Ethics and the Dynamic Observer Narrator

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Byram, Katra A.
Ethics and the Dynamic Observer Narrator: Reckoning with Past and Present in German Literature.

The Ohio State University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/38651.

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A Footnote to History
German Trauma and the Ethics of Holocaust Representation in W. G. Sebald’s Austerlitz

I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind’s door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends.

—Joan Didion, Slouching toward Bethlehem

W. G. Sebald (1944–2001), the German expatriate professor whose melancholy prose has fascinated readers since the late 1990s, talked extensively about his narrators and their role in his approach to representing the tragedies of twentieth-century history. “I think it’s important to know the point of view from which these tales are told, the moral makeup of the teller,” he explained in October 2001. “That’s why my narrator has such a presence.” He affirmed that he always approached the topic of the Holocaust obliquely, or in a mediated fashion: “That is intentional, because I fear a slide into melodrama, even if that melodrama is based on historical circumstances. Aesthetic authenticity—which is tied to the ethical in a subterranean, intimate way—gets lost then. . . . There are always reminders that [the story] is told this way by somebody, that it has gone through the filter of the narrator.” I begin this last chapter with the historical author’s statements about his narrators, because in this chapter, even more than in my discussion of Grass, my topic is

1. Baker, “Q&A.”
3. Doerry and Hage, “Ich fürchte das Melodramatische.”
as much the discursive field in which his work operates as it is the work itself. My focus is Sebald’s final novel, *Austerlitz*, and the ethical frameworks that underlie his narrative strategies in this text. I argue that tracing the narrator’s story shows Sebald challenging the two distinct paradigms that dominate thinking about the proper role of narrative in representing the Holocaust, but that the challenge is masked by the expectations that the paradigms themselves awaken.

The first paradigm applies to survivor narratives and is closely related to the field of trauma studies. In this highly narrativist approach, narrative testimony about the Holocaust is seen as the victims’ path to integrating their traumatic experience into a broader self-understanding and, hence, to achieving a modicum of healing. These stories also allow the outside world to acknowledge the victims by hearing, preserving, and communicating their stories. The other paradigm applies to representations by nonsurvivors. Those who did not experience the historical disaster directly are enjoined to avoid falsely totalizing or granting meaning to it and to maintain an appropriate distance. They should not pretend to comprehend the incomprehensible, identify with victims, evoke sentimentality or falsely transfiguring emotion, or try to directly depict the worst of the horrors. Many of the injunctions and vocabulary used within this paradigm resonate strongly with antinarrativist approaches to understanding identity.

Somewhat paradoxically, *Austerlitz* has emerged as an exemplar of both paradigms. Both feature prominently in discussions of the title character’s story, and, while the tension between them lies at the root of some critical disagreements, readers seem to have had little difficulty reconciling them in this context. The situation becomes trickier when the narrator becomes the focus of inquiry, however. This chapter takes up that focus, contending that the narrator is key to the work, not only as a teller of Austerlitz’s story but also as a historical figure with a story of his own. I argue that the text presents the narrator’s behavior and his relationship to Austerlitz as structured by psychological trauma, and pursue the implications this psychological state bears for his story of self, both the way he tells it and the way it is received. As I pursue the implied author’s story about the narrator, I read Sebald the historical author as challenging the ethical guidelines of Holocaust representation, even as he consistently signals their importance. In the end, I question the ethics of Sebald’s novel, but I do not indict him; instead, I use his novel to show that neither narrative nor antinarrative form can guarantee ethical soundness.

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4. Katja Garloff’s “Task of the Narrator” and Claire Feehily’s “Surest Engagement” also interpret the narrator as suffering from trauma.
The Discursive Background of Austerlitz’s Reception

Both representational paradigms share a fundamental tenet: the central story of the Holocaust is one of Jewish suffering. In his introduction to the 1992 collection *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* Saul Friedlander argues that in representations of the Holocaust “some claim to ‘truth’ appears particularly imperative. . . . There are limits to representation which should not be but can easily be transgressed,” and most people have a sense of “obligation” to preserve a “master-narrative” about these truths.5 While Friedlander maintains that defining the components of this “master-narrative” is very difficult, it would seem that there is a central and crucial truth of the Holocaust: Jews and other groups suffered catastrophe, loss, and pain at the hands of Germans under National Socialism. Sebald’s novel privileges a reading that conforms to this central tenet. The Jewish Austerlitz’s story comprises the text’s central narrative and claims 333 of the book’s 421 pages. The book places his story at its core, flanking it with the anonymous narrator’s account of the circumstances of his meetings with Austerlitz. It then further wraps Austerlitz’s story within short accounts of other victims of German National Socialist violence: at the beginning that of the torture victims Gastone Novelli and Jean Améry, and at the end that of the Jews murdered in the Lithuanian city of Kaunus and the nearby Fort IX. Finally, and as if to dispel any doubt about the text’s subject, the title points to Austerlitz as its topic and its goal. Most criticism has followed the discursive expectations and the book’s overt cues. Austerlitz’s story assumes central importance, and most of those who discuss the German narrator focus on how he presents Austerlitz’s story and assess the ethical status of this presentation. The narrator is read as a listener of and conduit for Austerlitz’s historically victimized voice, and the ethical status of the narrator and of the work as a whole is seen as turning on this relationship.6

Initially, the fictional memoir of a Jewish man’s suffering and dislocation as a result of the Holocaust received overwhelmingly positive reviews in the

5. Friedlander, “Introduction,” 3. Friedlander’s claim rejects the perspectival, postmodernist abandonment of the idea of “truth” in history and the concomitant effort to resist historical “master narratives.” In particular, he rejects Hayden White’s argument that historians can tell different stories about the same historical facts depending on the historical narrative frames they choose to employ and insists that there are constraints on such relativism in the context of the Holocaust (10). For White’s articulation of the role of emplotment in historiography, see White, “Question of Narrative.”

United States, from the *New York Times* to *Newsweek*. Critics attributed a “harrowing emotional power” to the story of Jacques Austerlitz and deemed Sebald’s treatment of the Holocaust through that story a “small but significant miracle.”

Lukewarm responses from the United States and Great Britain tended to criticize the book on literary and stylistic grounds rather than historical or political ones. Some German reviewers did express reservations about the book’s historiographical implications; Iris Radisch, for instance, charged that it diminishes the horror of the Holocaust by making it just another exhibit in Sebald’s historical “museum of lost things.” Still, the vast majority of immediate responses lauded the book, almost entirely disregarding the narrator as they did so. The *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani went so far as to complain about the “gratuitous device of the narrator.”

Much of the scholarship on Sebald has been as celebratory as the journalistic reviews, and the early scholarship, in particular, focuses on the character Austerlitz and treats the narrator as a marginal figure. Many discuss the narrator primarily in terms of his relationship to Sebald, taking a position on whether one should read the figure as an autobiographical representation or as a fictional character. Early considerations of his function usually remained brief, even when he was assigned substantial importance. Sigrid Löffler, for instance, calls the narrator in Sebald’s texts the actual protagonist, but she never discusses the figure in depth. Thomas Wirtz and Amir Eshel go further

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11. Kakutani, “No Man’s Land.”

12. In his introduction to a special issue of *Germanic Review*, Mark Anderson opens by saying that the journal “adds its voice to a chorus of praise” for Sebald’s work (155). For other examples of explicitly celebratory work, see Bigsby, *Remembering and Imagining*; Blackler, *Reading W. G. Sebald*; Schütte, *W. G. Sebald*.

13. Gray Kochhar-Lindgren takes the narrator unproblematically as Sebald in “Charcoal,” 371. Sigrid Löffler’s “Melancholie” reads the narrator as a fictional character who shares traits with and, thus, remains close to his creator. McCulloh calls the narrator “Sebald” or “the narrator” by turns. See, for example, *Understanding W. G. Sebald*, 110, 19. Amir Eshel’s “Power of Time” argues that the text encourages this uncertainty as part of its project to thematize the “tension between fact and fiction” (76).

in acknowledging and analyzing the narrator as a character, but their examinations still remain cursory.  

The spectrum of opinions about the novel’s ethical status has widened in the successive waves of criticism, and the narrator has attracted more attention, often in the form of questions about his ethical status. Some have continued to read Sebald’s work as a paradigm of ethical representation of the Holocaust. Jan Ceuppens views ethical representation as the fundamental goal of Sebald’s writing and maintains that Sebald’s fiction seeks a mode of representation that would respect the other by maintaining “the appropriate distance with regard to the object under scrutiny.” Deane Blackler’s book on Sebald devotes a chapter to his narrators, arguing that the texts position the narrator as an authority to be questioned and use the figure to encourage an ethically positive “disobedient” reading. Lynn L. Wolff discusses the narrator as a feature of Sebald’s “literary historiography,” which aims to provide “restitution” for past events by establishing circuits of testimony that can generate empathy for individuals and their stories. But others ask whether the narrator infringes on the central truth of Jewish suffering by identifying with Austerlitz or blurring the line between Jewish suffering and the German’s response to it. Katja Garloff, for instance, sees the novel as acknowledging “the encrypted wish to be able to speak for [the victims] . . . which remains an arrogation as much as an obligation.” In the end, however, she argues that Sebald uses the narrator figure to critique narrative appropriation and to illustrate the impossibility of ever adequately understanding or representing the victim’s story. 

Stuart Taberner begins by casting doubt on the motives of the narrator in Sebald’s earlier Die Ausgewanderten, but he sees Austerlitz’s narrator as self-conscious about the dangers of identifying with the victim whose story he tells. The narrator of the later novel eschews identification and foregrounds his mediation of Austerlitz’s life story. And Anne Fuchs, while admitting some uneasiness about Sebald’s fictional project and the impulse to identification it contains, maintains that his unrelenting self-reflexivity carefully “marks the divide between self and other.” Even many initially critical studies, then, eventually affirm the narrator’s engagement with Austerlitz’s

16. Ceuppens, “Transcripts,” 254. He makes this statement in the context of discussing Sebald’s earlier text The Emigrants [Die Ausgewanderten].
17. Blackler, Reading W. G. Sebald.
story as self-aware and ethically sound; while giving voice to Austerlitz, he resists the temptation to blur the line between himself and his protagonist.\(^{22}\) Read in this way, Sebald’s text becomes a fictional counterpart to the proliferation of Holocaust history told through personal memory and testimony; it joins the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., the USC Shoah Foundation, and documentaries such as the BBC’s *Into the Arms of Strangers* in relating Holocaust history by telling stories of its victims. Other scholars, however, take a more critical stance. Silke Horstkotte finds that the narrator displays a disturbing lack of empathy as he confronts the tragedies of the past.\(^{23}\) Brad Prager reaches a diametrically opposed position, diagnosing the narrator as displaying a deep empathy but questioning the ethical appropriateness of such a German figure; he concludes that “despite his attempts to let victims speak for themselves—to allow their voices to emerge—Sebald’s work at times blurs important differences between the speaker and the listener.”\(^{24}\)

As these brief summaries show, even those studies that analyze the narrator extensively tend to focus on the way he represents Austerlitz’s story, rather than on the way he presents his own. Many explicitly refer to the assumption that the victims of the Holocaust should be given room to “speak for themselves.” One of their main concerns in assessing the ethical status of this representation is whether or not the narrator properly “disidentifies” with Austerlitz in doing so—whether or not he both acknowledges and shows empathy for the man’s experience and resists the temptation to blur the line between himself and his subject.\(^{25}\) As I discuss later, these readings are strongly cued by the text, but they also align with thinking about the proper mode for engaging with Holocaust victims and experience. Dominic LaCapra, for instance, valorizes this kind of careful empathy as a “virtual, not vicarious, experience” of emotion and of historical trauma.\(^{26}\)

The novel presents itself as transmitting the (fictional) victim’s voice, but, in accordance with norms for nonsurvivor accounts, it does not pretend to offer an unmediated account of events. Scholarly responses to it have applauded this approach, as they have its adherence to other norms: that nonsurvivor representations should resist a totalizing urge that would impose coherence on historical events; that they should refrain from ascribing meaning, especially moral meaning, to victims’ experience and suffering;

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25. See chapter 1 for a discussion of disidentification.
that they should be wary of narrative conventions used for inciting emotion, because these facilitate a slide into false sentimentality or identification; and that they should refrain from providing direct images of the atrocities themselves.\footnote{Ibid., 52–55, 98–99.} Many of these injunctions would seem to rule out a narrativist approach to the events of the Holocaust and the lives they interrupted or severed. The Holocaust, these scholars would argue, constituted a radical break that disrupts the possibility of constructing a life story in a narrativist framework. No story could or should repair the radical loss of continuity, of socially supported identity, of moral orientation that these events caused.

In his essay in Friedlander’s volume, for instance, Hayden White advocates representing stories of the Holocaust in a “modernist style, that was developed in order to represent the kind of experiences which social modernism made possible.”\footnote{White, “Historical Emplotment,” 52.} Citing White, Todd Presner argues that, instead of trying to represent historical disaster as a realist would, erasing “experiential and historical gap[s]” and using “meaning-making strategies” to generate a coherent, stable story, Sebald takes a “modernist” approach that undermines the illusion of a complete, authoritative account of meaningful events.\footnote{Presner, “Synoptic and Artificial View.”} In this description that contrasts a “realist” approach with a “modernist” one, one that aims to create wholeness with one that emphasizes breaks and gaps, a preference for an antinarrativist approach to history and identity manifests itself. Claudia Öhlschläger, too, reads Sebald as rejecting a historiographical approach that seeks coherence and consensus; implicitly, she associates that approach with realism, as she places Sebald “between the modern and the postmodern” and describes his writing in terms such as “fragmentary, blurry, incoherent.”\footnote{Öhlschläger, Beschädigtes Leben, 11.} Sebald’s narrative ethics consists of “the narration of the gaps, holes, and tears that the history of destruction has left behind.”\footnote{Ibid., 248.} Fuchs

\footnote{Ibid., 52–55, 98–99. These are “norms” within cultural theory and the academy; popular representations often transgress these norms and are criticized for it in critical discourse. The reactions to Schindler’s List, for instance, including Sebald’s comments on the film, offer an example of this phenomenon. On the debate about Schindler’s List, see ibid., 99, n. 12, and many of the essays in Loshitzky, Spielberg’s Holocaust. For Sebald’s comments about the film, see Jaggi, “Recovered Memories.”}
Chapter Seven contends that “because for Sebald history can no longer be narrated as the story of causal chains of development, but only as a network of fates, in his prose it always leads out of the present and into that ‘encyclopedic cosmos of memory and research’ that grips both his narrators and his readers.” In critical writing on nonsurvivor representations of the Holocaust, there is a strong preference for discontinuity, incoherence, and the contingency of history and the lives it touches: for antinarrativist approaches to history and identity. Sebald’s fictional writing appeals to this preference.

Some scholars have noted the tension between the narrativist and antinarrativist paradigms as they apply to Austerlitz’s story. Fuchs questions the compatibility of a therapeutic model of narration based on trauma theory and a historical approach that resists reaching any kind of satisfying conclusions. She reconciles these opposing tendencies by associating one approach with Austerlitz and the other with the narrator; while the therapeutic model holds for the victim, outsiders cannot indulge in this closure but must resist it. John Zilcosky argues that, despite Sebald’s protestations to the contrary and his clear narrative efforts to avoid it, Austerlitz is a traditionally narrative melodrama. “If history is so unrecoverable,” he asks, “then why has Austerlitz just been able to discover all the major details of his past?” Kathy Behrendt resolves the tension between the two paradigms by revising the antinarrativist position to accommodate the novel’s focus on memory. Austerlitz, she contends, is an antinarrative that shows that memory is not dispensable when personal memory is connected to historical memory; the antinarrativist position needs to acknowledge the painful necessity of memory. Behrendt accepts the novel’s “narrative skepticism” without question, locating

34. Fuchs, Schmerzesspuren der Geschichte, 32.
35. Cf. Bettina Mosbach, “Superimposition.” Mosbach reverses these assumptions, asserting that while Austerlitz cannot restore a chronological sense of self, the narrator creates “meaningful correspondences” and “continuity” through analogy and superimposition (407). Mosbach’s assessment of the narrator’s creation is also problematic; while she criticizes the narrator’s analogies as “the product[s] of a mind confused” that are superimposed on Austerlitz’s story (402), she concludes that it is the narrator’s “systematic confusion of its ‘true’ chronology that paradoxically puts A’s story in ‘proper order’” (407). Given that Austerlitz has departed, however, he could not benefit from this “proper order,” which he had sought.
37. Kathy Behrendt, “Scraping Down the Past,” 398–99, 405–7. She also says that the narrativist position must recognize that memory and a coherent story are not always grounds for optimism. I disagree with her conclusions about the ultimate results of memory, since I think that the end of the novel suggests a positive outlook for Austerlitz, if with a melancholy tone. See also Zilcosky, “Lost and Found.”
the tension about memory within the antinarrative position, rather than in
the book’s combination of the two modes.

I think, though, that both modes are clearly visible. In Austerlitz’s story,
the tension between them has been unproblematic because Sebald uses them
according to convention and the norms of ethical representation. Most read-
ers have unconsciously resolved the tension as Fuchs does: the narrativist arc
that corresponds to trauma theory is associated with Austerlitz’s voice, and
the antinarrativist tendencies and strategies are emphasized as the German
narrator’s and/or author’s efforts to maintain appropriate distance. Sebald and
his critical readers seem to be in accord about who should tell what kinds of
stories about the Holocaust.

I assert, however, that both the narrativist and antinarrativist paradigms
can also be applied to the narrator’s implicit story about himself. And in that
context, they become much more contentious. In talking about his narrar-
tor, Sebald, like his readers, emphasized his role as a mediator: “I think it’s
important to know the point of view from which these tales are told, the
moral makeup of the teller. That’s why my narrator has such a presence.”

The narrator in Austerlitz does have a palpable presence. Of the 421-page
book, 79 pages take place outside of Austerlitz’s memories. While many of
these reproduce Austerlitz’s architectural monologues, the remainder con-
sists of the narrator’s accounts of his meetings with Austerlitz and of the
personal experiences he associates with those meetings. These accounts allow
the reader to infer a great deal about his identity and his relationship to Aus-
terlitz. They suggest that as a German, he has been traumatized indirectly by
the events of the Holocaust, and that this trauma determines the nature of
his relationship to Austerlitz and his story. Both Garloff and Taberner pursue
aspects of this interaction between the narrator’s identity and his representa-
tion of Austerlitz’s history. But the narrator’s story is not present simply to
inflect Austerlitz’s, or even to explore the problem of narrating the Jewish
“other’s” story. The narrator’s story, or the position that it assumes in relation
to Austerlitz’s, is an essential part of the story about postwar identity and
history that the text tells. The shape that the German narrator’s story takes is
crucial, yet even those studies that focus on the narrator do not consider this
shape.

I think that the narrator appears as a victim of trauma who needs a thera-
peutic story but whose need is thwarted because of discursive constraints:
German suffering does not belong to the “master-narrative” of the Holocaust.

40. See, for instance, Garloff, “Task of the Narrator”; Taberner, “German Nostalgia?”;
Prager, “Good German.”
The issue of German suffering during the war at large has been a recurring topic of great controversy in Germany. Memory and historical fact both provide ample proof of German civilian hardship, but while some argue that these stories must be heard, others object that they distract attention from, and even seek to ameliorate German culpability for, the National Socialist massacre of the Jews. Thus, from the television miniseries *Heimat* to Ronald Reagan's and Helmut Kohl's visit to the military cemetery at Bitburg, from the *Historikerstreit* [historians' debate] to the international arguments about the proposed museum for documenting the plight of German refugees after World War II,\(^4\) representations of the German experience of the war have sparked public controversy on a scale few topics in contemporary Germany can. The *feuilleton* flurry surrounding Sebald's own *On the Natural History of Destruction* [*Luftkrieg und Literatur*], in which he laments the supposed dearth of literary writing about the bombing of Germany, also owes its intensity to this dynamic. Andreas Huyssen rejects the charge that this text relativizes the German past and argues that the taboo on discussing German suffering must weaken,\(^5\) but Sebald's delivery of the original lectures in Zürich in 1997 and their subsequent publication in 2001 began a heated debate about the possibility of discussing German suffering without relativizing German crimes.\(^6\) Strangely, despite the strong responses to these lectures, the issue of German suffering has rarely been raised in connection with Sebald's fiction. Or perhaps it is not so strange. After all, whereas the lectures treat the firebombings, the fiction treats the Holocaust. In this realm, the idea of German suffering and trauma is even more out of place. And yet, I believe that both German suffering at the Holocaust and the discursive constraints placed on representing it—its decisive “out-of-placeness”—are central components of Sebald's text.

\(^4\) Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* (1984) treats German history, including National Socialism and World War II, by following the experiences of a fictional family and village from 1919 to 1982. Reagan's and Kohl's 1985 ceremonial visit to Bitburg became controversial after it was revealed that members of the *Waffen-SS* were buried there alongside army soldiers. In the *Historikerstreit*, which played out largely in newspapers, historians and philosophers contested the interpretation of Germany's World War II history (were Nazi crimes singular, or comparable to those of other authoritarian regimes?) and its implications for postwar German identity and policy. The Center against Expulsions [Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen] was first proposed in 1999. After public and political debates, the Federal Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation [Bundesstiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung] was founded in 2008 with a broader mission of commemorating all the refugees generated by National Socialist policies, World War II, and their aftermath.

\(^5\) Huyssen, “Rewritings and New Beginnings,” 81.

\(^6\) Gerald Fetz's online review of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (2003) credits Sebald's lectures and text with having touched off the flood of writing and documentation about the bombings in Germany.
The Narrator’s Trauma

Sebald’s narrator has a strong presence, but he offers little concrete information about himself. He spent his childhood in the town of W., probably sometime in the 1940s, since he was a university student in the mid-1960s. He studied in England, during which time he made several trips to Belgium, and after a brief return to Germany in 1975, he made England his permanent home in 1976. There, he teaches at a university. He comes to London only rarely; one of his visits is prompted by a frightening disruption in the vision of his right eye. Even such a spare biography is difficult to assemble; the reader must glean bits of information from the narrator’s comments on his meetings with Austerlitz and, particularly, on the experiences that are temporally close to and that he associates with those meetings.

The Footnote

I believe that the key for deciphering this information resides in a passage that has been almost entirely overlooked: the book’s single, anomalous footnote. This footnote opens the door to understanding the narrator’s preoccupations and fascination with Austerlitz, the narrative style that effaces the differences between him and his subject, and the relationship that the text suggests between the story the narrator tells about Austerlitz and his own history. The footnote signals the repressed German trauma that constitutes the text’s second story line.

Reviewing his manuscript and Austerlitz’s discussion of the Lucerne train station, the narrator remembers, as if he had forgotten it until then, his own experience of that spot. The narrator visits Lucerne and, thinking of Austerlitz’s comments, observes the train station from a bridge. A few hours later, as he is sleeping, the building catches fire and burns to the ground. The news images of the burning building remain in his mind for weeks, and he says that these visions cause him to feel “that I had been to blame, or at least one of those to blame, for the Lucerne fire” (11) [daß ich der Schuldige oder zumindest einer der Mitschuldigen sei an dem Luzerner Brand (20)]. Vivid dreams of the fire haunt him for years thereafter. In this footnote, the German narrator expresses his unease and anxiety at the thought of a conflagration that spun out of control and destroyed an old and venerable building; despite his physical distance from the event, he cannot help but feel himself to be guilty. His response to this fire thus mirrors a common German response to the historical event that bears the name of such a fire: the Holocaust.
The connection to the Holocaust is intensified by the narrator’s use of the word “Mitschuldige” [accessory], a term common in postwar discussions of German guilt, to refer to his inexplicable feeling of culpability. The narrator feels guilty about the fire simply by virtue of his temporal and spatial proximity to its location; it actually occurs only “long after I was fast asleep in my hotel room in Zurich” (10) [als ich längst wieder in tiefstem Schlaf in meinem Züricher Hotelzimmer lag (19)]. Similarly, any guilt he experiences about the Holocaust can be only of a proximate nature, since he is too young to bear any direct responsibility for its events.

The footnote’s form and content suggest that the narrator is marked not only by guilt, however, but also by trauma. For the reader who follows the star that marks the footnote and who reads the note as it extends across three pages, the subordinated text arrests and interrupts the main narrative, much as mental reenactments of traumatic events are said to intrude into and interrupt normal experience. And the footnote’s content describes the narrator’s haunting by the events that traumatize him: “In my dreams, even years later, I sometimes saw the flames leaping from the dome and lighting up the entire panorama of the snow-covered Alps” (11) [Noch viele Jahre später habe ich manchmal in meinen Träumen gesehen, wie die Flammen aus dem Kuppeldach schlugen und das gesamte Panorama der Schneealpen illuminierten (20)]. With respect to the Lucerne fire, the narrator exhibits the classic signs of trauma. He could not fully experience the horror of the event at the time or construct a narrated and structured memory of it, since he was in bed and unaware. But after seeing news footage of the blaze, he relives it time and again in his dreams; the image is engraved in his mind. Even as he experiences guilt for the event, it traumatizes him.

This mixture of guilt and trauma is symptomatic of the relationship the text suggests between the narrator and National Socialist violence. Even the way he learns of the traumatizing Lucerne fire links his experience of it to a common German experience of the Holocaust; Aleida Assmann posits that Germans have been traumatized by the Holocaust through the photos and newsreels they saw of its horrors after they “slept through” the events them-

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44. Wirtz, in “Schwarze Zuckerwatte,” and Garloff, in “Task of the Narrator,” also note the narrator’s feeling of guilt. Wirtz interprets it as a manifestation of the “black narcissism” that binds the narrator to Austerlitz (533), and Garloff mentions it in passing as an instance of the narrator’s “occasional guilt feelings,” which “indicate that he also feels responsible for the violence he recounts” (161).

45. This idea of an “unexperienced” experience being replayed by the trauma victim belongs to a conception of trauma that Ruth Leys terms the “mimetic paradigm.” Leys, Trauma: A Genealogy, 1–17. For an example of such a conception, see Caruth, “Introduction,” 153.
selves. As Garloff puts it, “the narrator is rather carefully construed as both similar to and different from the protagonist, and as both a victim and an accomplice of past violence.” Although the narrator’s relation to the Holocaust diverges completely from Austerlitz’s, the text depicts both as suffering trauma from it. This trauma marks both men; “they [have] become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”

Traumatic Traces

The remainder of the narrator’s account of his own experiences supports the idea that he suffers from a trauma originating in the Holocaust, and this supposition explains oddities in both his character and his narration. The overarching structure of the text, for instance, reflects the trauma victim’s compulsion to repeat, a common element of the theory of trauma from Freud’s anecdote of his grandson’s “fort/da” game in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” to contemporary psychological writings on post-traumatic stress syndrome. The narrator’s text reveals his inability to turn from the topic of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. He leads into his discussion of Austerlitz’s life through the story of the victim Jean Améry, and when he closes Austerlitz’s tale, it is only to embark on a narrative about Dan Jacobson’s Jewish forefathers. This narrative constitutes the text’s inconclusive end; the narrator finishes Jacobson’s book and returns to Mechelen, the site from which Belgian Jews were deported to the death camps in the East.

Not only does the narrator return explicitly to stories of the Holocaust’s victims, but his descriptions of the few places he visits exhibit uncanny connections to them and to the events that claimed them. The most striking of these resemblances surfaces when the narrator relates Austerlitz’s discussion of the Antwerp train station. Standing beneath the huge clock that usurps the traditional place of the emperor in the pantheon, Austerlitz comments on its omnipotent power:

The movements of all travelers could be surveyed from the central position occupied by the clock in Antwerp Station, and conversely all travelers had to look up at the clock and were obliged to adjust their activities to its demands. (12)

46. Assmann and Frevert, Geschichtsvergessenheit, 117.
47. Garloff, “Task of the Narrator,” 160.
Chapter Seven

Von dem Zentralpunkt, den das Uhrwerk im Antwerpener Bahnhof einnehme, ließen sich die Bewegungen sämtlicher Reisender überwachen, und umgekehrt müßten die Reisenden alle zu der Uhr aufblicken und seien gezwungen, ihre Handlungsweise auszurichten nach ihr. (22)

The clock and its regulation of time assume the all-powerful position of an upstart dictator. The next sentence both relates this dictator directly to Hitler and identifies the narrator as the source of this uncanny connection; it refers to universal time’s final triumph over the world in the nineteenth century as “Gleichschaltung,” the term used to describe Hitler’s consolidation of power in 1933 and a German word that must originate with the narrator, rather than with the French-speaking Austerlitz.49 This same clock doubles as an eerie concentration camp guard, as its guarantee and slogan “Endacht maakt macht” (12) [Unity makes power],50 echoes the infamous “Arbeit macht frei” [Work makes free] of the Auschwitz gates.

Likewise, the narrator’s association of the people in the train station with the animals of the nocturnal zoo locates the novel’s association between train stations and the Holocaust with him. Entering the station, he sees it as “another Nocturama” (6) [zweites Nocturama (13)] and its people as the zoo’s animals. He is overtaken by the

passing thought, nonsensical in itself, that they were the last members of a diminutive race which had perished or been expelled from its homeland, and that because they alone survived they wore the same sorrowful expression as the creatures in the zoo. (7)

an sich unsinnigen Gedanken, es handle sich bei ihnen um die letzten Angehörigen eines reduzierten, aus seiner Heimat ausgewiesenen oder untergegangenen Volks, um solche, die, weil nur sie von allen noch überlebten, die gleichen gramvollen Mienen trugen wie die Tiere im Zoo. (14)

Like the Jews to be found in train stations during the final years of the Third Reich, the figures know themselves to be the sad and final members of a doomed people.51 The narrator’s comparison of them with animals even recalls

49. Translation plays a key role in both revealing and obscuring the narrator’s trauma. The narrator’s translation of Austerlitz’s French narration into German allows the text to resonate with German discussions of the Holocaust and National Socialism. The English translation often removes these traces, and perhaps also words that lend strong emotional coloring to the narrator, from the text. In this case, Bell writes that the clocks were “standardized” (12).

50. My translation. Bell leaves the phrase untranslated, as it is in the original.

51. Of course, the connection between train stations and the Holocaust underlies Austerlitz’s own fascination and engagement with train stations throughout the novel. See Öhlschläger,
uncannily the propaganda that proclaimed the Jews to be subhuman. And the next sentence identifies Austerlitz, whose story will shortly reveal him as the last of his line, to be one of these people.

But this passage also reveals the narrator’s resistance to recognizing consciously the connections his mind makes. He dismisses the image as a “passing thought, nonsensical in itself,” refusing to recognize its relevance for the story he is telling. The passage that perhaps most strongly suggests his own traumatic relationship to the World War II past indicates that he also avoids the connection between these historical events and himself. Here, he describes his reactions to the fortress of Breendonk, a building in which Jewish victims were imprisoned and tortured. During his visit, the rooms of the fortress remind him of his home and his childhood. The first of these associations seems innocuous: massive carts that the prisoners had pushed recall to his mind the farmers’ wheelbarrows of his hometown. But the associations become progressively more sinister as he penetrates deeper into the fortress. He next sees the recreation room of the SS men and easily imagines the men on which the victims were tortured, he is assaulted by childhood memories that arise out of “the abyss”: the washhouse, the butcher cleaning away the bloody remains of his work, his father using the disliked word “scrubbing brush” (25) [Wurzelbürste (41)]. Upon reaching the place in the fort most terribly representative of Jewish trauma, he is overcome by memories of his own, contemporaneous childhood, of determined and painful efforts to wash away dirt and blood stains. And he begins to faint. Still, he professes not to understand why the location should call forth these upsetting childhood memories: “No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open” (25) [Genau kann niemand erklären, was in uns geschieht, wenn die Türe aufgerissen wird, hinter der die Schrecken der Kindheit verborgen sind (41)].

The narrator thus exhibits the opposing tendencies of the trauma victim that Freud identifies. On one level, he seeks repetition of the event. On another, his behavior conforms to Freud’s observation that trauma victims’ waking energies are spent less in trying to remember the traumatic event

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Beschädigtes Leben, 111–16. The description here is the narrator’s, however, rather than Austerlitz’s.

52. The German “aufgerissen” suggests a more violent act in opening the doors to memory than does the English “flung.”
than in trying not to think about it. During the upsetting flood of childhood memories at Breendonk, the narrator speaks of them as being hidden behind closed doors that must forcibly be torn open. In contrast, Austerlitz’s fascination with closed doors leads him to imagine what they hide. He recalls a dream in which he catches a glimpse of what lies inside: “I still remember how, in my half-conscious state, I tried to hold fast to my powdery gray dream image . . . and to discover what it concealed” (194) [Ich weiß noch, wie ich im Halbschlafl versuchte, das pulvergraue . . . Traumbild festzuhalten und zu erkennen, was in ihm verborgen war (280–81)]. The narrator behaves quite differently. He reports that when he first visits Breendonk, he shrinks from passing through its dark entrance. Once in the fort, each step into the interior increases his panic and his perception of lack of air and of weight pressing down until he almost cannot make the final descent into the torture chamber. Much of the visit has “darkened” in his mind, possibly “because I did not really want to see what it had to show” (23) [weil ich nicht wirklich sehen wollte, was man dort sah (38)]. On his second visit to Breendonk, after Austerlitz completes his story, he cannot enter the fort’s “dark gate” at all (296). Instead, he sits down on the bank of the moat to read Jacobson’s story, unable or unwilling to reenter the place where his memories had assaulted him before.

**Trauma and Identification**

Reading the text as a product of the narrator’s traumatic relationship to the Holocaust accounts for much of his strangeness as a character and a storyteller. On a psychological level, it provides grounds for his devotion to Austerlitz’s story. On the level of poetics, it explains both his narrative style and the text’s structure. The interaction of these two levels raises questions about the historical, political, and ethical implications of his story and the text’s representation of it. The narrator’s trauma provides an unspoken justification for breaking the injunction against identification with the victims and, at the same time, implies his own need for a narrative of healing.

The narrator’s final look at the fortress highlights the symbolic role this recurring image plays, a role that parallels the novel’s narrative structure. Just as fortresses were built with multiple lines of defense to protect against assault from without, the narrator uses others’ stories to shield himself from assault from within. His repeated engagement with others’ stories facilitates his effort
to keep his own buried, a practice that Eric Santner terms “narrative fetish-
ism.” By telling others' stories, he avoids “the need for mourning by simulating
a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss
elsewhere.” The layers upon layers of narration—Austerlitz’s citing of oth-
ers’ words in his own telling, Jacobson’s text on his family’s history, Claude
Simon’s relation of Gastone Novelli’s life story—act as defensive walls that
shield the narrator’s own story. During his first conversation with the narrator
in Antwerp, Austerlitz remarks on the irrational and futile nineteenth-century
efforts to protect the old fortifications around cities by ringing them with lay-
ers of new walls. He sees these projects as proof of the human tendency “to
forge ahead with our projects far beyond any reasonable bounds” (18) [unsere
Unternehmungen voranzutreiben weit über jede Vernunftgrenze hinaus (31)].
Certainly, the unconscious efforts to protect oneself from remembering traum-
atic events thwart all reason; LaCapra holds that remembering and nar-
rating the traumatic event offers the only hope for mourning and working
through it to some degree. But reason does not enter the equation. In fact,
the narrator’s unconscious engagement with his trauma resembles the behav-
ior of the only animal he remembers from the Nocturama. His repeats others’
stories much as the raccoon incessantly washes his apple,

as if it hoped that all this washing, which went far beyond any reasonable
thoroughness, would help it to escape the unreal world in which it had
arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own. (4)

als hoffe er, durch dieses, weit über jede vernünftige Gründlichkeit hinaus-
gehende Waschen entkommen zu können aus der falschen Welt, in die er
gewissermaßen ohne sein eigenes Zutun geraten war. (10–11)

Reading the narrator as a trauma victim employing narrative fetishism to pro-
tect himself explains his obsession with Austerlitz. From the beginning, his
interaction with Austerlitz exhibits a curious one-sidedness. During their first
meeting in the Antwerp train station, Austerlitz’s descriptions of train sta-
tion architecture consume hours. Once Austerlitz has begun telling the nar-
rator his life story, a postcard with a date and address is enough to bring the
narrator scurrying to London to listen silently to the next installment. Long
intervals between such summons generate anxiety in the narrator; the first
time it occurs, he expresses fear that he might have said something to offend

54. Santner, “Representation of Trauma,” 144.
55. LaCapra, History and Memory, 10–12.
Austerlitz and, thus, to prevent him from continuing with his story. The narrator’s need to hear Austerlitz’s story results in a relationship based neither in the equal exchange of friendship nor on the standard therapeutic model of doctor and patient. A victim of trauma himself, the narrator remains oddly passive in his role as interlocutor for Austerlitz’s narration of his traumatic memories. He does not fulfill the role Dori Laub outlines for someone who is helping a trauma victim excavate and witness his experience of the traumatic events; while the narrator remains “unobtrusive [and] nondirective,” he fails spectacularly to be “active, in the lead” as Austerlitz tells his story. This passivity is, perhaps, a symptom of his desire for the complete obliteration of his own story. After all, it is after the first installment of Austerlitz’s story has consumed eighty pages of text in which the narrator disappears almost completely that the hotel doorman’s friendly “good night” appears to the narrator “almost an absolution or a blessing” (97) [eine Freisprechung beinahe oder ein Segen (145)]. He desperately needs the self-forgetfulness that Austerlitz’s story offers.

The entire text bears the traces of the narrator’s desire to erase himself from the story he tells, a desire that derives both from his trauma and from the ethical imperative to give voice to the Jewish experience of suffering. At the same time, the trauma forces a continual return to his own connection to the events, and the ethical demands require that the narrator mediate the victim’s voice, rather than disappear into it. In other words, the text shows a constant tension between the narrator’s self-erasure and the insistent need, both psychological and ethical, to insert himself into the story. His strategy for reporting Austerlitz’s story provides an obvious example. As Eduard does in Stuffcake, Sebald’s narrator presents himself as a simple scribe, transparently recording the facts of his meetings and conversations with Austerlitz. His text consists of an ostensibly verbatim reconstruction of the conversations; the tag “he said,” followed by direct speech, recurs constantly. Eventually, however, the ubiquitous tags foreground the story’s mediated nature even as they insist on the narrator’s role as mere reporter. This mediation becomes particularly visible when he reports Austerlitz’s report of another’s speech, resulting in passages such as, “in the Šporkova, Vera said to me, said Austerlitz” [in der Šporkova, sagte mir Věra, sagte Austerlitz (262)]. Many critics cite these tags as evidence of Sebald’s care to approach the victim’s

57. In these eighty pages, the narrator surfaces only in the numerous “he said” phrases and in a single mention of a slight pause in Austerlitz’s narration.
58. My translation.
story in a mediated, ethical way.\textsuperscript{59} It seems that Sebald intended them to be read in this way: “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. . . . I content myself with the role of the messenger.”\textsuperscript{60} Disidentification happens here. The narrator recognizes Austerlitz’s experience, but he avoids the dangerous trap of identifying with him.

Still, the danger of the German narrator’s inappropriate identification with the Jewish Austerlitz looms large in interpretations such as Taberner’s and Garloff’s,\textsuperscript{61} and I think that many interpretations argue against its presence precisely because the novel pushes the bounds. Even as the tags and other stylistic features foreground distance, other characteristics of the narrator’s style work toward eliding the boundaries between himself and Austerlitz. He forgoes quotation marks for demarcating individuals’ speech, instead using a combination of the German special subjunctive to indicate indirect quotations and lexical markers such as “he said” to mark direct quotations. The combination of indirect and direct citation can create the impression of a gradual slide from the narrator’s voice to the voice that he attributes to Austerlitz and back. These slides often occur at the beginning of one of Austerlitz’s monologues, when the narrator’s relation of the events surrounding the two men’s conversation gradually yields to Austerlitz’s voice. One passage, for instance, begins with the narrator’s direct speech and self-reference; then shifts to the special subjunctive as Austerlitz begins to speak; and then presents direct speech from an “I” that it identifies as Austerlitz only after a long sentence of uncertainty.\textsuperscript{62}


\textsuperscript{60} Jaggi, “Recovered Memories.”

\textsuperscript{61} The problem of improper identification is one of Taberner’s central concerns in “German Nostalgia?” Garloff begins “Task of the Narrator” with her contention that in \textit{Austerlitz}, Sebald sets out to work against the improper identification with the Jewish victims of National Socialism (157–58).

\textsuperscript{62} The slides produce their full effect only in the German, as English has no way of rendering the German special subjunctive. In her translation, Bell shifts immediately to Austerlitz’s direct speech:

As we walked down to Greenwich, Austerlitz told me that a number of artists had painted the park in past centuries. Their pictures showed . . . [two long sentences, more than a half page, of indirect speech; the narrator is the speaker, but uses verb mood to indicate that he is reproducing Austerlitz’s speech]. I believe I first saw an example of these panoramas of Greenwich in one of the dilapidated country houses which, as I mentioned yesterday, I often visited with Hilary when I was studying at Oxford. I clearly remember, said Austerlitz . . . . ” (102–3)
Other passages waver between the two forms, as if the narrator cannot quite decide whose voice should dominate. When Austerlitz tells the narrator of his gradually intensifying disgust at his own writing, for instance, a single sentence of indirect speech appears between two “directly quoted” statements:

I was increasingly overcome by a sense of aversion and distaste, said Austerlitz, at the mere thought of opening the bundles of papers and looking through the endless reams I had written in the course of the years. Yet reading and writing had always been his favorite occupation. How happily, said Austerlitz, have I sat over a book in the deepening twilight. (121–22)


Perhaps most striking are those few passages when an unusual use of deictics makes identifying the subject and object of speech difficult. In the middle of a passage in which Austerlitz describes his retirement in first-person direct speech, the following sentence appears: “I might perhaps, Austerlitz said to me, have had some idea since our first conversations in Antwerp of the extent of his interests” (120) [Ich hätte ja, so sagte Austerlitz zu mir, vielleicht seit unseren ersten Antwerpener Gesprächen schon eine Ahnung von der Weitläufigkeit seiner Interessen (178)]. Suddenly and without warning, the “I” is the narrator, not Austerlitz.

Compare to the German original:


63. Though the “his” of the English translation does signal a shift back to the narrator’s voice, Bell includes the tag “he added,” which attributes the middle sentence to Austerlitz and dampens the effect. I have removed this tag here.
Other elements also contribute to the blurring between the voices and identities of the narrator and his subject. Prager notes the afflictions of sight that plague both Austerlitz and the narrator and concludes that “Sebald’s work at times blurs important differences between the speaker and the listener,” so that the narrator sometimes appears as a kind of “doppelgänger.” And there are many other ways in which they coincide. Among the novel’s recurring motifs and images are half-light and the soft, blurred colors often accompanying it. Both “the narrator” and “Austerlitz” paint the background for the events they relate as an atmosphere that hovers between darkness and light. Similarly, both figures are often surrounded by silent spaces empty of other people. Sitting in a hotel late at night, the narrator writes in a quiet broken only by the inhuman clacking of the heating and an occasional funereal black taxi on the street outside (97). This quiet reappears in the narrator’s description of Austerlitz’s house, which lies on a “remarkably quiet street” (117) [auffallend stille Gasse (174)] leagues away in atmosphere from the geographically adjacent, busy Mile End junction. Similarly, Austerlitz’s accounts feature the silence of abandoned, unpeopled spaces, which he encounters in the empty streets of Terezín and the silent rooms of the Theresienstadt and veterinary museums (188–89, 198, 265). The narrator has blurred the distinctions between himself and his subject to the extent that the reader can determine no clear voice for either one.

In other words, despite Sebald’s clear emphasis on maintaining distance between the narrator and Austerlitz, the text undermines that distance in many ways. Prager calls the narrator’s getting closer to Austerlitz empathy; Ralf Jeutter holds that the narrator appropriates Jewish stories to discover “his own truth which converges with the truth of his subjects.” In either case, such readings question whether the narrator really does what so many praise him for doing: fulfilling the imperative to give the Holocaust victim voice while emphasizing the distance between the victim and the narrator (or author, painter, filmmaker, etc.). Instead, the narrator’s mode of approach appears to be one that corresponds to what Michael Geyer sees as a common kind of German memory practice. He contends that the tension of wanting both to feel German and to acknowledge the disaster of the Holocaust has led Germans to emphasize repentance, reconciliation, and pity when dealing with the past. This emphasis, in turn, has fostered a German identification

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65. For instances where Austerlitz is the speaker, see 45, 125, 145, 156–57. For examples by the narrator, see 3–4, 6, 31, 39, 298.
with Jewish victims, rather than an unearthing of German memory. Despite the text’s emphasis on the narrator as a mediator, I do not think that the narrator can be absolved of trying to identify with Austerlitz in order to avoid confronting his own past.

**Evaluating the Text’s Ethics**

The question, then, becomes how to evaluate both the narrator who seeks this identification and the text that presents him as seeking it. In other words, my concern in this last section is to investigate how an understanding of the narrator as traumatized affects ethical judgments of the text on two different levels: the level of the narrative audience, within the logic of the storyworld; and that of the authorial audience, which sees the storyworld as a construction. I argue that these judgments are very different, and that their differences have repercussions both for understanding the novel, and for the claims of the narrativist and antinarrativist paradigms. Other recent studies have also pointed to the differences of interpretation that these two levels of reading yield. Richard Crownshaw has roundly criticized studies that read Austerlitz’s trauma and the text’s traumatic engagement with readers as real, rather than as authorial reflections on trauma. Targeting studies that view Sebald as an ethical model, Prager asserts that, while a nonfiction account similar to the novel might be ethically laudable, a fictional empathetic German listener is not appropriate to the topic: “Were the work not ultimately a well-orchestrated work of fiction, it would appear that Sebald’s intention is to make room for testimony, or to allow the victims to speak for themselves.” As a work of fiction, however, it does not achieve this ethical goal. Horstkotte maintains that Austerlitz’s reluctance to face the reality of Auschwitz is psychologically motivated, but the novel’s retreat from that reality conjures Auschwitz as an “unreal or mythical place that bears no consequence for the characters’ lives and no relation to the present.” In its refusal to approach Auschwitz, the novel denies its violence any relevance to Austerlitz, the narrator, or the present world. My reading of the narrator’s story runs in a similar vein: while it is unproblematic on the narrative level, I find it unsettling on the authorial one. In this case, then, the distances of ethical and interpretive judgment are

68. Rabinowitz’s “Truth in Fiction” provides a typology of audiences.
70. Prager, “Good German,” 92 (my emphasis).
71. Horstkotte, Nachbilder, 253.
not located between the ideal narrative and narrative audiences within the fictional world, as Rabinowitz has argued; instead, the fact of fictionality that separates narrative and authorial audience generates the disjuncture in ethical judgment.  

Evaluating the Narrator's Need for His Story

NARRATIVE AUDIENCE. Read from the perspective of the narrative audience, as a bystander within the fictional world, the idea that the narrator suffers from a trauma originating with the events of the Holocaust discourages judging his mode of encounter with the past: he is a man who suffers because he cannot tell his story. As I noted at the outset, many have argued that the novel is highly antinarrative. Behrendt, for instance, reads its emphasis on mediation, discontinuity, and uncertainty as indicating Sebald’s antinarrativist approach to Austerlitz’s story, and to identity and history in general. Such stories should not be coherent. Bettina Mosbach, too, sees narrative as inadequate to Austerlitz’s plight; he cannot recreate a coherent life story because the Holocaust is a fissure that cannot be bridged. No narrative can generate a sense of *idem*-identity, of sameness over time, across that break. The little Czech boy and the English professor can never be united.

Yet the trauma theory that underlies the novel values narrative differently, and the novel’s overall logic suggests that assembling a life story can restore a sense of self. From Freud to recent psychological and humanist accounts, trauma theorists have emphasized the therapeutic value of testimony, often in the form of narrative. The novel’s narrative arc suggests that for Austerlitz, self-narration has had a therapeutic effect. As Zilcosky argues, while the novel’s discourse and mode of representation *assert* that “coming home” is impossible, its progression tells a different story. Austerlitz identifies himself, finds his mother, regains his childhood language, and embarks on a search for his father. Most significant, I think, he intends to undertake that trip with

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73. Kathy Behrendt, "Scraping Down the Past."
75. Paul Ricoeur attributes such a bridging function to narrative. See *Oneself as Another* (122, 48) and my discussion in chapter 2.
another living person. In the grip of his crippling past, he had fled from his love interest Marie and the life in the present that she represents. At the end of the book, he goes to look for her. Despite the novel’s emphasis on the discontinuities and destroyed connections of Austerlitz’s life, his encounter with the listening narrator has allowed him to construct a coherent life story and to move forward into the future.

That encounter provides no ray of hope for the narrator, however. Zilcosky believes that the narrator, too, finds his “point of origin” and the possibility of a “recuperated self” at the end of the book. Having returned to Mechelen, the narrator reads Dan Jacobson’s account, in which he finds Sebald’s birthdate (and, presumably, his own) in a list of victims’ identifying data; Zilcosky discounts the narrator’s return to “nomadism” in the novel’s final sentence as holding within it the promise of “reorientation.”

I think that the narrator’s situation is very different, however. Claire Feehily observes that “the narrator’s psychological journey overarches the plot” of the novel. While Austerlitz’s story remains encapsulated within the novel and attains a degree of closure, the narrator’s story neither begins nor ends with Austerlitz’s. At the book’s end, Austerlitz is still searching, but when the search for his father is complete, his quest will reach its logical end, an end where the hope of life, as represented by Marie, awaits. But the narrator leaves Austerlitz’s story only to delve into and lose himself in the next. And there is no end to the victims’ stories. Nor, despite his discovery of his birthdate, can he ever really find himself there. The “point of origin” he finds can never be his own.

Cathy Caruth sees the experience of trauma shared through testimony as leading to an “encounter with another” and the potential of an ethical “awakening” to the real. But the relationship between Austerlitz and the narrator belies the implicit optimism of this view of trauma and its articulation. Unable to speak his trauma himself, the German narrator perpetually seeks voices, victims, who can. Continually projecting this loss on others allows him to avoid narrating and processing his own trauma—but this avoidance of memory and mourning wins only the certainty that the trauma will persist.

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78. Ibid., 696–97.
80. Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, 8–9, 97–112. Other theorists have criticized the broad understanding of trauma and its relationship to history that Caruth and others have articulated. The objection to expanding the term to ever-new situations, including those of perpetrators, is a driving force of Leys’s genealogy of the term in Trauma: A Genealogy (1–2, 305). In Writing History, Writing Trauma, LaCapra warns against conflating history and trauma (xi), or sacralizing it by granting it redemptive power (23).
81. LaCapra, History and Memory, 10.
The text’s close indicates that, for the narrator, the experience of the Holocaust remains traumatic indeed.

The narrator’s failure to address and narrate his own trauma carries another consequence. LaCapra holds that “witnessing is a necessary condition of agency” and that, for trauma victims, it may be the only activity that can release them from shock and help them interact with others in the present time.\(^8^2\) The narrator, who cannot tell his story because postwar discursive constraints prevent him from doing so, remains a nonentity with no apparent ties to the world. He seems to have no country, no relationships other than that with Austerlitz, and no connection to the present day. Instead, his story emerges from the silent corners where the past persists: the fort-become-museum, the cemetery, the quiet house and photographs that offer the only proof and remembrance of Austerlitz’s past life. Prisoner to his trauma, the narrator comes running whenever Austerlitz sends a postcard, and then inherits Austerlitz’s house, a place dedicated to memory and the past that the narrator cannot escape. While Austerlitz goes out to meet the world at the end of the book, the narrator retreats from it; in the last scene, he returns to Mechelen and the stories of Holocaust victims.\(^8^3\)

The footnote’s structure, too, appears symptomatic of the narrator’s traumatic relationship to the past. Readers are likely to accept its form as a footnote unthinkingly, since a note appears entirely appropriate to its contents: neither forwarding Austerlitz’s story, nor providing information about the narrator’s encounters with him, those contents belong in a subordinated relationship to the rest of the text, if they belong there at all. In fact, the reader may be tempted to skip over what the text presents (literally) as marginally relevant commentary; the sizeable chunks of three successive pages that the footnote takes up appear a tedious interruption of the narrative. In fact, however, this interruptive nature highlights the traumatic character of the memory. The narrator states that he remembers the occurrences in Lucerne “on looking through these notes” (10) [bei der Durchsicht dieser Aufzeichnungen (18)]; that is, the memory of this event breaks into what otherwise seems to be a completed, coherent, and linear history. Narratively and typographically, the memory disturbs the ordered and, while painful and distressing, accepted story of twentieth-century Jewish suffering. Such a disruption corresponds to the concept of history Shoshana Felman develops in *The Juridical Uncon-

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82. Ibid., 12. See also van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 13.
83. Focusing on the way the narrator presents Austerlitz’s tale, Taberner views this difference as the final evidence that the text refuses to equate the narrator with Austerlitz (“German Nostalgia?” 99).
scious. Based on her interpretation of Benjamin’s writings on history, she concludes that history actually “consists in chains of traumatic interruptions.” Rather than acknowledging these traumatic interruptions, however, history works to repress them. It first denies the defeated and traumatized access to history, silencing the direct expression of this trauma within the historical record, and then refuses to include the story of those traumatized within the official “victor’s history,” erasing any secondary mention of these traumatic breaks. This “historical unconscious” remains, however, with the result that the speechless silence of trauma lies at the heart of any history. Even if the narrator identifies himself with Austerlitz, his unacknowledged trauma prevents him from profiting from that identification. His trauma seems to justify his mode of engagement with the past.

AUTHORIAL AUDIENCE. Reading the narrator as a figure in a deliberately constructed story changes this assessment, however. Read on the level of the narrative audience, the footnote is symptomatic. But read on the level of the authorial audience, it is symbolic. It seems to represent the interruption of coherent history by this historical unconscious, the momentary expression of what remains silenced at the heart of Sebald’s text. In this interruptive capacity, it functions very much like the photographs that punctuate the text from beginning to end; indeed, the two photographs that appear on the page parallel the footnote’s effects. The footnote betrays what the main body of the text represses: the story of the narrator’s buried traumatic relationship to the events that drive Austerlitz’s story, the events of the Holocaust. Similarly, the thumbnail photograph of the fire that accompanies it, which depicts the scene from a distance, tells the story behind the narrator’s haunting much as a journalistic photo might. By relegating this relationship and story to the footnote, the text encourages the reader to skim over it. But at the same time, its placement in the footnote, in subscript underneath the main narrative of Austerlitz, draws attention to its subordination. In fact, the footnote and its photo are dwarfed by a large photograph of the inside of the dome, presumably taken by Austerlitz, whose fragmentary and tilted perspective reproduces his own feeling of skewed disorientation. In this text, the German narrator is a traumatized victim of a history that has been silenced in favor of the Jewish

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85. Ibid., 34.
86. Eshel’s “Power of Time” argues that the photos act as Benjaminian “genuine images” to mark that which remains absent from it (91, 94). Carolin Duttlinger’s “Traumatic Photographs” asserts that in *Austerlitz*, Sebald posits a “structural analogy” between trauma and photography.
87. I thank James van Dyke for drawing my attention to the very different characteristics of these two photos.
victims’ story. As a result, the narrator cannot hope to process his trauma or to experience a healing release from it. He is the unrecognized victim of the past that haunts Austerlitz.

While reading *Austerlitz* this way goes against the dominant grain of interpretations of Sebald’s fiction, it is very much in keeping with the concerns that Sebald raised in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, where he decries the failure of postwar German literature to offer an adequate account of German suffering during the war. And as Huyssen notes in relation to the nonfictional text, the novel may be concerned not only with the “psychic repression” associated with trauma, but also subliminally with the “political repression” that memory politics and the discursive constraints associated with them have imposed. The novel, like the lectures and the book they produced, argues that Germans must be able to tell the story of their own suffering if they are to be able to come to terms with the past, inhabit the present, and move forward into the future. Yet the paradigms of Holocaust representation dictate that their stories be subordinated, even silenced, in favor of other victims’ stories.

**Evaluating the Narrator’s Evasion of His Story**

The novel represses the narrator’s story and his need for it, because his story does not accord with the paradigms of Holocaust representation to which the novel otherwise so scrupulously adheres. Sebald demotes the narrator’s story to the margins and presents it in splintered fragments out of deference to the Jewish victim’s story—and highlights that demotion, a move that simultaneously reinforces and questions the paradigm that demands it.

This demotion might be seen not only as self-effacing, however, but also as self-serving for the narrator. As in all of the other fictional texts I have discussed, the narrator resists giving his life a narrative form that would unify his experience and his identity over time; in so doing, he evades the connection between his present self and the past that torments him. If readers imagine themselves among the narrative audience, as contemporaries of Jacques Austerlitz and his unnamed biographer, then the narrator’s opposing need for and evasion of his own story are psychologically motivated by his trauma.

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88. Huyssen, “On Rewritings,” 85. In his discussions of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Wilfried Wilms pursues the idea that politically driven discursive norms contributed not only to the dearth of representations of German suffering but also to Sebald’s attribution of this dearth to purely psychic causes. According to Wilms, these norms so conditioned Sebald’s perception that he failed to perceive them as he contemplated the topic of the Allied bombings. See “Taboo and Repression” and “Speak No Evil.”
In this case, the evasion is understandable. Behrendt conceives of Austerlitz's antinarrative impulses in this way and interprets the novel as showing that such avoidance, while it may be understandable, cannot be desirable. When personal and historical memory are so entwined as to be inseparable, she argues, “certain strands of historical memory are morally imperative for all concerned.”

A similar argument can be made about the narrator, as Behrendt does not. The end of the novel shows the effects of his resistance to connecting past and present. His failure to reckon with his past makes him a nonentity in the present, an empty figure with no relation to or ability to act in the world he inhabits. Fuchs’s assessment of Sebald’s relationship to the present applies to his narrator’s, as well: his historical engagement consists entirely of the memory of loss, with no notion that an awareness of this loss might call for critical—and potentially transformative—action in the present. The narrator’s existence is not, it seems to me, an ethically desirable one.

I know that my evaluations thus far present a catch-22: the narrator is damned if he (wants to) tell his story, and damned if he doesn’t. There seems to be no acceptable way for the German narrator to represent his own history. In fact, reading from within the authorial audience, I think this predicament is the point. Sebald exposes the narrator’s personally and ethically undesirable dilemma: the novel diagnoses the German plight as an inability to inhabit the present because of an unprocessed obsession with the past, an obsession that can take no acceptable form. This reading draws credibility from the openness with which the novel presents the narrator’s obsession with and desire for identification with Austerlitz, his evasion of his own past, and his hopeless future. On a more general level, this predicament exposes the inadequacy of approaches that proclaim either narrativist or antinarrativist approaches to identity and history as inherently superior. In its adherence to expectations as it presents Austerlitz’s story, the novel makes both appear viable: survivors have a right to narrativist self-understanding, while nonsurvivors should resist narratively constructed meaning when they represent survivors’ histories. Conversely, neither the depiction of the narrator’s narrativist need as repressed nor his antinarrativist self-presentation seems adequate. Either approach might, under certain circumstances, but neither does. Neither a narrativist nor an antinarrativist paradigm guarantees ethical soundness, in

90. Fuchs, Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte, 167–68. For Fuchs, Sebald’s seeming valuation of the past over the present is perhaps the most problematic aspect of his work (169–76).
91. In a similar vein, Wolff claims that Sebald work follows the “principle of simultaneously thematizing and problematizing narration—narration not only as story-telling but also as story-making—all while remaining within the narrative process.” Wolff, Sebald’s Hybrid Poetics, 198.
Holocaust representations or elsewhere. Nor does either preclude it. Whether or not a representation is ethical depends on the identities in question and the circumstances under which they are recalled, represented, and understood. Such a novel seems to me an important contribution to discussions about appropriate modes for engaging with the Holocaust, and with history more generally. It seeks to acknowledge and give voice to the German experience, making the German plight visible. It illuminates the impossible corner into which the narrativist and antinarrativist paradigms have driven the German narrator—and, perhaps, also the melancholy, expatriate Sebald.

This understanding of the narrator and Sebald’s presentation of him complements accounts like Wolff’s recent and compelling book, which focuses primarily on the author and Austerlitz as it argues that Sebald’s oeuvre as a whole searches for an ethical, literary approach to the past.92 Still, I have to close by relativizing my enthusiasm for Sebald’s achievement. This novel has always made me uneasy. In part, this uneasiness may stem from my own internalization of the norms that Sebald challenges: the idea that a survivor has a right to and need for a story, while the (child of a) perpetrator does not. The same interpretive framework that has discouraged many people from even perceiving the narrator’s story affects my judgment of it. In essence, we are the narrator’s ideal audience. We take him at face value, allowing him to hide in plain sight, because our own perceptual limitations make us blind to his situation. We are captivated by, and captives of, the lyric state that Sebald conjures. We have not yet become the authorial audience, one that can recognize and accept the novel as a book about Austerlitz and the narrating protagonist. We are the audience the implied author wants to expose; we should feel uneasy, because the book challenges our frameworks of interpretation.

But I think that my uneasiness also has another source. It is not just the narrator who directs attention to Austerlitz while he retreats, unconsciously presenting his story as suppressed by Jewish experience. Sebald, too, represents the book as a Jewish story, and consciously so. Paratexts like the title, cover photo, and interviews signal Austerlitz’s story not just as the more important one but, implicitly, as the only one. The German is “only” the narrator. “Hiding” the narrator’s story is part of Sebald’s point: discursive norms demand that such stories hide. But I have never been able to shake the suspicion that Sebald is hiding a bit, himself. Perhaps he was hiding from undesired controversy like that he experienced after the Luftkrieg und Literatur [Natural History of Destruction] lectures. Perhaps he feared that the story he wanted to tell about Austerlitz and the children’s transports

92. Wolff, Sebald’s Hybrid Poetics.
would be overshadowed or lost if such controversy ensued. Or, perhaps, he was moved by considerations about what his flesh-and-blood readers would bear.

I value the novel’s depiction of both Austerlitz’s plight and the narrator’s. I value the story it tells about how narratives can and cannot reconcile past and present. I value its diagnosis of the limitations that the narrativist and antinarrativist paradigms impose on individuals’ ability to tell their stories, and to be heard telling their stories, and to be understood as they tell them. Despite my appreciation for its achievements, however, my uneasiness persists about the way Sebald presents the two stories that he tells. Perhaps time will tell if that uneasiness is the product of my own limitations as an audience or of Sebald’s construction and presentation of his book. For now, I know only that it has been productive. It prompted me to investigate how narrative reckoning with the past functions in novels such as these—how dynamic observer narratives both present narrative as a means for reconciling past and present identities and cast doubt on its ability to achieve that aim.