegriffs ohne weiteres mit der Zerstörung der Heimat zu vereinbaren weiß. Darüber hinaus bedeutet das Trachtlerische in letzter Konsequenz auch die Negation jeden Auslands. (BdU 167)

\(^{47}\) Bonn, *Die Idee der Wiederholung*, p. 73.

In this sense, the uncritical valuation of Czech culture and the Czech language, as a land of culture which is opposed to the murderous ideology of Nazism, that appears in *Austerlitz* can be read as a resistance to the *Trachterisch*, by recognizing the otherness of the Czech Republic through the medium of a German-language text. Austerlitz, who claims not to be able to speak a word of German, views the language as a series of sinister hieroglyphs –

sie war für mich beinahe so schwierig wie das Entziffern einer ägyptischen oder babylonischen Keil- oder Zeichenschrift. Silbenweise mußte ich die in meinem Lexikon nicht aufgeführten, vielfach zusammengesetzten Komposita enträtseln, die von der in Theresienstadt alles beherrschenden Fach- und Verwaltungssprache der Deutschen offenbar fortlauend hervorgebracht wurden. (A 338)

Here, Fuchs deduces that his readings are ‘natürlich nicht wirklich von seinen vermeintlich mangelhaften Deutschkenntnissen behindert’, but rather are hindered by the hypertrophied rationalized jargon of the National Socialists; Austerlitz did learn German with Hilary in school after all. Sebald certainly expressed his wrath about the vileness of Nazi jargon many times, particularly in his essay on Andersch, but in *Austerlitz* it seems that the German language as a whole, like Germany as a whole, has been irretrievably contaminated by the National Socialists. Here, once more, it would seem that Sebald chooses to ignore the debates that had taken place in German and Austrian literature over the reclamation of German as a poetic language throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Handke’s treatment of the German language, by contrast, reveals his own engagement with these debates. Filip Kobal also initially views the German language as a system that encodes a malignant political influence, for example in the way that it has infiltrated Slovenian:

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49 As well as the languages of Wales, England and Belgium.
50 Fuchs, *Die Schmerzenspuren der Geschichte*, p. 53.
51 Sigrid Korff claims that Sebald tries to recreate an entirely new German language from the departure point of 1933, through his invention of the ‘Sebald-Satz’: ‘Sebalds Konstruktion einer Sprache, die die Sprachentwicklung nach 1933 ausklammert, indem sie dort ansetzt, wo das Wissen der aus Deutschland vertriebenen Emigranten aufhört, kennzeichnet einen Versuch, die Hypotheken, mit denen der Nationalsozialismus die Sprache der deutschen Nachkriegsliteratur belastet hat, zu umgehen.’ Korff, ‘Die Treue zum Detail – W. G. Sebalds ‘Die Ausgewanderten’, p. 197.
Fremde Sprachen hatten mich in der Kindheit geradezu angelockt. [...] Die slowenische Sprache dagegen, die man im Dorf täglich hörte, hatte mich eher abgestoßen. Das kam weniger von dem slawischen Klang als von den vielen deutschen Wörtern, welche diesen immer wieder durchbrachen. (WH 194)

Like Austerlitz, Filip characterizes German as the language of administration and empire, one that has colonized Slovenian to the extent that Slovenian has acquired a series of ‘unnatural’ calques for those functions of the (Austro-Hungarian) state in which Slovenians themselves could not participate:

so mußten für alles Staatliche, Öffentliche und auch Begriffliche wortwörtliche Übersetzungen aus den Herrschersprachen, dem Deutschen und dem Lateinischen, einspringen, was ähnlich künstlich und verschroben aussah [...] (WH 200)

This characterization of the German language as a mechanism of violent oppression is reminiscent of the general scepticism about language contained in Handke’s early theatrical work, Kaspar. In his essay on the play, Sebald comments,

[es] ist die Sprache selbst, die in diesem Lernprozeß als das Zeughaus eines grausamen Instrumentariums sichtbar wird [...] Besessen von dem Versuch, die Animation des Lebens zu ergründen, wird eine Bilderwelt zertrennt in ihre anatomischen Bestandteile. Solcher Art sind die erfolgreichen Operationen der Sprache. (CS 63)

In Die Wiederholung, the instrumental, objective function of language is assigned to (Austrian-) German. Slovenian, by contrast, is immediately linked to the pre-grammatical ‘Bilderwelt.’ According to Filip Kobal, it is a subjective language of metaphor and poetry, a ‘Sammlung von Ein-Wort-Märchen’ (WH 205), which provides Kobal with a direct relation to the nature it describes. Single words in Slovenian, describing macabre or paradoxical quantities, such as ‘Sonnenregen’ or ‘die Kotwürste des Regenwurms,’ appear to him to contain ‘die Kraft von Welterbildern’ (WH 204), that encapsulate poetry and physicality in one.

Denn als Antwort auf jedes mich befragende Wort, auch wenn ich die Sache nie gesehen hatte, und auch wenn diese längst aus der Welt war, kam von der Sache immer ein Bild, oder, genauer, ein Schein. (WH 209)

Slovenian, in other words, is the unalienated Romantic language of pure revelation.
4.3.2 Languages canny and uncanny: Austerlitz

In *Austerlitz*, each of the languages used by Austerlitz has a discrete function, while language itself is a prison of pain. As we have seen, language itself breaks down for Austerlitz at the end of his academic career, revealing itself as another of the monstrous ordering mechanisms of Enlightenment –

Immerzu dachte ich nur, so ein Satz, das ist etwas nur vorgeblich Sinnvolles, in Wahrheit allenfalls Behelfsmäßiges, eine Art Auswuchs unserer Ignoranz […] (A 183)

Later, in his dreams, the uncanny dead are deaf and dumb. Nonetheless, languages as discrete cultural systems do play a role in determining the political geography of the novel. If German is the language of administration and mass murder, then, as noted in the last chapter, English and Welsh are the languages of inauthenticity, of dismal religion and of the uncanny, and French and Czech are the languages through which Austerlitz enters the bourgeois linguistic and cultural order. French functions as the language of Enlightenment civilization and the public sphere in the Austerlitz-Aychenwald household, whereas Czech is the language of the canny,

erst wenn wir wieder heimkehrten […] hätten wir, über häuslichere und kindlichere Dinge sozusagen, tschechisch geredet. (A 227)

English and Welsh, French and Czech complement each other, but never combine to provide an adequate language for Austerlitz himself; his story must be translated into German, the one language which Austerlitz claims he cannot learn, by the narrator, before being written into a complete poetic narrative.\(^{52}\)

Here, then, the functions of language are fragmented and arranged in a paradoxical hierarchy, where French and Czech are privileged as the languages of authentic literary and emotional expression, yet hardly ever are used in the narrative, whereas German is forever polluted by Nazi ideology, yet is the de facto language of poetic

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\(^{52}\) Massimo Leone adds a significant footnote to his essay on ‘Textual Wanderings’: ‘The fact that Austerlitz writes in an alien language is one cause of his defeat. In this sense, W. G. Sebald, as an exiled German writer who re-appropriates his own language, can be seen to succeed where his protagonist fails.’ Of course, Austerlitz does not write in German at all, but the politics of appropriation represented by the narrator’s deployment of German seem to have more sinister and colonising overtones than Leone suggests. Leone, ‘Textual Wanderings’, in *W. G. Sebald – A Critical Companion*, p. 101.
expression for the narrator. Further, Austerlitz’s claim to speak no German in adulthood is called into question by his earlier assertion that his teacher Hilary helped him to achieve a level of fluency in German far higher than the rest of his class.


Welsh displaces and is then again displaced by English in Austerlitz’s childhood; German appears as a functional and liberating language in his late adolescence, to be later disowned; Latin, the scholar’s language, is also listed yet never heard of again in the narrative; and when the narrator first addresses Austerlitz in Belgium, fluent French displaces Austerlitz’s day-to-day working language of English:

[wir] hatten uns seit unserem ersten Antwerpener Gespräch stets nur der französischen Sprache bedient, ich mit schandbarer Unbeholfenheit, Austerlitz hingegen auf eine so formvollendete Weise, daß ich ihn lang für einen Franzosen hielt. (A 50)

French is then replaced by English in conversations with the narrator, a move that causes Austerlitz obvious discomfort, as English, too, is a marker of Austerlitz’s doubled exile.

Es berührte mich damals sehr seltsam, als wir in das für mich praktikablere Englisch überwechselten, daß nun an ihm eine mir bis dahin ganz verborgen gebliebene Unsicherheit zum Vorschein kam, die sich in einem leichten Sprachfehler äußerte und in gelegentlichen Stotteranfällen [...]. (A 50)

Even after his visit to Prague, Austerlitz’s miraculous recovery of Czech is not permanent; Věra is the only person with whom he speaks in Czech. In order to search for his father, Austerlitz must first return to English to be treated for his nervous breakdown on his return from Prague, and finally move back to French so that he can read through the archives in the Bibliothèque Nationale. A fragile mastery of Czech is the medium in which he comes closest to an original, authentic identity, and to the retrieval of his lost childhood. Indeed, in the sequence in Otýlie’s glove shop, it is the language in which he learns to count, and thereby begins to grasp an order of things: 'jeden, dvě, tři, záhlí Věra, und ich, sagte Austerlitz, zählte weiter, čtyře, pět, šest,
sedm, und fühlte mich dabei wie einer, der mit unsicheren Schritten hinausgeht aufs Eis’ (A 234). The ice, as we know, is a treacherous space where the smallest and most shameful slips may be doomed to be repeated again and again throughout history, as in the picture by von Valckenborch. The Slavic Czech language, like Slovenian, is a language of revelation and potential redemption, but one dangerously close to the historical uncanny.

As for Kaspar Hauser, then, language remains inadequate for Austerlitz, although it has functions that are liberating as well as some which are oppressive. It is a marker of the linguistic order that separates him from the primal, immediate Bildewelt, the world of images, and indeed the material world of things. Significantly, he grasps for his glasses case while he is suffering attacks of stammering:

bei denen er das abgewetzte Brillenfutteral, das er stets in seiner linken Hand hielt, so fest umklammerte, daß man das Weiße sehen konnte unter der Haut seiner Knöchel.

(A 50)

Austerlitz’s discomfort with the politically and personally oppressive English language manifests itself in a physical groping for aids to his vision, a movement towards a pre-linguistic sensual and visual relation to the object world – an early indication of his desire to return to the pre-Oedipal state of union that precedes language and self-reflection, as well as a desire to pass back through the linguistic order to the world of objects and, as indicated by ‘das Weiße seiner Knöchel,’ to a skeletal state of death. Like the bourgeois order and the bourgeois subject, then, language itself is split into component, dissonant functions by the mechanisms of history.

Filip Kobal’s attitude to language, as we have seen, is initially similar to Austerlitz’s, in that he divides language into two discrete functions: the poetic function, expressed through the Ein-wort-Märchen of Slovenian, and the administrative, legalistic, alienating function of German. As Kobal continues his travels through Slovenia and his studies of the Slovenian language, though, he reconciles the two languages, which seemed in opposition:

Ergriff der Lesende aber nicht Partei für die andere Sprache, gegen seine eigene? Schrieb er nur dem Slowenischen, und nicht auch seinem Deutschen, jene Ein-Wort-Zauberkraft zu? – Nein, es waren doch die beiden Sprachen zusammen, die Einwörter
Here, the dialogue between Slovenian and German provides the poetic solution to the dirempted nature of language. This is not a dialectical resolution in a Sebaldian sense; neither language is negated, nor subsumed in the other. Kobal suggests that multilingualism, far from being a symptom of a tragic breach in a heile Welt of images, carries with it the possibility of reconciling the historical breach symbolized by the ruin of the Tower of Babel:

Wie augenöffnend demnach, daß es die verschiedenen Sprachen gab, wie sinnvoll die angeblich so zerstörerische babylonische Sprachenverwirrung. War der Turm, insgeheim, nicht doch erbaut, und reichte er nicht, luftig, doch an einen Himmel? (WH 207)

Where the act of shifting between languages is symbolically associated with blindness for Austerlitz – he must grasp for his glasses case – here, it is literally eye opening. As Dorothee Fuß notes, in Die Wiederholung the act of translation itself has poetic potential, and hence allows Filip Kobal to recover his lost childhood:

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54 Ten years later, in a very different context, Handke again expressed his dislike of nationalistic linguistic notions of purity, in particular what he portrays as the over-zealous purging of Croatian: ‘In jenem rein-Kroatisch-Wörterbuch stand dazu für ’luka’, Aue, nur noch die dem kroatischen Meerland entsprechende Bedeutung ‘Hafen’, während ich in einem anderen, einem Vorkriegs-Wörterbuch, dann noch ’Prarie’ fand’ (Peter Handke, ,Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serben’, in Abschied des Träumers, pp. 36-162 p. 145). Here, the implication is that the linguistic purging of the ‘non-Croatian’ elements of the erstwhile Serbo-Croatian language impoverishes it by eliminating its ability to refer to a rich variety of Balkan landscapes. For Handke, the zealous ‘pure Croatian’ dictionary is a symbolic mirror of the violent ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Serbs from Croatia.
Das Zusammenspiel von Vater- und Muttersprache im Wörterbuch aktiviert vergangene Zeit und setzt Kindheitsbilder frei, die in der Leselandschaft Raum greifen und die Kindheitslandschaft zurückholen.\(^{55}\)

In this reading, then, poetic, inter-linguistic play provides a path to the landscape of childhood (or *Kindschaft*, as Kobal decides to name the simultaneous experience of childhood and landscape), thus facilitating a reclamation of childhood which does not succumb to the exclusively maternal moment of incest. Where Austerlitz undertakes a laborious, archaeological dig through the dialectically entwined layers of his life in order to recover the maternal images of his childhood – culminating in that of the blue sequined shoe –, Kobal sets the images of his childhood into free play through a synchronous, dialogical operation which allows both languages to reciprocally redeem each other, while remaining distinct. ‘Am Slowenischen reflektiert sich mir das Deutsche anders,’ said Handke later in interview.

Dennoch glaube ich, daß trotz dieses schrecklichen Mißbrauchs jegliches deutsche Wort noch immer verwendbar ist, sogar jenes ‘Heil’, aber nur, wenn ihm der Dichter eine besondere Bedeutungswandlung oder Richtungsänderung ermöglicht und es damit erlöst.\(^{56}\)

In *Schwindel.Gefühle*, too, a dictionary from the nineteenth century provides the narrator with a small moment of peace. The German-Italian phrasebook *Der Berechte Italiener* is another patrilineal inheritance – it belonged to ‘einem Großonkel mütterlichseits’ who had lived in Northern Italy. This dictionary, like that which belonged to Filip’s grandfather, is a window into a prelapsarian nineteenth-century idyll, where the German tongue is in perfect balance with a bordering language:

In diesem Büchlein [...] ist alles aufs beste geordnet, so als setze die Welt sich tatsächlich bloß aus Wörtern zusammen, als wäre dadurch auch das Entsetzliche in Sicherheit gebracht, als gäbe es zu jedem Teil ein Gegenteil, zu jedem Bösen ein Gutes, zu jedem Verdrüß eine Freude, zu jedem Unglück ein Glück und zu jeder Lüge auch ein Stück Wahrheit. (SG 120)

The subjunctive verbs show the counterfactual status of this realm of equality in Sebald’s melancholy universe, and the book never appears again in the text. It does

\(^{55}\) Fuß, ‘Bedürfnis nach Heil’, p. 75.

\(^{56}\) *Noch einmal vom neunten Land*, p. 17.
not generate a productive poetics. Yet the notion of a pre-modern, or at least pre-twentieth-century book that contains within its covers not merely the record of a lost order, but *generates* it through its own textual magic — a magic that inheres as much in the physical, fetishized object of the book as in the linguistic data that it holds — is a key element in Sebald’s Romantic poetics of inheritance, as I show in the next section.

### 4.3.3 Romantic cipher-writings: the book of plants and the landscape of childhood

If the Slovenian dictionary represents a mirror of Filip’s split national identity, and a means to reconcile his warring national identities, his brother’s agricultural diary functions as another mystical encipherment of meaning. The diary, which Gregor wrote in Slovenian, was left for Filip as a baptismal present (WH 210); it describes, in loving detail, how to make an apple orchard fruitful. More than a simple manual, for Filip the handwritten text appears as a brotherly pedagogy — ‘insgesamt Lehnhefl und Lehrbuch in einem’ — and a key to the hitherto illegible cipher-language of nature.

Klaus Bonn traces an intertextual relationship between this handbook of cultivation and Virgil’s Georgics, a link that underlines not only the nostalgia for a natural Heimat articulated by Filip, but also the nostalgia for a pastoral tradition that is intimately linked with the history of European civilisation and classical literature.57 The book is no simple key to an unreflected, Adamic language of nature, but rather a sophisticated tool for reading the cultural language inscribed in the landscape by

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57 Bonn, *Die Idee der Wiederholung in Peter Handkes Schriften*, p. 89. Cf, for example, Book II, where Virgil speaks of the manly self-birthing of trees and the aesthetic discipline of horticulture:

> ‘The Trees, which of themselves advance in Air, Are barren kinds, but strongly built and fair: Because the Vigour of the Native Earth Maintains the Plant, and makes a Manly Birth. Yet these, receiving Graffs of other Kind, Or thence transplanted, change their salvage Mind. Their Wildness lose, and quitting Nature’s part, Obey the Rules and Discipline of Art.’ *Virgil’s Georgics with Dryden’s translation*, ed. by Alistair Elliot (Ashington: MidNAG, 1981), p. 61.

In Handke’s *Der Chinese des Schmerzes*, too, the protagonist, a *Schwellenforscher* who crosses the boundary of violence rather than that of memory, attempts to console himself for the alienation of modern city life by reading the *Georgics*. Handke, *Der Chinese des Schmerzes*, p. 42.
thousands of years of agriculture and literature, inscriptions that can be traced in the ‘leere Viehstiege,’ the empty cow paths that form a key image in the central section of the novel.

Fuß argues that both the dictionary and the diary allow Filip to engage in a productive act of memory, which produces access to the Kindschaft that Kobal yearns for – the image that is a combination of childhood and of landscape. This, Fuß notes, is a productive image in memory, a Nachbild, in Goethe’s terminology, rather than the treacherous Blendungsbild that appears in front of the subject’s external vision without his control. The magical word Kindschaft has an older sense of filiation or adoption, as in Romans 9: 3-5:


The pastoral landscape of memory is one saturated in the legitimating powers of masculine inheritance: indeed, Fuß goes so far as to suggest that the train tunnel in which Filip sleeps between Slovenia and Austria represents a second birth into the second maternal lap of the curvaceous Karst, but one as a self-legitimating masculine poet, free of all physical or emotional dependence on the mother. Köbal’s recapturing of Kindschaft, via his fraternal inheritance, allows him to become one of an adopted line of ancestors, by a narrative binding of the natural landscape of plants and the imaginary linguistic order of the paternal ancestors. Once he is at one with the landscape, and bound into the tribe of the Kobals, he can ascend to the status of poet.

unmöglich also, sich an die Vorfahren zu halten (der einzige wirksame Vorfahr, das weiß ich, ist der Satz, welcher dem, an dem ich gerade bin, vorausging). Doch mag es auch Schein sein: Mit einem Ahnherrn in mir bin ich nicht mehr nur Einzahl [...] ‘Wenn es mir gelingt’, schreibt der Bruder in seinem letzten Brief, ‘die Gedanken in die Ferne zu spitzen, erscheint das Bild der Kobal-Sippschaft, wie sie gemeinsam am Tisch sitzt und meine Kratzerein liest.’ Der Schein, er lebe, und sei mein Stoff! (WH 190)59

59 This family reunion, it should be noted, is imagined with the ‘innige Ironie’ that accompanies Gregor’s piety, and makes of him a truly Romantic, rather than a sentimentalising poet: see WH 182.
As Bonn notes, *Kindschaft* is no naïve return to childhood, but a reflected, ironic poetic space, in Schiller’s terms, indeed, a sentimental *Kindlichkeit* and no naïve *Kindheit*.60

Handkes *Wiederholung*, so mag man festhalten, zeitige eine Metamorphose des Mythos im privaten Raum. Nicht erst würde der ‘mythische Aspekt’ als ein außenstehendes ‘Anderes’ dem Ich integriert, sondern, von jeher unablosbarer Teil der persönlichen vita selber, im Schreiben veräußert, wird er möglicherweise frei zur Wiederholung.61

As does the nineteenth-century dictionary, with its promise of reconciliation, the book of plants too recurs in Sebald’s fiction: at the moment of his deepest crisis of identity, Austerlitz is given a book that offers him a therapeutic key to the secret language of nature. Marie brings him a book from his grandfather’s library, an eighteenth-century herbal ‘pour toutes sortes de maladies, internes et externes’ (A 384). Like Filip’s brother’s agricultural manual, which is written in his brother’s exceptionally elegant handwriting, the printing of the antique herbal is itself an object of aesthetic beauty, a consummate artwork in which the beauty of its presentation is a mirror of the beauty of its content. Gregor Kobal’s book describes an enchanted fruit garden that belongs neither to the village nor to the wood, but to a liminal space between nature and culture. It makes visible not only the trees and blossoms in the garden, but the pre-modern craft of horticulture, the traditional manner in which his brother has learned to discipline and tend for trees to make them yield fruit. Equally, Austerlitz’s little herbal is a mirror of a pre-modern relationship to nature, one that deals with the lost tradition of *Naturphilosophie*, with its mystic doctrines of the humours and the phases of the moon:

Rezepte für die Herstellung von aromatischen Ölen, Pulvern, Essenzen und Infusionen zur Beruhigung von den Säften der Schwarzen Galle und Austreibung der Melancholie, in denen von Ingredienzien wie blassen und dunklen Rosenblättern, Märzveilchen, Pfirsichblüten, Safran, Melisse und Augentrost die Rede war [...]. (A 385)

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60 Bonn, *Die Idee der Wiederholung*, p. 120.
61 Bonn, *Die Idee der Wiederholung*, p. 29.
This book is an archive of lost knowledge, a memorial to a lost and better mythological order, and indeed, says Austerlitz, it brings back his memory and sense of self, quite as though it were a Benjaminian index pointing towards lost time. Yet here, it is not a lost life that yearns to be recovered, but a lost Gnostic knowledge, of the language of nature as subject: ‘Jedes Ding, sagt Jacob Böhme, hat seinen Mund zur Offenbarung,’ Hartmut Böhme writes in Natur und Subjekt, but the rationalistic discourse of modernity has silenced these voices. Böhme cites the speech that Novalis writes for the object world in the Temple of Sais, bewailing man’s overweening pride and refusal to listen to nature:

Seine Begierde, Gott zu werden, hat ihn von uns getrennt, er sucht, was wir nicht wissen und ahnden können, und seitdem ist er keine begleitende Stimme, keine Mitbewegung mehr.

A few pages before Austerlitz describes the herbal given to him by Marie, she points out to him just this gap of incomprehension between nature and subject, on a visit to the zoo:

Sie sagte damals, was mir unvergeßlich geblieben ist, sagte Austerlitz, daß die eingesperrten Tiere und wir, ihr menschliches Publikum, einander anblickten à travers une brèche d’incompréhension. (A 376)

If Gregor’s writings ultimately point towards a textual reunion with his family, reading his letters at one together in the family home, the writer of the herbal makes even more extravagant claims for it, that it will draw down all possible happiness and grace and blessings from heaven: a communion between divine and human long since broken. The sign-language of the natural order, deciphered through the key of the herbal as Gregor’s gardening notes are deciphered through the key of his grandfather’s dictionary, points to a benevolent divine order. Gregor’s natural-philosophical reading leads him to take a place in a male hierarchy of poetry and tradition, passed down through a family lineage. Austerlitz is restored to health through tracing the half-forgotten knowledge of Marie’s grandfather’s book, not through his own family’s lore, which has been entirely lost in the destruction of his family. He is not restored to

62 Böhme, Natur und Subjekt, p. 38
full manhood: he subsequently loses touch with his lover Marie, and the lore of aromatic plants fails to cure his black gall and melancholy. The dialectic of Enlightenment has divorced Austerlitz from the pre-modern unity of nature and subject described in the herbal. Equally, the first harbinger of political modernity, the French Revolution, put an end to the fiction of the ‘frommen und wohltätigen Damen der oberen Stände’ who are supposed to be the ministering angels of this divine order (A 385). Marie de Verneueil is the descendent of these kindly gentlewomen, as is, perhaps, the ‘little’ Chinese optician who ministers to the Sebaldian narrator in Nach der Natur,

- einen Augenblick
- lang spür ich ihre Fingerkuppen an meinen Schläfen, spüre,
- wie eine Welle mein Herz
- durchquert [...]. (NdN 82)

In Austerlitz, too, it is an oriental figure who tends to the narrator when an excess of reading and writing has inflamed his eyes – ‘eine ungemeine nobler Mann, der einen weißen Turban trug, beinahe, so dachte ich dummerweise, wie der Prophet Muhammed’ (A 60). And another beturbanned man prepares the portal to the Waiting Room at Liverpool Street Station, the antechamber of memory: a man

der zu seiner abgewetzten Eisenbahnderuniform einen schn eew eiB en  Turban trug unde mit einem Besen einmal hier, einmal da etwas von dem auf dem Pflaster herumliegenden Unrat zusammenfegte. (A 196)

On the periphery of the narrative, orientalist clichés are admixed with misogynist ones, as the holders of the mysterious lore of healing are coded as female and Asian, receptacles of a knowledge that masculinist Enlightenment has driven out of a disenchanted Europe. Once more, as in the story of Cosmo and Adelwarth, then, the postcolonial uncanny comes back to haunt the premodern harmony of nature and subject.

### 4.4 Das böhmische Meer

If Bohemia and Slovenia fulfil the same function in Austerlitz and Die Wiederholung as pre-lapsarian arcadia, site of an original language and of a past beyond guilt, Handke has subsequently distanced himself from romanticizing views of Slovenia.
Although, in interview, he admitted that he was initially attracted to the history of resistance demonstrated by the Slovenians – an identification that allows him to sidestep his inherited Austrian guilt – he went on to express his specific resistance to a political project, mooted around the time of the fall of the Iron Curtain and of the Velvet Revolution, of assimilating Slovenia to a revanchist imperial idea of *Mitteleuropa*. Milan Kundera had suggested that this project would ‘save’ Slovenia from the Balkans and instead bracket it with the Czech Republic and Croatia.

Wie traurig, und auch empörend, wenn jemand wie Milan Kundera noch heute, vor ein paar Wochen, in einem von *Le Monde* veröffentlichten Aufruf zur ‘Rettung Sloweniens’ dieses, zusammen mit Kroatien, vom serbischen ‘Balkan’ abgrenzt und es blind jenem gespenstischen ‘Zentraleuropa’ zuschlägt, dessen kaiserlichen Herren doch einst auch sein slawisches Tschechisch [...] als barbarisches Kauderwelsch abtun wollten!\(^\text{64}\)

‘Gespenstisch’ is precisely the word to describe the *Mitteleuropa* that Austerlitz encounters and narrates in the course of his search for his childhood. At times, the tragic historical progress of the twentieth century in the Czech Republic does appear, most saliently in the passages describing the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, the subsequent persecution of the Czechoslovak people and the deportation of the Czechoslovak Jews, most particularly, of course, Austerlitz’s mother. Terezín is the culminating symbol of this negative historical dialectic, an imperial fortress appropriated as a concentration camp, which is further made into a parody of a bourgeois utopia by the Nazis, and ends as a ghost town, through whose ominous streets only cripples and madmen hobble.\(^\text{65}\) Marienbad is another of these haunted Czech loci, where the communist secret police tail Austerlitz and Marie de Verneuil on motorbikes through a desolate landscape, and where the dyspeptic ghosts of the self-pitying bourgeois age disturb Austerlitz’s sleep (A 299). Vera herself makes a single glancing reference to Czechoslovakia’s post-war history as a satellite state of the Soviet Union, when she explains that her inquiries as to Austerlitz’s whereabouts prove futile:


\(^{65}\) Austerlitz encounters only an old man walking with a stick and ‘[einer] Geistesgestörten in einem abgerissenen Anzug, der [...] in einer Art von gestammeltem Deutsch wild fuchtelnd ich weiß nicht was für eine Geschichte erzählte’ (A 274).
imper war es, als verliefen sämtliche Spuren im Sand, dann es habe ja damals, als ein Heer von Zensoren den Postverkehr durcheinanderbrachte, oft Monate gedauert, bis man aus dem Ausland eine Antwort bekam. (A 296)

The ‘horde’ of censors only metonymically refers to the whole apparatus of Soviet repression that presumably curtailed Věra’s freedom of expression and movement in the post-war period. Nonetheless, in this chain of glancing references to Czechoslovakia’s traumatic history, Sebald implies that imperial structures have cursed Czechoslovakia for hundreds of years, whether they were Austro-Hungarian, Nazi or Soviet. In this sense, he takes an ironic historical distance to Czechoslovakia as much as does Handke to Slovenia, and includes its history in that of the dialectic of Enlightenment.66

Further, in Handke’s Slovenia, the fortress that appears in one of the narrator’s trance-like wanderings through the Karst brings not involuntary memories of Slovenia’s colonial past to the narrator, but security from a storm and, in a dream, a ghost of a presence that seems familiar and dear to him. The vision of a dehistoricized, prelapsarian Slovenia here surfaces from the subtexts of Die Wiederholung, as does the affecting thought of a ‘unbekannte Küstenplateau’ buried behind the Karst, linking Carinthia and Slovenia underneath the Dolines (WH 267). Equally, another, more

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66 This irony is also evident in the sceptical tone that Sebald takes when describing Charles Sealsfield’s/Karl Postl’s rhapsodies about his Bohemian homeland in ‘Ansichten aus der Neuen Welt: Über Charles Sealsfield’ (UH pp. 17-39). Sebald describes Postl’s perfunctory descriptions of Austria in Austria as it Is (published in 1828), and says, ‘Ausführlich wird der Text erst, als Sealsfield die böhmischen und mährischen Provinzen beschreibt, fast könnte man sagen, wie ein verlorenes Paradies.’ He goes on to quote choice examples from Sealsfield’s luxuriant prose which makes of Bohemia a pastoral idyll, untouched by history, finishing with, ‘niemand braucht auszuwandern von hier wie die deutschen Bauern’. As the rest of the essay concerns itself with unpicking the possible causes of Sealsfield’s admiration for German emigrants who participated in American expansionism, Sebald does not here need to flag explicitly the historical ironies inherent in this statement, not least the irony that Bohemia and Moravia were colonies of Austria already.

The Il Ritorno in Patria sequence of Schwintel.Gefühle contains an image of the reverse side of the Sebaldian image of Czechoslovakia: the narrator mentions Dr. Rambousek, a Moravian refugee in W., who dies, apparently of a morphine overdose. ‘Ich war deshalb lange Zeit in dem Glauben, die aus Mähren Gebürtigen würden Morphinisten genannt und ihre Heimat liege nicht weniger weit in der Ferne als die Mongolei oder China’ (SG 256). In the narrator’s childish fantasy, Moravians become the very embodiment of the exotic, the counterpoint to W.
utopian marine vision of Czechoslovakia lurks at the boundaries of Sebald’s Bohemia: that of the bohemian coast, Böhmen am Meer. In Schwindel.Gefühle, the Sebaldian narrator observes a young woman on a train who is, he claims, the reincarnation of the fabled Winter Queen, Elizabeth Stuart, from the seventeenth century. She is reading a book called Das böhmische Meer, by Mila Štern (SG 278). The narrator has never since been able to find this book in any catalogue, he tells us (SG 280), and indeed, Schedel confirms that this book is a fictive intertext, which has no traceable bibliographical record and which instead, she suggests, refers to the established and fantastic literary topos of Bohemia on the sea. In The Winter’s Tale, Shakespeare has Sicilian ships land on ‘the desert shore’ of Bohemia, which proves to be a pastoral locus amoenus, an Arcadia full of wild beasts, kindly shepherds and innocent peasant festivities. Sixteenth-century maps nowhere show such a sea-coast, any more than do modern ones, and for centuries the location was seen as an embarrassing mistake on Shakespeare’s part. Subsequently the topos of Bohemia by the sea re-entered literature as a cipher for a counter-historical European utopia in the twentieth century: Rilke, Bachmann, Fühmann and others wrote about Bohemia on the sea as a utopia that defies history, one that resists rational, Enlightenment cartography and the imperialist borders of nation states. For Bachmann, Bohemia on the sea indicates ‘a new, poetic topography,’ in which ‘the I and the word, the sea and the land border each other. The poet trusts words not because they

67 Schedel, Wer weiß, wie es vor Zeiten gewesen ist?, p. 41.
represent reality but because they are creative. Bohemia on the sea is at once counter-Enlightenment political utopia and a locus where poetic meaning can supplant scientific domination, not unlike the fantastic landscape of the imagination that Austerlitz constructs to escape into in his adolescence,

Eine Art idealer Landschaft, in der die arabische Wüste, das Reich der Azteken, der antarktische Kontinent, die Schneealpen, die Nordwestpassage, der Kongostrom und die Halbinsel Krim in einem einzigen Panorama beieinander waren [...] (A 93)

4.4.1 Bourgeois liners

Allusions to a Bohemian sea-coast appear throughout the Czech sections of *Austerlitz*. These are by no means unambiguously utopian. Frequently, the Bohemian sea is obliquely hinted at when the image of an ocean liner emerges, an image, which, along with the railway, is linked to Austerlitz’s journey into exile. It is hearing a radio report about the sea steamer PRAGUE, which carried a *Kindertransport* to England, which makes Austerlitz determine to re-appropriate his childhood memories:

Ich kam darüber zu dem Schluß, daß ich zwar nicht wußte, ob auch ich damals mit der PRAGUE oder ob ich mit einem anderen Schiff nach England gekommen war, daß aber allein die Erwähnung des Namens dieser Stadt in dem jetzt gegebenen Zusammenhang reichte, um mich davon zu überzeugen, daß ich dorthin nun würde zurückkehren müssen. (A 210)

The sea steamer functions as a continuation of the railway, a technological monster of modernity that in Austerlitz’s infancy separated him from his mother, and in his own account, disrupted his personal identity forever. It is, therefore, another sign of exile. However, it is, of course, also the Moses basket in which he is brought away from near-certain destruction in the Nazi empire to safety in England; and further, it is the name of the sea-steamer PRAGUE, a floating reference to Bohemia on the sea, that finally calls him back to the Czech republic and his childhood origins. Thus, the PRAGUE is both destructive engine and utopian barque in one.

Marienbad is also saturated with marine imagery. On the morning after his first night in Marienbad, Austerlitz wakes ‘wie ein Seekranker’ (A 305), oppressed by a dream...

71 Brigid Haines, ‘Böhmen liegt am Meer,’ or when Writers Redraw Maps’ in Neighbours and Strangers. Literary and Cultural Relations in Germany, Austria and Central Europe since 1989, ed. by Ian Foster and Juliet Wigmore (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 6-35, p. 16.
about death, and in an attempt to revive his spirits, walks past the grand hotels Pacifik, Atlantik, Metropole, Polonia and Bohemia, which not only sound like ocean liners but also ‘aus dem Frühnebel auftauchen wie Ozeandampfer auf einem dunklen Meer’ (A 306). In the sentence immediately following this simile, Austerlitz makes the melancholy observation: ‘irgendwann in der Vergangenheit [...] habe ich einen Fehler gemacht und bin jetzt in einem falschen Leben’ (A 306): the ocean liners of Bohemia have brought him away from his home coast and the life that he was, in some sense, supposed to lead. The motif of the ocean liner appears often, both in the Bohemian sections and elsewhere in the novel, as an ominous image of confinement and implacable modernity. It appears perhaps most ironically where Austerlitz describes the parody of a spa town performed in Theresienstadt for the benefit of the Red Cross, where the residents appear to gather every evening on the battlements ‘beinahe so wie Weltreisende auf einem Ozeandampfer, ein alles in allem beruhigendes Schauspiel’ (A 349). The night after visiting Terezín, too, Austerlitz sees a vision of a desolate semi-marine landscape around the northern Bohemian city of Dux:

Wo vordem fester Boden gewesen war [...] da war nun nichts mehr als leerer Raum und auf seinem Grund Steine und Schotter und totes Wasser, unberührt selbst von der Bewegung der Luft. Wie Schiffe trieben in der Düsternis die Schemen der Kraftwerke [...]. (A 295)

The image of the steamship is doubly laden, though: it is also a figure for escape for Agáta – when banned by the Nazis from performing in public or moving freely through Prague, she says ‘daß sie erst jetzt wirklich verstehe, wie schön es ist, sorglos auf einem Flußdampfer an der Reling zu stehen’ (A 251). For all that Austerlitz’s life is a tragedy, it must be said, the PRAGUE does, after all, rescue him from a yet more dreadful fate; he may be tormented with survivor guilt, but his parents were murdered before they had reached half the age that Austerlitz reaches.

**4.4.2 Barques of rescue**

The image of the barque in *Die Wiederholung* – even more than *Austerlitz*, a mostly land-bound novel – is closer to that of Gracchus’s barque, floating between this world and the next, or the village church in Allgäu, which the Sebaldian narrator imagines being transformed into a barque traveling over the Alps (SG 195). In his essay on Ernst Herbeck, Sebald distinguishes between the sea liner as the engine of bourgeois
society, and the makeshift raft as the last resort of the schizoid bachelor, as described by Kafka. He cites Deleuze and Guattari on Kafka’s bachelor:

> Seine Reise ist nicht die stolze Fahrt des Bürgers auf einem Schiff übers Meer ‘mit viele Wirkung ringsherum’, sondern die Schizo-Reise ‘auf seinen paar Holzstückchen in den Wellen, die sich noch selbst gegenseitig stoßen und herunterdrücken.’

Ernst Herbeck is, Sebald suggests, one of these schizoid bachelors, making his way out on a contradictory course that is fuelled by a longing ‘das die inzestuöse Sehnsucht an Weite und Intensität noch übertrifft’ (BdU 147) – the contradictory longing to at once be alone and to unite with every desiring machine. In this essay, Sebald concludes that this solitary voyage of the bachelor inevitably results in the bachelor going through a succession of metamorphoses that diminish him. Later, in his fictional texts, the barque does indeed symbolize an attempted voyage away from incest and towards both solitude and a kind of redemption. The barque of the hunter Gracchus that voyages through *Schwindel.Gefühle* exemplifies this divided barque, and has fellows throughout Sebald’s work, as Jo Catling writes:

> These mysterious vessels, then, invite the narrator and more especially the reader to follow them over the horizon out of sight, into ‘eine andere Zeit’, a symbolic realm just out of reach like the *Land des Lächelns* which is accessed, as suggested above, by momentary blindness [...], and where the possibility of a fateful yet at the same time liberating disappearance from view is ever present, as in the case of ‘der Übersetzer / Omar Khayyams’, the poet Edward Fitzgerald, who towards the end of *Nach der Natur* segelte mit festgebundenem Zylinder hinaus auf die Nordsee und ward nie mehr gesehen. (NdN 93)

Handke’s barques in *Die Wiederholung*, like that of Gracchus, waver between being promises of a *Jenseits* whither they are bound, and disturbing proof that such crossing over is never possible. In an appellative passage in *Die Wiederholung*, the arid Karst landscape is compared, like the countryside of Bohemia, to the sea –

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Obwohl die Ebene unten noch nah ist [...] herrscht auf dem Plateau eine Stille, als seist du schon weit draußen auf dem offenen Meer. (WH 293)

This sentence stands at the beginning of a journey across this dry sea written in the second person singular, which is a repetition within the narrative of the pilgrimage to the Karst. In this internal narrative, the narrated subject wanders past the remnants of old fortresses – ‘vorbei an runden Steinhaufen, die in Wirklichkeit die Eingänge zu unterirdischen Materialbunkern sind’ (WH 294) – and includes the ritual of stripping naked upon entering a cave, the goal of the journey. Once in the cave, the subject falls asleep, and dreams of a barque:

Du hörst im Traum von der Lache als einem See, und siehst dort eine Barke im Schilf, mit deinem Haselstock als dem Ruder, worauf aus der leere nun ein Delphin taucht, den Rücken, von der Last der Früchte darauf, eingewölbt zu einer Doline. (WH 296)

Returning from this dream, ‘Nicht aus der Welt wirst du gewesen sein, sondern einmal ganz hiesig’ (WH 297). Eventually, the narrator says, you will arrive at the sea:

Und eines Tages im Lauf deiner Jahre wirst du dann an die Stelle gekommen sein, wo tief unten am Horizont der besonnnte Nebelstreifen das adriatische Meer sein wir; wirst da, Ortskundiger, die Frachtdampfer und Segler im Golf von Triest unterscheiden von den Kränen der Werft von Monfalcone, den Schlössern von Miramare und Duino und den Kuppeln der Basilika von San Giovanni am Timavo, und dann am Grund des Tolininrichters zu deinen Füßen, zwischen zwei Felsbrocken, die ganz wirkliche, mehrsitzige halbverrottete Barke samt Ruder entdecken, und sie, den Teil für das Ganze, unwilliäglich, du bist nun so frei, bedacht haben mit dem Namen BUNDESLADE. (WH 298)

The unarticulated implication here, as with the nameless fingers that touch Filip’s face in the night, is that the barque is a relic of Gregor that has been left behind for Filip to find, and that, just as Gregor is now in the land between the dead and the living – neither proven dead nor found alive – the barque is in a liminal condition, half-rotted, half-useable, yet marked as a religious object, the ark of the covenant. This barque is one of only two references in the text to an explicitly Jewish system of signs: the first being one of the signs that greets Filip on his entry to Slovenia, that ‘genau in der Mitte zwischen zwei unleserlichen Ortsnamen stand, im Vorbeifahren das Fragment einer hebräischen Schriftrolle mir in die Augen sprang’ (WH 135).
Filip’s barque appears at the Adriatic shoreline, over-looking the churches and castles of Italy, almost as though it were the counterpart to the barque of Malachio in Venice, on the other side of the Adriatic, which the Sebaldian narrator enters in *Schwindel.Gefühle*. The Sebaldian narrator’s journey in this barque creates a temporary fraternity between himself and the Jewish man who steers it, and who bids him goodbye: *Ci vediamo a Gerusalleme* (SG 72). In the barque, the Sebaldian narrator experiences a rare moment of reconciliation: not only the Jewish messianic dream of reunion in the lost *Heimat* of Jerusalem, but an implicit reconciliation between the guilt-ridden German narrator and the Jewish boatman. ‘Next year in Jerusalem’ may exist in a mythical time, beyond history, but it is something less despairing than Gracchus’s hopeless voyage between death and life. Friedrichs reads Handke’s overdetermined barque and ark in one as a foundation symbol for the Kobal tribe

Yet the barque is not, in fact, portable – half-rotted, unseaworthy, it has a liminal status between sacred and profane, between the *Kulturlandschaft* of Italy and the wild Karst of Slovenia, indeed between life and death, a status similar to that of the Kobal tribe itself, which bestrides the border between Austria and Slovenia. It is a tribal totem that can only be left in place, and carried back across the border in narrative: a reconciliation that does not take place in the mind of the tormented bachelor, but in the poetic text.

### 4.4.3 Perdita found

*Austerlitz*’s over-determined marine imagery, of abandonment and the call of *Heimat* in one, harks back to Shakespeare’s original Bohemian shore. Here, the loyal courtier Antigonus lands and exposes the infant Perdita, at its jealous father’s bidding. Leontes, her father, has mistakenly assumed that Perdita is not his legitimate heir, but the bastard offspring of his wife and the king of Bohemia. ‘Thus for thy mother’s fault

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art thus expos’d to loss, and what might follow!’ Perdita is not lost, though, nor eaten by wild beasts, however, but rescued by a shepherd, as, similarly, Austerlitz is rescued by a shepherd of souls. In Austerlitz, then, the Bohemian sea-coast represents not simply an abstract political or poetic utopia of Mitteleuropäisch harmony, a counterweight to the tragic course of imperial ambitions in Bohemia, but a personal plot of infant abandonment, rescue and eventual homecoming. In the final scene of A Winter’s Tale, a statue of Perdita’s wronged mother Hermione comes to life, and father, mother and child are reconciled, as Perdita announces her own marriage. The uncanny moment where the statue awakens, akin to the uncanniness of the mechanical woman Olimpia, is banished as it turns out that Hermione had only feigned death all along. Intertextually, Shakespeare’s tragicomedy represents a utopian mirror of Austerlitz’s life story, where abandonment is followed by reconciliation, disinheritation by acknowledgement, and where the uncanny spectre of the dead mother proves to have been fully alive all along. The restored child can then enter into full, autonomous adulthood, and into its own adult sexual romance.75

4.4.4 Marienbad and the Auschowitz Springs

Marie de Verneuil invokes the erotic promise of the Bohemian shore when she invites Austerlitz to accompany her to Marienbad, where, Austerlitz claims in retrospect, she ‘den Versuch anstellen wollte, mich aus meiner Vereinzelung zu befreien. Sie hatte alles auf das beste in die Wege geleitet’ (A 298). Huddled intimately in the ‘tief gepolsterten Fond des Wagens’ (A 298) – a suggestively sensual situation – Austerlitz and Marie travel

einmal in Wellentäler hinunter, dann wieder auf ausgedehnte Hochebenen hinauf, über die man in die äußerste Ferne sehen konnte, bis dorthin, sagte Marie, wo Böhmen angrenzt an das Baltische Meer (A 299).

75 In the Sebaldian narrator’s childhood memories of W., a Bohemian woman is among one of those who appear particularly sexually charged, ‘die im Posthalterhaus wohnenden Modistin Valerie Schwarz, die […] aus dem Böhmischen stammte und die trotz ihrer geringen Körpergröße eine Brust besaß von Ausmaßen, wie ich sie später nur noch einmal, und zwar an der Trafikantin in Fellinis Film ‘Amarcord’, gesehen habe.’ The erotic promise of Bohemia is here both grotesque and hallucinogenic, possible only in a cinematic reality (SG 253).
The erotic promise of the Bohemian sea appears to hold when the couple reaches their hotel room in Marienbad, where Marie immediately begins to establish herself, creating an independent – if temporary – household for the couple. However, she is disturbed by the dust on an untouched desk, reminiscent of the furniture in Věra’s apartment, which is unchanged since Austerlitz’s last visit there in 1939. Marie finds this extratemporal condition uncanny, rather than reassuring.

Es sei seltsam, meinte sie schließlich, sie habe den Eindruck, daß der Schreibsekretär, obgleich alles sonst durchaus seine Ordnung habe, seit Jahren nicht abgestaubt worden sei. Was für eine Erklärung, fragte sie mich, sagte Austerlitz, hat wohl dieses bemerkenswerte Phänomen? Ist der Schreibtisch vielleicht der Platz der Gespenster? (A 302)

The ghosts that haunt Austerlitz have thus followed him over the border. The spectral writing-desk has already been described by Austerlitz, some pages earlier, as the writing-desk of the imprisoned Casanova; bent over his desk, ‘auf die Größe eines Knaben geschrumpft[,]’ (A 292), and surrounded by clouds of dust, he is at work on a fifteen-volume futuristic novel, Icosameron, which, as Marcel Atze’s research has shown, is an early harbinger of the dialectic of Enlightenment, a utopian novel that turns into a technological dystopia.\(^{76}\) Outside, Sebald describes the landscape in apocalyptic terms: where once ‘Menschen gelebt hatten, Füchse über die Felder liefen und vielerlei Vögel geflogen sind’ there is now nothing but the ‘totes Wasser’ and desolate industrial landscape of contemporary Bohemia. The dusty desk is thus another dialectical image, a memento mori signifying the dark side of Bohemian history – war, industrialization, oppression. Sebald alludes more directly to the ‘dead water’ of Bohemia when Austerlitz and Marie go to the heart of the Marienbad mineral waters, the ‘sogennante Auschowitzer Quellen’ (A 310). Here, the Bohemian waters barely conceal the name Auschwitz, which appears nowhere else in the novel, but which, true to Sebald’s Benjaminian view of history, lies at the centre of Marienbad, of the ruin of the grand bourgeoisie and of the Kakania that sustained their culture.

Es gehört gewiß zu den furchtbarsten und nicht oft genug erinnerten Ironien der Geschichte, daß die braven österreichischen Kaiser unter ihren zahlreichen Titeln nicht nur den des Königs von Jerusalem, sondern auch den der Herzöge von Auschwitz führten [...].

Casanova’s desk also indicates a displacement of any Bohemian utopia back from the sphere of the biographical and the possible into the realm of literature, through the figure of the futuristic novel *Icosameron*. Casanova is here an ‘author on loan,’ in Schedel’s sense of the word, and, as a diminutive figure, is reminiscent of Benjamin’s ‘buckeliger Zwerg,’ the figure of historical materialism hidden in the heart of history. He is also reminiscent of Gregor Kobal, a half-blind antecedent (Casanova, in the vision, has ‘wäβrigen, für die Ferne schon halb blinden Augen’ [A 292]) whose memoirs and utopian visions remind the protagonist that reconciliation and subjective wholeness can only be created in poetic activity, not by any pilgrimage across the border in search of ghosts.

Like the ships, though, the haunted desk implies not solely a political, historical dialectic, but also contains a personal significance. The disquieting presence of the desk also indicates the ghosts from Austerlitz’s childhood that haunt Marienbad, namely, the memory of a holiday which he spent there with his mother, father and Věra in 1938. ‘Es waren drei wunderbare, beinahe selige Wochen,’ (A 297), reports Věra. Austerlitz has no personal memory of this holiday,

und vielleicht ist es deshalb gewesen, daß ich später, Ende August 1972, gerade dort, in Marienbad, mit nichts als blinder Angst vor der besseren Wendung gestanden bin, die sich damals anbahnen wollte in meinem Leben. (A 298)

The manifest reading of his autobiography that Austerlitz here undertakes suggests that repression of his childhood memories have led him to be an incomplete adult, haunted by his loss and therefore unable to assume control of his own fate. Latently,

77 ‘Damals vor Graz’, p. 134. Intriguingly, in interview, Handke suggested that this Mitteleuropa, only ever a megalomaniac construct, was now perhaps only to be found in the small details that Austrian and Slovenian train stations have in common, such as the boot-scrappers and the infamous Kakanian yellow paint. Once again, the train station functions as a dialectical image for the ironies of empire. Peter Handke, *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen: Ein Gespräch, geführt von Herbert Gamper* (Zürich: Ammann, 1987), p. 155.

however, the ghosts that haunt him, of infant unity with his mother and pre-Oedipal family harmony, may also be those that prevent him from sexual union with Marie. Marie herself appears at one point distanced from him, like Agáta in ghostly grey clouds:

Der kubanische Rauch hing in blauen Schleiern zwischen uns in der Luft, und es verstrich eine gewisse Zeit, bis Marie mich fragte, was in mir vorgehe, weshalb ich so geistesabwesend, so in mich gekehrt sei [...] (A 308)

Later, precisely in the Auschwitz springs at Marienbad, Marie predicts that, when she wishes him a happy birthday on the next day, ‘das wird dann so sein, als wünschte ich einer Maschine, deren Mechanismus man nicht kennt, einen guten Gang’ (A 311).

Like his mother, Austerlitz functions like an uncanny doll, possessing no autonomous sexual identity. ‘Warum, sagte sie, bist du, seit wir hierher gekommen sind, wie ein zugefrorener Teich?’ (A 311). The simile of the frozen pond refers, one can probably assume, to Austerlitz’s sexual frigidity and refusal to communicate with Marie. It is also, though, an image used by Agáta, just before she is deported to Theresienstadt. ‘Vielleicht wenn du in das dunkle Wasser der Teiche schaust, vielleicht siehst du an einem guten Tag mein Gesicht’ (A 261). Hidden in the utopian waters of Bohemia, the chimerical promise of re-union with the mother is ever-present.

4.5 Doppelgänger and brotherly love: reconciliation and redemption

When writing on Die Wiederholung, Sebald does not focus on those passages where erotic or uncanny undercurrents surround Kobal’s mother. Instead, the mother is interpreted as the matriarch of a utopian realm of brotherliness, as well as the inspiration for his poetic activity.

Daß die Krankheit der Mutter es ist, die ihm hilft, seine Erzählhemmung zu überwinden, läßt darauf schließen, daß eine der Hauptaufgaben des Erzählens, so wie es hier gemeint ist, die der Linderung ist. (UH 175)

The therapeutic function of narrative expresses itself in a brotherly reconciliation, though, not a return to pre-Oedipal unity with the mother: Sebald instead selects out the scenes in Die Wiederholung where Filip is united with other men for particular attention. For him, they are signs of a matriarchy where people are

[...] ein jeder fast der Bruder des anderen. Etwas davon leuchtet auf in der Begegnung Filip Kobals mit anderen männlichen Figuren in der archaischen Landschaft des
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Slovenia, here, becomes the land where fractured identities are healed, and the schizophrenic voyage of the lonely bachelor ends in brotherhood. The uncanny Doppelgänger, a harbinger of guilt, re-appears in the figure of a Slovenian soldier, and the portrait of the waiter exemplifies the poetic reconciliation that Sebald considers Handke to have achieved.

The story of the young waiter is indeed described in lyrical prose; more, Filip’s feelings towards him verge on the homoerotic.

The culmination of Filip’s attraction to the waiter occurs in a dream, where the waiter becomes the reader and hence poetic heir of a narrative of the Kobal family that, in the waking world, Filip’s father had never written. ‘Der Wildbacharbeiter war zum Bauernschriftsteller geworden’ (WH 232), dreams Filip,

ein zeitgemäßer Nachfolger jener slowenischen Bauern von der Jahrhundertwende, deren Erzählungen man sammelte [...] und des Traumbuchs aufmerksamer Leser war der junge Kellner. (WH 232)

On the other side of the border, Filip can become reconciled with the double that persecuted him as a child, in a re-union that Sebald names as brotherly. Sebald’s attachment to a novel that describes an affective constellation of a beloved male ancestor, spectral mother and homosexual fixation repeats a pattern that, as Barzilai shows, is endemic in Sebald’s fiction. Discussing Die Ausgewanderten, she points out that (illicit) homosocial desire of the German narrator for the Jewish characters whose lives he narrates lies behind and is often mediated by relations with women who are either dying or spectral. She argues
That the main protagonists of Sebald’s works are consistently male, whereas women appear either as conduits of male memory or as dead mothers/lovers, may suggest that in the German imagination Jewish difference continues to be configured as both feminine and homosexual.79

Barzilai concludes that Sebald’s deployment of age-old anti-Semitic clichés of the ‘queer’ or ‘feminine’ Jew re-instates German male anxiety as the sole filter through which the past can be viewed. A similar troublesome complex of Jewish identity and, here, romanticized Slovenian otherness is at play in Sebald’s interpretation of Handke, one that becomes far more evident in Austerlitz.

In Handke’s text, the reunion with the Doppelgänger, while initially homoerotic, appears as a transient stage in the larger project of a re-integration of the poetic self. The section describing Filip’s encounter with the soldier moves from the first to the third person, as the narrator pulls back from his fragmented, subjective first-person narration and is able to view himself as a unitary entity, a ‘he’ who has a describable identity. Watching the soldier from behind, the narrator writes:

Endlich wurde dieser erfahren, wer er war (von einem Dritten beschrieben, hatte er sich jedes Mal entweder verkannt oder überschatzt gewußt, dem eigenen Bild – wenn ihm eins glückte – hatte er keinmal glauben können, und doch war die Frage ‘Wer bin ich?’ oft so dringlich geworden wie ein Stoßgebet) [...]. (WH 255)

Even watching the soldier without speaking to him, Filip is able to retrieve the traumatic memory of being bullied from his childhood, and describe a reunion that reunites the self in an imagined narrative scenario:

[...] endlich hatte er vor sich die Hauptperson aus der Kindheit, seinen Doppelgänger, der, da war er ganz sicher, irgendwo in der Welt zugleich mit ihm aufwuchs und eines Tages, ganz bestimmt, einfach dasein wird als der wahre Freund und, statt ihn nur immer zu durchschauen wie sogar die eigenen Eltern, ihn wortlos versteht und freispricht, wie er umgekehrt ihn, mit einem erkennenden Lachen oder bloßen Aufatmen; endlich blickte er in den untrüglichen Spiegel! (WH 256)

Filip’s poetic reunion with his childhood enemy heals those conflicts that Webber identifies as inherent in the apparition of the Doppelgänger, and that we saw exemplified in Schwindel.Gefühle, in the previous chapter: in particular, the

"Doppelgänger" as symbol of the conflict between the Romantic and the real, and as symbol of the *unheimlich*, the conflict between the desire to return home and the fear of the return of the repressed.  

At the end of *Die Wiederholung*, Filip returns to his family home, and confronts the primal scene of his parents in the marital bed:

Ich trat an das Fenster und erblickte drinnen in der Stube auf dem Bett das Elternpaar. Es war eng umschlungen, nebeneinander, und der Mann hatte das eine Bein auf die Hüfte der Frau gelegt. Sie rollten hin und her, so daß ich abwechselnd das eine und das andre Gesicht sah. (WH 330)

In Freudian terms, the sight of his parents in the marital bed would trigger the primal trauma of the male child, but the union of his parents now appears to the returning poet Filip more as a sacrament:

Der harte Vater zeigte sich einmal gelöst von Schwäche, endlich an das Herz seiner Frau gesunken, jene Mantel, unter dem er sich in den Osternächten auf den Kirchenboden ausgestreckt hatte, frischrot auf den Schultern, und die Mutter, die Augen geweitet von Todesangst, wollte von der Umarmung ihres Gemahls am Leben gehalten werden. (WH 330)

Filip here is less Oedipus and more Telemachus, a son who has gone on a voyage to restore the male line of his family and to bring his parents together once more in the marital bed. Years later, he adds, 'fand ich an der Stelle des Betts, von einer warmen Sonne beschienen, einen gut gedeihenden Gummibaum [...]’ (WH 330). The tree in the location of the marital bed is a distant relation of the olive tree out of which Odysseus’s marital bed is carved, which at once roots Penelope for ten years to her husband’s house in Ithaca, and proves the test of Odysseus’s authentic identity: Penelope suggests that Odysseus’s bed can be pulled outside for him to sleep on, but Odysseus refutes this:

Then I cut away the foliage of the long-leaved olive [...] making a bed post of it, and bored all holes with an auger.

I began with this and built my bed [...] but I do not know now,

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80 Webber, *The Doppelgänger*, pp. 3 ff.
Langsame Heimkehr: Die Wiederholung and Austerlitz

dear lady, whether my bed is still in place, or if some man
has cut underneath the stump of the olive, and moved it elsewhere.  
The little ornamental rubber plant hardly has the epic stature of Odysseus’s mighty olive, but like the tree in Ithaca it cements the wanderer’s homecoming and accession to his rightful position in the family. Returning home, confronting the primal scene and taking over the family tree, even if in the bathetic form of a pot plant, completes Filip’s poetic development from being a child who resented his father’s peasant origins and wished to be ‘ganz ohne Herkunft’ (WH 59) to a loyal son like Telemachus. Filip continues his description of the rubber plant by saying

[ich] erinnerte mich an den einstigen Schmerzenswinkel, empfand ihn erst recht und sah im voraus den Augenblick, wo das sich rankende Ziergewachs wieder weichen würde einem sich krämmenden Menschenwesen. (WH 331)

Again, in miniature, the rubber plant presages the day when Filip will wield the traditional learning gleaned from his brother’s diary of plant cultivation to make the wild growth ordered once more.

Remembering is always already a kind of repetition, Handke says, and the treble repetition of Sebald’s account of Die Wiederholung not only repeats those reconciliations contained in the original text, but adds another redemptive layer to it, that of Jewish messianism. In Sebald’s own fictional texts, redemption is absent for his characters. The Sebaldian narrator’s own uncle, Ambros Adelwarth, in Die Ausgewanderten, also arrives in Ithaka (DA 150) at the end of his life, but this is no familial reunion or restitution of order. If for Filip and his brother-uncle Gregor, narration is an ecstatic retrieval of self and reunification of the family, for Adelwarth, it is nothing but torture:


Adelwarth’s journey to Ithaka is one to a psychiatric institution, where he submits to traumatic electroshock therapy and develops a nervous, not a visionary half-blindness:

die Hände zitterten das Gesicht war asymmetrisch geworden, und das linke Auge wanderte unstet herum (DA 151).

Adelwarth’s voyage to Ithaca is a voyage away from reconciliation or indeed poetic recollection, towards a deepening melancholy, catatonia and eventual silence (DA 162). Similarly, in Austerlitz, unlike either Die Wiederholung itself or Sebald’s account of it, the retrieval of memory and of a blissful, if imaginary, intimacy with his dead mother does not redeem the protagonist. For the rest of his narrative, Austerlitz continues to wander in a melancholy circle. He does experience involuntary flashes of retrieval that reverse the progress of time – moments such as that in the Gare d’Austerlitz, when Austerlitz suddenly imagines ‘ihn [his father] zu sehen, wie er sich bei der Abfahr aus dem Abteilfenster lehnt’ (A 412). All the same, he constantly returns to a disoriented sense of alienation from the world; instead of attaining to any redemption, Austerlitz remains

niedergedrückt von dem dumpfen Gefühl, weder in diese ihm anfänglich fremde Stadt noch sonst irgendwohin zu gehören. (A 362)

Austerlitz disappears from the narrative as rootless and traceless as he enters it, leaving from a train station in Paris just as, twenty years previously, he had met the narrator at one in Antwerp. Here, it is the Sebaldian narrator who becomes heir to Austerlitz’s oral narrative, and transforms it into a poetic text – one written in a prose that makes Austerlitz’s own voice indistinguishable from that of the narrator, and which interweaves Austerlitz’s textual, architectural, historical and artistic associations with those of the narrator. Austerlitz himself destroys his magnum opus when he retires in 1991, by burying it in the back garden of the house that the Sebaldian narrator subsequently inherits (A 176). The buried sediment of Austerlitz’s creative work becomes one more layer in the textual strata of the novel, Austerlitz’s personal history transformed into the narrator’s poetry. Despite Sebald’s stated intention to avoid appropriating the subject position of the victim, it is the narrator, not Austerlitz, who attains to the position of poetic author of the narrative, who manages to arrest the erasures of history by employing Austerlitz’s ‘historical metaphysic’ and binding his fragmented memories into a text that nonetheless refuses the grands récits of Enlightenment historiography. As in Die Wiederholung, then, poetic creation
becomes a redemptive act, but one which redeems the narrator as much as the erased past. If, due to the catastrophes of history Austerlitz cannot overcome his melancholy at the loss of his childhood, and the German narrator can describe no such untainted origins for himself, the narrator can at least encode Austerlitz's origins in poetic language, and hint at an identity between himself and the subject of his narration that esoterically links him to Austerlitz's guiltless Jewish origins.
5 Unheimliche Heimat

5.1 Win A

‘Wie weit überhaupt muß man zurück, um den Anfang zu finden?’ asks the narrator in Nach der Natur (71). It is no wonder, after all, that this search for an origin beyond history constantly preoccupies the Sebaldian narrator. Though Bohemia by the sea and the imaginary Jerusalem of Slovenia serve as poetic spaces of origin and return, the geographically and historically concrete space of W., the hometown shared by the Sebaldian narrators, is at once a place where they examine their inherited burden of historical guilt, and, at times, one that contains, besides its manifest history of catastrophe, fascism and prosperity, a secret mythology. This mythology, like the poetic narrative of Austerlitz’s life, is only revealed by the mythopoetics of the Sebaldian narrator’s textual production.

If Morgan considers the Sebaldian narrator to be suffering from a fashionable metaphysical homelessness – a ‘linke Melancholie’ – Zilcosky’s suggestion that the Sebaldian narrator suffers from an excess of homelands rather than none at all seems more telling.

The final physical return […] ironically repeats the ancient topos of the homecoming: the extravagant Italian title towers over the narrator’s Odyssean journey to an insignificant village in Allgäu, which may or may not be his ‘patria’. The Italian title deliberately puts the narrator’s ‘fatherland’ in question. Is it Allgäu? Or is it England, where he now lives and whence [sic] he finally ‘returns’ in the very last pages of Vertigo? (SG 280) Or is it in Italy (as ‘patria’ suggests), the spiritual homeland of the German writer-in-training from Goethe onward? The narrator’s ‘patria’ is all three of these. Thus what appears to be the narrator’s homelessness turns out, rather, to be an uncanny surplus of homes.¹

The construct that is the Sebaldian narrator’s homeland is profoundly overdetermined, a bathetic place of origin, a haunted mythological landscape, a well-rehearsed literary trope and a historical ruin, to mention some of its guises.

5.1.1 Il ritorno in patria

Like Austerlitz and Filip Kobal, the Sebaldian narrator of *Schwindel.Gefühle* returns home on foot bearing only a rucksack into the land of his fathers, his *patria* of W. (SG 193). Unlike Slovenia and Bohemia, though, W. proves to be anything but a welcoming homeland; and, if Patricia Hellweg’s account of her pilgrimage to Wertach im Allgäu is to believed, in 1996, Wertach itself found its newly-celebrated local author rather less than canny – ‘der schreibe dann wieder ‘so ein Zeug’, das gar nicht stimme, und wenn doch, gehe das niemanden an.’ The mayor of Wertach, in Hellweg’s narrative, is at pains to explain that the Sebalds are no natives of Wertach, and hence that they have no natural claims on Wertach as a *Heimat*:

Die Familie Sebald ist also irgendwann mal nach Wertach hergezogen, wann, weiß ich nicht, ist also keine Familie, die in Wertach entstanden ist oder sich entwickelt hat. So gibt es mehrere Beispiele, speziell auch nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg die sogenannten Flüchtlingsfamilien.

Hellach reports that particular offence appears to have been given by Sebald’s refusal to canonise the remembrance of his Catholic education by appearing in Wertach at school reunions. Since Sebald’s death, Wertach has canonized its erstwhile prodigal son, and now advertises a ‘Sebald-Weg’ among its principle attractions. (This website stresses Sebald’s maternal grandfather’s twenty years as a village gendarme, thereby subtly transforming the Sebald family into rooted Wertachians, rather than the stigmatized *Flüchtlingsfamilie*.

The Sebaldian narrator’s own *Ritorno in Patria* reads, in part, as a directly ironic reversal of the happy retrievals of Austerlitz. If the pass into Austerlitz’s and Filip’s past is presided over by a goddess of time, the waitress in the ‘Tyrolean’ cafe in Innsbruck, where the narrator spends his final night before returning home, is possessed of an ‘Ausgeschämtheit’ that acts on him like a nervous poison under his skin. Far from opening up the secret language of landscape of his past to him, her poisonous presence

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3 Hellweg, ‘Lokaltermin Wertach’, p. 29.
4 <http://www.wertach.de/index_html/infos/der-sebald-weg>, accessed 1 August 2007. I am indebted to Professor Moray McGowan for this link.
robs him of the ability to read: ‘Die Buchstaben zitterten und verschwammen vor meinen Augen’ (SG 190). Again like Austerlitz, he finds the lodgings where he first spent his childhood, but unlike the flat in Sporkova, they are changed beyond recognition, altered by the prosperity of the post-war years.

Soweit es sich bei den baulichen Veränderungen, die man im Engelwirt vorgenommen hatte, mit Genauigkeit sagen ließ, befand sich das mir angewiesene Zimmer an derselben Stelle, an der unser Wohnzimmer gewesen war, mit der Einrichtung, die die Eltern angeschafft hatten, als es nach zwei, drei Jahren zügiger Aufwärtsentwicklung als zweifelsfrei gelten durfte. (SG 210)

Here, it is not the premodern series of catastrophic fires that have destroyed all recognizable features, but rather the modern or postmodern levelling of consumer society. The narrator’s home becomes transformed by his parents’ move upwards into the supposedly classless post-war German society that puts an end to the bourgeois age. In the well-appointed 1950s household, the fetishes of classical German literature are present in an ostentatiously representative function, surviving as an empty show alongside other consumer items:

Vermerkt werden muß außerdem noch, daß auf dem Wohnzimmerschrank die Wohnzimmeruhr auf ihre lieblose Art die Stunden zählte und daß im Aufsatz des Schranks nebst dem chinesischen Teeservice eine Reihe in Leinen gebundener dramatischer Schriften ihren Platz hatten, und zwar diejenigen Shakespeares, Schillers, Hebbels und Sudermanns. (SG 212)

Unlike the well-loved volumes of bourgeois French literature still preserved in the flat in Sporkova, these books have of course never been opened by the narrator’s family, and were only bought in ‘einer Anwandlung von Kulturbewußtsein’ from a travelling salesman (SG 212).

The Sebaldian narrator’s ill-omened journey goes through a bleak rain-swept landscape, whose miserable spell is finally broken when the sun comes out and shows him the valley like a revelation (SG 192). The narrator’s Kindschaft is henceforth constructed by this dialectical movement between idyll and hellhole, between the Odyssean return to Ithaca and a nightmarish katabasis. As Morgan notes, during his stay in his hometown Sebald remembers ‘die Heimkehr des verlorenen Sohns aus den böhmischen Wäldern’ (SG 214) in a local production of Die Räuber and tacitly identifies with
Schiller’s tragic hero. Nonetheless, the return of neither Odysseus nor Karl Moor is appropriate to his situation. W. is neither poetic Bohemian wood nor authentic Heimat. As are all the settings in Schwindel.Gefühle, W. is haunted by an uncanny sexuality, but here it is neither the forbidden homosexual desire of Venice nor the maternal lure of Bohemia: instead, sexuality is policed by the stern patriarchal law of castration. Thus, the Sebaldian narrator remembers a postcard of the smoking cone of Vesuvius that had somehow found its way into his parents’ photo-album, which in turn had mysteriously come into his own possession. The smoking volcano of sexuality is restrained within the bourgeois confines of the photo album, and the man who owned the postcard collection whence the picture of Vesuvius came bears the mark of breaking the paternal proscriptions on sexuality.

Es hieß, er liege in dem an das Zimmer der Rosina anschließenden Raum und er habe an der Hüfte eine große Wunde, die nicht mehr verheilen wolle. Er habe, so hieß es, in seiner Jugend eine Zigarre, die er verbotenerweise geraucht hat, vor seinem Vater verbergen wollen und in den Hosensack gesteckt. (SG 215)

Sometimes, it seems, a cigar is very much not just a cigar. The Sebaldian narrator has neither seen the Engelwirt nor can he understand his martyrdom, and in later life it seems impossible to him that he ever existed. Nevertheless, his dolorous wound signifies the heavy-handed patriarchal law, with its associated threat of castration, which hangs about W.

5.1.2 ein Stück grüne idyllische Landschaft

In his essay on Gerhard Roth, Sebald codes his uncanny Heimat as a source of mythological education. Roth, he suggests, refuses to let his belief in superstition be taken from him by science, and Sebald continues,

So ist auch der Verfasser dieses Essays, der in seiner Kindheit noch seinen Großvater den Hut vor einem Hollerbuschen hat ziehen sehen und der es sich hier noch einmal erlaubt, mit Jean Paul zu reden, ‘für seine Person froh, daß er ... auf einem Dorfe jung gewesen und also in einigem Aberglauben erzogen worden, mit dessen Erinnerung er sich jetzo behilft’. (UH 161)

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Mythology is in this essay described as a form of thinking that offers a resistance to the oppressive and progressive forces of civilisation:


Although the mythological morality here described is one that is anti-humanist, one that seeks redemption in the relativization and withdrawal of human existence (UH 160), it is also one that has educated the Sebaldian narrator in a form of sensitive subjectivity that contributes to his education as poet.

In Nach der Natur, the Sebaldian lyrical self mythologizes his conception and birth in almost hyperbolic terms, designating the place of his conception as an exotic locus amoenus:

\begin{quote}
ein Schwan und sein Spiegelbild auf der schwarzen Fläche des Wassers,

   ein völliges Gleichnis des Friedens. (NdN 72)
\end{quote}

Most significantly, perhaps,

\begin{quote}
das Ganze macht zunächst einen

   irgendwie undeutschen Eindruck […]
\end{quote}

The Sebaldian narrator’s origins are displaced to a ‘non-German’ space, one that appears innocent of historical guilt. Dialectically, the poem reverses this impression a few lines later, by referring to Altdorfer’s 1537 painting of Lot and his daughters:

\begin{quote}
   Am Horizont

   lodert ein furchtbares Feuer,

   das eine große Stadt verdirbt […]

   Im Mittelgrund ist ein Stück

   grüne idyllische Landschaft,

   und dem Beschauer zunächst
\end{quote}
wird das neue Geschlecht
der Moabiter gezeugt. (NdN 74)

The idyllic space where the Sebaldian narrator is conceived, then, is not a utopia beyond history, but a guilty paradise won at the expense of those whom the lovers have destroyed and burned. The history of the new race of the Moabites is built on the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah, a classically melancholy image, and one that burns out all traces of homosexual desire in favour of the sterner law of paternal succession. Woven into this image is another moment of incest, but a guilt-laden one:

‘Come, let us make our father drink wine,’ says Lot’s eldest daughter, ‘and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father. And they made their father drink wine that night: and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father; and he perceived not when she lay down, nor when she arose. (Gen 19: 32-33)’

Unlike Austerlitz’s blissful imaginary reconciliation with his mother, or indeed Filip Kobal’s proud return home, the poetic narrator’s return to his origins reveals no pre-oedipal bliss nor an authentic origin: here, only perversion, destruction and a deviation from the lineage of Abraham are recorded. Only through the earthly fulfillment of writing can the narrator of Nach der Natur escape from this blighted origin, and seek his own redemption in poetic utopias and artistic affiliations that transpose him from the tainted site of his German Herkunft.

5.2 Literature into politics

If then, ultimately, Sebald is in agreement with Strauß and Handke that historical and personal redemption are only realisable in poetic language – albeit in very different ways – why, then, did all three authors, having each established a neo-Romantic poetics, make infamous and politically controversial forays into the public sphere in the 1990s and 2000s? It is not here my intention to undertake a new examination of the hoary Feuilleton debates surrounding Strauß and Handke, or Sebald’s intervention into the air war debate, nor even to rehearse them in any great detail. Rather, following on my discussion of neo-Romanticism in all three authors, the question arises as to whether the relationships between the neo-Romantic poetics of these three authors, their

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6 King James Bible (Authorized Version).
examinations of the discontents and fracturings of the bourgeois self, can be related to their controversial excursions into the public discourse of politics in the late 1980s and 1990s. The progress and consequences of these *Feuilleton* scandals have been detailed and analysed at length by other scholars, and here my intention can only be to summarise them. A very brief account of the scandals, then, follows below.

### 5.2.1 Strauß and *Anschwellender Bocksgesang*

Strauß, previously an acclaimed dramatist and a prose writer whose fictions and discursive works were feted by a literary elite but hardly widely well-known, sprung into public controversy with the publication of his essay ‘Anschwellender Bocksgesang’ in *Der Spiegel*, on the 8th of February 1993. The article, written in a climate of fear and insecurity following the re-unification of Germany and an ensuing rise in right-wing violence, demanded a poetic return to right-wing thinking. For Strauß, right-wing thought is allied to aesthetic-political attitudes similar to those advocated in *Der junge Mann*.

Anders als die linke, Heilsgeschichte parodierende Phantasie malt sich die rechte kein künftiges Weltreich aus, bedarf keiner Utopie, sondern sucht den Wiederanschluß an die lange Zeit, die unbewegte, ist ihrem Wesen nach Tiefenerinnerung und insofern eine religiöse oder protopolitische Initiation.7

This would have been bad enough, given the climate of the times, had Strauß not also appeared to excuse the spate of neo-Nazi violence as understandable expressions of alienation from a deracinated, spineless German culture, which had bent over backwards to accommodate immigrants at the expense of its own traditions. Using the vocabulary of generational *ressentiment*, he claimed that the violent young people of 1993 are revolting less against the Enlightenment and its tradition of tolerance per se, and more against the self-satisfied moralising of the 1968 generation, just as that generation had in its turn revolted. He warned against facile left-wing prescriptions that claimed that an insincere tolerance of immigration was the only way to prevent the return of Nazism and Hitler: negativity is an insufficient ground in which to root a national identity. Rather, an affirmation of ‘mythical’ German values is the best way to

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ensure that young people once again listened to the voice of tradition and authority. Strauß finished the essay with an apocalyptic warning that conflicts were appearing on the horizon that could no longer be appeased with economic prosperity. Swift outrage followed in the media, and shortly afterwards also in literary journals. In particular, *Weimarer Beiträge* dedicated an entire issue to the debate. This contained responses that cited his journalistic intervention in the context of his literary work and of the intellectual tradition in which he is writing. The essayists ranged from applauding his critique of facile left-wing posturing to denouncing his gnomic vocabulary, which elides genuine questions of social disadvantage and political conflict. Nadja Thomas’s extensive study of the scandal is an excellent resource for the minutiae of the debate. She herself considers his intervention to be rooted in the aporia of conservatism which attempts to enlighten while being anti-Enlightenment, and to have roots in conservative literary ideas of presence and the chthonic that privilege Bild over Begriff. Thus, Joachim Vogel classed Strauß with dangerous cultural conservatives such as Oswald Spengler or Stefan George, and linked his intervention to antidemocratic intellectual pronouncements in the Weimar Republic. Stefan Breuer, by contrast, in *Die Anatomie der Konservativen Revolution*, concludes that Strauß does not belong to the ‘Mentalitätskrise des verblassenden Bildungsbürgertums im Zuge der aufkommenden, reflexiven Moderne im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert’ as there is no trace of new nationalism about him. And indeed, although in 1994 Strauß provided the introduction for a tendently nationalist book, *Die selbstbewußte Nation: ‘Anschwellender

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Strauß made no further attempt to stylise himself as the leader of any revanchist literary or political movement. In the interim, Strauß has distanced himself from his role as public provocateur, though he does still intervene from time to time to pronounce on issues such as, indeed, Handke’s Heine-Preis scandal (see below), or on the ‘clash of civilisations’ between Islam and Christianity in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in September 2001. In an article from early 2006, for instance, he claimed that Muslim communities in Germany are a ‘Vorbereitungsgesellschaft’ that will teach a secular Germany the value of true spirituality and family values in the future. The media seem to have arrived at a compromise in their attitude to Strauß, whereby tribute is paid to his literary greatness while a certain eye-rolling is detectable in reaction to his intermittent political pronouncements. From the moment of aesthetic autonomy and truth that Strauß reached for the artwork, over and above that of the subject and of society, in Der junge Mann, it seems that Strauß has since extended that privileged position of autonomy to the creator of the artwork himself. As artist, then, in the public sphere Strauß arrogates to himself an aesthetically privileged voice of the critic who can stand both outside the historical laws of society and the torments of personal sexual desire. And while Strauß’s pronouncements may have both their reactionary and their excessively obfuscatory aspects as well as their uncomfortably critical ones, it is certain that Strauß has remained true to his oppositional aesthetic-political vision, which has developed from neo-Romanticism to a Novalis-like conservatism in a steady line from the early 1970s to the present day.

5.2.2 Handke and Serbia

By the 1980s, Peter Handke had largely withdrawn from the political interventions that characterized his public persona in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Slovenia, as we have seen, became an increasingly complex element in his poetic landscape, but while its poetic status in his work did provide a point of political reference within his prose, his
writings on Slovenia remained confined to the literary sphere. His initial political, as distinct from literary, engagement with Slovenia was the text ‘Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land,’ first published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on the 27th of July 1991, which criticized the premature recognition of Croatia by Austria and Germany.

Die Geschichtslosigkeit, welche jenes reine Gegenwärtigsein vielleicht ermöglicht hatte, war Schein gewesen (wenn auch ein fruchtbarer?); höchstens handelte es sich um eine kleine Pause in der Geschichte (oder unserer unselig-ewigen Zwanghaftigkeit?).

Slovenian culture, he argued, would only be destroyed by the fetishes of an independent nation – a flag, a currency – in contradistinction to its free flourishing in the Yugoslav federation. His Slovenian intervention caused relatively little comment in comparison to the enormous controversy over his text defending the Serbian position in the Balkan crises of the 1990s, published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in the first two January weeks of 1996, under the title chosen by the editors, of ‘Gerechtigkeit für Serbien. Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina’.

Here, he argued that he was not necessarily defending the actions of Serbia, but felt the need to remind Western readers that Serbia was not the sole aggressor in the conflict. In Handke’s view, the partial Western (by which he primarily meant French and German) media misrepresented the Serbian case in the Balkan war. The Croatians, in his account, are also historically the oppressors of the Serbs (a fact which, interestingly, Sebald also addresses in *Die Ringe des Saturn*, where he lists Croatian atrocities against Serbia in the second world war, and points the finger at Kurt Waldheim as both their abetter and the very symbol of Austria’s bad conscience. Waldheim’s voice reading out a statement of peace and brotherhood, sent out into space on the *Voyager*, is the very spectre of the historical uncanny.) This historical oppression, Handke claims, makes the question as to who was the initial aggressor rather more difficult to answer than the pro-Croatian Western media might suggest.

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18 RdS 119-123.
Wer wird diese Geschichte einmal anders schreiben, und sei es bloß auch in den Nuancen – die freilich viel dazutun könnten, die Völker aus ihrer gegenseitigen Bilderstarre zu erlösen?  

Here, Handke is at pains to emphasise that he does not want to question the fact of the Srebrenica massacre, but merely wants to find out how such an allegedly well-planned massacre could happen, committed by an exhausted war machine, before the eyes of the world.

The response to his piece was immediate and outraged. The *Corriere della Sera* called him a terrorist, *Libération* claimed that he was mocking the victims of the Slovenian war of 1991, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* found that he was glorifying war as a ‘higher reality,’ *Le Monde* called him a pro-Serbian advocate, and *El Pais* called him an apologist for the Srebrenica massacre.  

Defence did come from some quarters, such as Branimir Soucek’s *Eine Frühlingsreise zum Gedankenfluß eines verirrten Literaten oder Gerechtigkeit für Peter Handke*. In 1999 he returned his Georg Büchner prize in protest against the NATO war on Yugoslavia (awarded 1973), and he also renounced his membership of the Catholic Church because the hierarchy supported the war, and Pope John Paul II said nothing. Controversy continued throughout the 2000s, when Slobodan Milosevic called Handke, somewhat against his will, as a witness on his behalf in the war crimes tribunal in The Hague in 2004, although in the event, Handke did not give evidence. However, not only did Handke visit Milosevic in prison, but on Milosevic’s sudden death in March 2006, Handke gave a speech at his graveside. He also accused the war crimes tribunal of letting Milosevic die in prison. This led to a

22 Pichler, *Die Beschreibung des Glücks*, p. 177.
23 Handke gave his own account of the trial in an article entitled, ‘Die Tablas von Daimiel. Ein Umwegzeugenbericht zum Prozeß gegen Slobodan Milosevic’, *Literaturen* 7/8 2005, pp. 82-103. Here, he suggests that Milosevic was ‘satanised’, in part because ‘Western’ judges did not understand his ‘occidental’ political circumstances (p. 91) and concludes that he himself ‘Slobodan Silosevic nicht nur vor dem falschen Gericht sehe, sondern ihn auch – zwar ganz und gar nicht für “unschuldig” halte (das, wie gesagt, ist nicht meine Sache), aber für “nicht schuldig im Sinne der Anklage” (p. 92).
renewed controversy in June 2006, when the city council of Düsseldorf voted against awarding Handke the Heinrich-Heine-Preis for which he had been nominated.24 Another media spat followed, with prominent figures variously casting Handke and Heine as oppositional or related representatives of German letters and political opposition. Among these was Botho Strauß, who defended Handke in terms that may not have won either artist much favour among the outraged literary left wing:

Wer Schuld und Irrtum nicht als Stigmata (im Grenzfall sogar Stimulantien) der Größe erkennt, sollte sich nicht mit wirklichen Dichtern und Denkern beschäftigen, sondern nur mit den richtigen. Wir leben gottlob noch nicht in einer Lea-Rosh-Kultur, in der sich deutscher Geist nur geduckt bewegen soll oder rückschaudernd erstarren und jede erhobene Stirn, etwa zum Ausschauhalten, als pietätlos und mißliebig angesehen wird.25

In this article, Strauß places Handke in the company of Heidegger, Brecht and Carl Schmitt as politically misguided but brilliant German literary figures who transform the ways in which we see things – a typically Straußian response which elides the specifics of Handke’s words and actions in favour of sweeping pronouncements about the fallibility of all great artists, and privileges the autonomy of poetic language over a socially and historically contextualized analysis. This is ‘die irdische Erfüllung’ stretched ad absurdum, a concept of language that, because it is wielded by a poet, metaphysically raises itself above all ‘pious’ discursive spheres.

Handke eventually declined the prize, and the rights and wrongs of the case continue to be debated. Indeed, a recent volume has just appeared documenting the scandal.26 To me, it is clear that certain roots of Handke’s excessive devotion to the ‘andersgelb’ Serbia can already be read in Die Wiederholung, and are linked to his affection for Slovenian culture and revulsion for Austrian, German and Croatian war crimes. The path from criticising his Austrian inheritance and embracing his Slovenian roots to being a public advocate for Serbia is not one that can be easily analysed, still less explained, in a brief note like this one. Nonetheless, it seems to me that an orientalizing notion of a marginalized Eastern European culture that contains pre-modern traces long

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24 Sebald was also awarded this prize in 2000.


26 Peter Jamin, Der Handke-Skandal (Remscheid: Gardez, 2007).
since lost in Western Europe, and a desire to make good his Austrian generational guilt, must have played a strong role in this path. His defence of Serbia also contained an attack on his generation of Germans, for failing to live up to the international challenge posed by the Yugoslav crisis of the early 1990s.


Here, once more, generational guilt and the echoes of the Goethean Bildungsideal coincide.

### 5.2.3 Sebald and the air war

Sebald’s own initiation of a Feuilleton debate was possibly even more unexpected than those of Handke and Strauß, coming as it did from a writer whose reputation was only just being established in Germany, and who was being feted as a master of ethical remembrance. As we have seen, his early critical writings, particularly on Sternheim and Döblin, certainly took an aggressively oppositional standpoint, but were at once too obscure and too in tune with a general 1968 orthodoxy to cause much public controversy. By the time that Sebald gave his Zurich lectures in 1997, by contrast, he was nearing the height of his literary fame in his lifetime. These lectures, later published as Luftkrieg und Literatur, claimed that German literature had been entirely silent about the true horror of the British air raids on Germany. Those few accounts that did exist, he claimed, were marked by unreliability, vacuity and repetitiveness, and did not approach the heart of the horror. Although Sebald in no way attempted to claim equivalence between the victims of the Nazi terror and the German bombing victims, a debate erupted questioning whether it was possible to talk about the bombings without attempting to exculpate Germans from their participation in war crimes. In addition, a Feuilleton debate also opened up as to whether Sebald’s account of a lacuna in German

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post-war literature was in fact accurate. Susanne Vees-Gulani has provided a useful summary of these debates in her article ‘The Experience of Destruction: W. G. Sebald, the Airwar, and Literature’. Despite the criticism that Sebald’s analysis found in many quarters, not least among them Volker Hage of the *Spiegel*, throughout the early 2000s the air war on Germany, and German wartime suffering received a new lease of critical and artistic attention, in particular through the publication of Günter Grass’s *Im Krebsgang* and Jörg Friedrich’s *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*. Despite his best efforts – efforts shared by Grass – to emphasize that German suffering in no way was equal to that of the suffering of the victims of the Nazis, posthumously, Sebald for a time became associated with a certain German revanchist sentiment that, in his critical and fictional works, he had striven to condemn. Susanne Vees-Gulani suggests that in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Sebald, as a member of the post-war generation, ‘searches almost relentlessly for any possibilities of access to the experiences’, as he does in the rest of his literary work, searching desperately for traces of the destroyed past. This is doubtlessly true, sifting as he does through works that mention the air war and disparaging them for their paucity of detail and emotional truth. *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, though, also seems to me a continuation of his critical works that ceaselessly look for a perfect encoding of aesthetics and ethics, metaphysics and politics, in the earthly fulfilment of writing.

Further, the terms in which Sebald discusses the effects of the air war on his psyche are not only those of the melancholic archaeologist of pain. Once more, in the postscript that Sebald added to the lectures for their publication as a book, the air war is described in terms of the Sebaldian uncanny. As elsewhere, he leans on the theories of the Mitcherlichs’ to draw a link between petit-bourgeois family life, ‘die Regulierung

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intimer Gefühle in der deutschen Familie’ and the ‘unter dem Hitler-Faschismus sich vollziehenden deutschen Katastrophe (L&L 90). Once more, it is his own autobiography that provides a gnomic key to this link. He describes reading a sentence in a book on the history of Sonthofen:

‘Viel hat uns der Krieg genommen, doch uns blieb, unberührt und blühend wie eh und je, unsere herrliche Heimatlandschaft.’ Lese ich diesen Satz, so verschwimmen vor meinen Augen Bilder von Feldwegen, Flußauen und Bergwiesen mit den Bildern der Zerstörung, und es sind die letzteren, perverserweise, und nicht die ganz irreal gewordenen frühkindlichen Idyllen, die so etwas wie ein Heimatgefühl in mir heraufrufen, vielleicht weil sie die mächtigere, übergeordnete Wirklichkeit meiner ersten Lebensjahre repräsentieren. (L&L 78)

Here, Sebald invokes the spectre of a ruinous landscape to overlay not only the official, hypocritical narrative of Sonthofen, but also his personal memories of his childhood, which have become ‘ganz irreal.’ Indeed, his ‘memory’ of lying as an infant ‘in dem sogenannten Stubenwagen’ gazing up untroubled at the blue sky (L&L 78) is later mirrored by the memory of the literary scholar and critic Hans Dieter Schäfer, an extract from whose novel about the bombing raids on Berlin Sebald cites as follows:

Ich lag in einem Wäsckorb, der Himmel warf einen hektischen Schein weit in den Korridor; in dieser roten Dämmerung streckte mir meine Mutter ihr aufgeschrecktes Gesicht entgegen; und als ich in den Keller getragen wurde, erhoben sich über mir die Dachbalken und schwankten.32

In Schäfer’s account, Sebald’s peaceful cradle has been replaced by a provisional washing basket, and the ‘unreal’ blue sky of Sebald’s childhood has been repainted an appropriate red. Personal memory – or family oral narrative, as it is unlikely that Sebald retained memories of his first year – has become ‘perversely’ delegitimized in favour of an ethically superior memory of ruins, one gathered from the pool of collective and scholarly memory. Nonetheless, even though Schäfer’s memory is the one that is more ‘real’ to Sebald than his own image of childhood, Schäfer himself admits that no matter how hard he tries to excavate his traumatic childhood memories, ‘desto stärker muß ich

begreifen, wie schwer die Erinnerung vorankommt.\textsuperscript{33} Sebald classes Schäfer’s heroic failure with the ethically appropriate accounts of Gerd Ledig, precisely because Schäfer acknowledges the gap in his account of the horror. By contrast, the ‘petit-bourgeois’ reminiscences that Sebald claims to have been sent subsequent to the broadcast of his lectures, contain precisely those positive affirmations of \textit{Heimat} that fill Sebald with \textit{Unbehagen} (L&L 89).

Thus, Sebald’s own family memories must become ‘perverted’ in order that they may reflect this \textit{Unbehagen}, the more profound aesthetic and political ‘truth’ that the adult Sebald has detected behind a seemingly intact childhood, and in order to break any line of inheritance that Sebald could have carried over from his petit-bourgeois past. The perversion of Sebald’s memory is heightened when, on the next page after his claim that his childhood idyll has become ‘unreal,’ Sebald claims that the ruins are ‘more real’ than the idyll because everywhere, even in Corsica, he has seen memorials to people murdered by the Germans. As well as the tablets, he says, while he was visiting the church of Morosaglia in Corsica, he saw the picture which once hung in his parents’ bedroom showing Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane.


Once more, as in \textit{Nach der Natur}, the uncanny space of the parental bed and the horrors of history are juxtaposed via an act of ekphrasis. Self-consciously, by means of a tangential aesthetic of networking, Sebald inserts the crimes of the German nation in the domestic sphere, where, as Maximilian Aychenwald claimed in \textit{Austerlitz}, the crimes of the Nazi era were gestated. Significantly, it is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane who provides the link between the two: a Jesus on the point of redemption, but reduced to despair and a feeling of abandonment by his father.

\textsuperscript{33} Schäfer 1990, p. 27, cited in L&L, p. 97.
‘Doch muß ich nicht unbedingt nach Deutschland, an den Ort meiner Herkunft zurück, wenn ich mir die Zeit der Zerstörung vergegenwärtigen will’, Sebald assures us (L&L 83). Nonetheless, the ‘wenigen Punkte, an denen sich mein Lebenslauf mit der Geschichte des Luftkriegs überschneidet’ (L&L 84) were sufficient, Sebald writes, for him to wish to explore the question of the lacuna in German literature where an account of the bombings should be. In a sense, Sebald’s contentious treatment of the air war completes his explorations of the Bildungsroman theme, by matching the domestic uncanny to the political uncanny in his own autobiography. The artist’s autobiography, here, as in Sebald’s literary fiction, becomes more than just an allegory for the disasters of history: it becomes the place where the destructive meaning of history is made manifest. It is the negative side of Handke’s ‘irdische Erfüllung,’ a fragmentary palimpsest that nonetheless bears a burden of absolute, apocalyptic truth.

5.2.4 Political uncanny

Far more than exploring intricacies of the debates and the (frequently unedifying) interventions of the various literary dramatis personae who pronounced on them, I want to ask the question as to whether, far from being unexpected and unprecedented interventions by previously liberal writers, the three Feuilleton scandals have roots that in part lie in the cultural nostalgia advocated by all three authors. Handke’s repeated interventions on behalf of Slovenia that turned into a peculiar and pained advocacy for the dictator Milosevic; Strauß’s Anschwellender Bocksgesang essay that caused moral panic among the German academic community; Sebald’s Luftkrieg und Literatur lectures and essay that gave rise to speculation that Sebald had moved into the territory of revanchism – all share a link to the poetic yearning for a means to translate a mythical golden age, unmediated meaning and redemptive poetics into contemporary literature and politics. Here, an important distinction is to be made between the interventions of Strauß and Sebald, on the one hand, and Handke on the other: while Strauß and Sebald caused controversy in the Feuilletons by questioning the status of poetics in politics, Handke’s intervention was explicitly political; although his advocacy of Serbia has roots in his poetic and familial affiliation to Slovenia, the discourse in which he engaged was not that of poetics, but of aggressive political debate. Nonetheless, although the political views espoused by all three in the 1990s are very far
from the orthodox critical theory of their youth, they share an generational similarity: Romanticism’s Other, perhaps, come back to haunt the dying spectre of liberalism.

5.3 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to shown that the same uncanny generational concerns plague Sebald as much as they do Strauß and Handke. All three writers are searching for redemption both from the disenchantment of the modern age in general and from the parental, Nazi generation in particular. The Bildungsroman form provided all three writers with a means to negotiate this tainted inheritance, and to lay to rest the uncanny spectres of the Doppelgänger and of the repressed historical past. The redemption that is sought is not the same for each writer: for Strauß, it is poetic language itself that must be redeemed from history, for Handke – perhaps most successfully – it is Kindschaft, the landscape of childhood and an unalienated relation to nature that nonetheless negociates the traumata of history. For Sebald, it is the past itself that must be redeemed, but ultimately it can only be redeemed through poetic language – a poetic position that does, after all, align Sebald with his generational fellows as a neo-Romantic writer. Sebald’s infamous melancholy is constantly at work in his writing, undermining supposed moments of rescue and return, haunting his utopias and disintegrating loving relationships. In a sense, the astute reader of Sebald must battle through the obscuring miasma of melancholy and the constant rabbit-holes of intertextuality in order to trace the disjunctions, ethical compromises, hauntings and unexpected desires that run through his works. This thesis represents an attempt to show that, despite Sebald’s all-pervasive aesthetic of ruins, his fiction contains occluded desires for utopias beyond and within history, for ideal homosocial relationships, for a return to the pre-Oedipal space and for an escape from his own tainted inheritance. Sebald’s utopias are not merely haunted by the ghosts of the past: they are also haunted by the post-colonial uncanny, and by the writer’s own bad conscience. Perhaps because of this bad conscience, this thesis also reveals several ethically dubious narrative positions of Sebald’s, particularly those which lie along the borders of the European masculine psyche, which projects its own anxieties onto the queer, Jewish or oriental Other.
It is my hope that this thesis will open up the way for more extensive comparative readings of Sebald as a 1968 writer. There is scope for much more work to be done on Sebald’s relationship to Handke, as well as to those other writers of his generation whom he has written critical essays, in particular Gerhard Roth. It also raises the question of post-colonial guilt throughout his work, and of the political role of sexuality, questions that deserve wider attention than I have given them here. I have also attempted to draw attention to the way in which Sebald uses the cloak of ethically scrupulous melancholy to elide important political questions and ethical quandaries in his work; several critics have started to lift this cloak, and there remains much more to be done in this direction. Equally, I hope that my readings of sexuality, love and desire in Sebald’s work will lead to further explorations of male identity and of Freud reception in his writings.

Despite their perhaps ill-advised political forays, all three writers afterwards returned to literary fiction. For all three, their unknown Heimat is always poetry – a banality, yes, but all poetry, reduced to a formula, must necessarily be banal. As Strauß said, already in the 1970s, the only destination and home for the homeless writer is writing.

Man schreibt einzig im Auftrag der Literatur. Man schreibt unter Aufsicht alles bisher Geschriebenen. Man schreibt aber doch auch, um sich nach und nach eine geistige Heimat zu schaffen, wo man eine natürliche nicht mehr besitzt. (PP 103)

Sebald’s return to this geistige Heimat of literature following Luftkrieg und Literatur was a tragically short one, his manner of death in itself Sebaldian, his oeuvre forever, by necessity, fragmentary. If the revenants of a mythically coherent self haunt his fiction, his fiction serves as a lasting reminder that the literary ghosts of the German past have not been laid to rest.
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