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# From Kafka to Sebald

## *Modernism and Narrative Form*

Edited by

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## 8. Sebald's Encounters with French Narrative

L.  
Judith R. Ryan

Sebald's scholarly writings on literature tend to focus on themes and issues rather than on narrative technique. In his book on Döblin from 1980, for example, his main concern is to trace the representation of power and violence in Döblin's novels. To be sure, he can hardly avoid addressing the issue of montage, but he does so primarily in order to move beyond it.<sup>1</sup> When he touches upon Döblin's use of language, his aim is to demonstrate its tendency toward mythic abstractions rather than to engage in close stylistic analysis.<sup>2</sup> Although he cites Döblin's 1928 essays "Vom Bau des epischen Werkes" and "Das Ich über die Natur", he reads them as evidence of Döblin's tendency toward historical monumentalism. Sebald's essayistic writings on literature—his two collections of essays on Austrian literature, *Beschreibung des Unglücks* (1985) and *Urheimliche Heimat* (1991), as well as his volume of essays *Logis in einem Landhaus* (1998)—focus on writing as a response to lived experience. Here again, his interest is mainly thematic: at the center of these essays are such topics as disorientation caused by disaster, displacement or psychological disturbance.

We know, of course, that Sebald was not only a scholar and a writer but also a practicing translator who founded the British Centre for Literary Translation in 1989. Good translation cannot be achieved without close attention to style. In the manuscripts of his own literary works, now housed at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach, we can observe him working on style, especially on word choice and sentence rhythm.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, his responses to drafts of the English translations of his own works are meticulously detailed and accompanied by occasional notes of explanation.<sup>4</sup> Still, his work in this area

cannot tell us what he knew about the inner workings of narrative. In this essay, I aim to trace one filiation in his understanding of narrative theory by following his reading of three French authors: Michel Butor, Gustave Flaubert and Marcel Proust.

Michel Butor's novel, *L'emploi du temps* (1957), provides important clues to Sebald's early acquaintance with a narrative structure that recurs in different forms in *Die Ringe des Saturn* and *Austerlitz*. During his first year in England, while teaching as an assistant lecturer at the University of Manchester, Sebald read *L'emploi du temps* with distinctly personal attention. He read the book in the French original and marked it up closely.<sup>5</sup> Set in an oppressive English industrial town reminiscent of Manchester but bearing the fictional name Bleston, the novel is narrated by a young man, Jacques Revel, who is spending a year as an intern in a bank. The novel takes the form of a diary, although as it turns out, an extremely complicated one. Revel hates every moment of his life in Bleston: at every turn, he expresses his animosity toward the place. Against Revel's observation that his writing feels "comme une petite vengeance" against the town, Sebald makes a small "x", and in the bottom margin of the page Sebald writes a footnote in what looks like rather thick brown felt-tipped pen: "J'ai commencé à lire *L'emploi du temps* pour cette raison."<sup>6</sup> In addition to the repugnance that the town evokes in him, Jacques Revel is handicapped by his lack of fluency in English. For some time, he can only negotiate the language by constant translation into his native tongue: "traduisant, toujours traduisant"<sup>7</sup>. In the upper margin of the blank page at the front of the novel, Sebald copies these words in brown felt-tipped pen, further down on the same page, he adds in the same pen: "De plus/en plus..." (More and more). Most newcomers to a foreign country have exactly the opposite experience, gradually putting translation behind them and learning to think directly in the foreign language. On the first page of the narrative itself, Sebald writes:

Sunday night 12<sup>th</sup>  
13<sup>th</sup> November 66  
Chorlton/Bleston

1966 was the year Sebald joined the University of Manchester, having received his licence ès lettres from the University of Fribourg in the preceding year. Chorlton is a place not far from Manchester. Later in the novel, he inserts a similar notation, no longer indicating the place but still giving the day of the week and the date: against Revel's diary entry for "lundi 26 mai" Sebald writes "Tuesday 15 Nov. 66" (he has now read 65 pages). At least at the beginning of Butor's novel, then, Sebald is mapping the dates of his reading in 1966 against the

chronology of Revel's diary. Is he reading it as a parallel to his own experiences in Manchester? Yet at the point when he inscribes the two dates from November 1966 in his copy of Butor's novel, he cannot have had much time to settle in the city. Just over halfway through the novel, Sebald underlines Revel's description of his writing table: "cette table qui était déjà mon rampart contre Bleston."<sup>8</sup> It would go too far to suppose that Sebald identifies with Revel's belief that writing can protect him from the hostility of the city, but he is certainly tracing the theme as it unfolds in the novel. Other underlinings and marginal lines show that Sebald is reading the book attentively, following the connected motifs of fire and smoke, the theme of irrational action, and the narrator's notion that he can assuage his distress by burning his original copy of the city map and continuing to work labouriously at the text of his diary.

Unlike most diary-novels, *L'emploi du temps* is constructed as a curious kind of multiple record-keeping: having arrived in Bleston on 1 October, Revel does not begin his diary until 1 May. Instead of recounting only what happens on the days of these entries, he also looks back at his experiences during the previous months of his stay. Thus each entry covers a dual time period. As he gains new insights into his previous impressions and experiences, his account of earlier dates expands, but these insights still fail to provide explanations, causing him to double back repeatedly to revisit episodes on which he has already reported. These digressions, as well as the fact that he only writes in his diary on weekdays, dooms to failure his original hope of bringing the two main temporal levels together in the course of writing. Ultimately, his narrative proliferates into five different angles of perception. Butor, of course, has developed these temporal complications with great care, but they can be quite dizzying for the reader. It is not surprising that Sebald rapidly gives up mapping his own experience against that of the increasingly complex time-structure of Revel's narrative.

Still, the gloomy and forbidding city that forms the novel's backdrop, its labyrinthine character, and the narrator's sense of being imprisoned within the confines of its complicated streets are elements that Sebald repeatedly marks in his copy. Jacques Revel's desire to escape by visiting areas outside the city proves impossible because the urban sprawl of the area makes it difficult to gain access to anything like open countryside. The labyrinth, in the first instance a metaphor for the disposition of the city and the fears it evokes, is also connected with Revel's attempt to uncover hidden truths through the act of revisiting his experiences in writing. In this regard, he follows a traditional expectation about writing as a guide to understanding. He sees his diary as an equivalent to Ariadne's thread, a guide that will lead him out of

darkness into light. Sebald underlines the passage where Revel makes this point.<sup>9</sup> Although the labyrinth is a motif that appears in several of Sebald's prose works (notably *Die Ringe des Saturn*, with its photo of the labyrinth at the Somerleyton estate),<sup>10</sup> the somber, smoky atmosphere of Bleston finds its most striking parallel in *Austerlitz*,<sup>11</sup> where the theme of imprisonment is most extensively treated. Revel's night-time wanderings in Bleston are a precursor, as it were, of the unnamed narrator's night-time wanderings in *Austerlitz*. Yet the divagations, physical and mental, of Sebald's narrators do not yield the truth they are seeking. However much he believes he has discovered about his past, Austerlitz is still convinced that he also needs to find traces of his father and his former friend Marie de Verneuil. The unnamed narrator who passes on Austerlitz's stories also comes to no clear conclusion: we do not even know if he ever finishes the book by Dan Jacobsen, part of which he reads while visiting the former concentration camp Breendonk.

Both *L'emploi du temps* and *Austerlitz* pose serious questions about the value of narration. Jacques Revel alternates between belief in the power of narrative to uncover the truth and despair at the complications that it introduces: writing as a way to salvation comes to appear highly questionable. Perhaps most tellingly, *L'emploi du temps* explores the question of the narrator's implication in the troubling atmosphere of the city. One critic writes on this connection: "Rhetoric is a powerful tool used by first-person narrators to make confessions, perpetuate narrative indeterminacy and vindicate themselves."<sup>12</sup> Revel uses various types of narrative slippage to imply that the fires that keep springing up in various parts of Bleston have been started by others and have nothing to do with him. Yet his impetuous burning of the map of Bleston is a destructive act that puts him, so to speak, on the same level as the fiery city, even if it does not lead to more actual fires. Since the city remains a mystery to him, he is obliged to purchase another copy of the map the following day. Unable to admit that he deliberately burned the first map, he finds himself trapped in a lie.

In an article on the relation of *L'emploi du temps* to the detective novel, Laura R. Kubinyi argues that its structure forms the narrative equivalent of a labyrinth without a center.<sup>13</sup> Lorna Martens connects the "empty center" of *L'emploi du temps* with the ambiguity of the novel's ending.<sup>14</sup> She shows how language takes over in Revel's writing, expanding his descriptions of Bleston into overwrought, fanciful metaphors that "give the prose its peculiar heavy, sonorous quality."<sup>15</sup> Revel assigns this power to the city itself rather than to the runaway effects of his own language. In a passage that Sebald underlines in brown felt-tipped pen, Revel compares Bleston with such American cities as Pittsburgh and Detroit:

Il me semble qu'elle, Bleston, pousse à l'extrême certaines particularités de ce genre d'agglomérations, qu'elle est, de toutes, celle dont la sorcellerie est la plus rusée et la plus puissante.<sup>16</sup>

"Agglomérations" is a pertinent word, one that describes not only the expansion of the city into adjoining areas but also the proliferation that marks Revel's record-keeping and continual retracing of events already narrated. The more one tries to escape from such a structure, the more one feels trapped in its mesh. A few pages later, Revel feels lost in its "filaments" even as he attempts to examine "cette énorme cellule cancerreuse dont chaque encre d'imprimerie, comme un colorant approprié, faisait ressortir un système d'organes."<sup>17</sup> On one level, the magic power ("sorcellerie") that emanates from the agglomerative city is negative, but it also has a positive aspect. In the ancient myth that subtexts this motif in Butor's novel, the maker of the labyrinth, Daedalus, was an artist. For Revel, the story of Theseus and the minotaur, depicted in the tapestries of Bleston, is connected with the myth of Cain, depicted in the stained-glass windows of the old cathedral. "Il faut vous rappeler que c'est une oeuvre de la Renaissance; l'artiste honorait en Cain le père de tous les arts."<sup>18</sup>

Thinking of Sebald's maze-like narrative structures as labyrinths without a center may help us to identify the extraordinary effect his writing exerts on the reader. On one level, in experiencing Sebald's texts as labyrinths, we often find ourselves undertaking a surprising amount of detective work, without necessarily finding a key that brings the works into coherent focus. On the other hand, life itself is disorderly and resistant to systematic ordering. The two opposing desires—to find an articulable truth and to represent the chaos of actual experience—come together in Sebald in a manner that is at once fascinating and frustrating. In contrast to Butor in *L'emploi du temps*, Sebald does not use the detective-novel model as a methodological meta-level within his narratives, but he does allude to related models that allow an investigator to follow traces and solve puzzles: those of the scholar, the essayist and the collector.<sup>19</sup> In *Die Ringe des Saturn*, for example, we see the narrator following up on a television program which he fell asleep watching: the program tells the story of Roger Casement, at first knighted for his exposure of abuses of native workers in South American rubber plantations but later executed for treason in his attempt to provide German armaments to the Irish rebels. The narrator follows the case as it is revisited in the British media and debated by handwriting specialists and other experts. In *Austerlitz*, the fictive protagonist travels to Prague in an attempt to find what he believes are his own family origins. In *Die Ringe des Saturn*, the narrator seems to arrive with undue haste at the conclusion that Casement really did

write the "black diaries" that turned public opinion against him; and in *Asterlitz*, the protagonist seems even more hasty in deciding that he has really found his old nanny in Prague. Mysteries that cannot be satisfactorily solved abound in Sebald's literary writings.

It is instructive to compare the assiduous reading that Sebald gave to *L'emploi du temps* in 1966 with his markings in the 13-volume Suhrkamp Taschenbuch edition of Proust in German translation that he purchased and read in 1964/65.<sup>20</sup> The first and last volumes are heavily marked; markings continue to be fairly frequent in volume 2, the second half of *In Swanns Welt* (Swann's Way),<sup>21</sup> but in subsequent volumes they occur at increasingly lengthy intervals. Only rarely does he note aspects of the novel's composition, as when he writes in the second volume: "über 100erte von Seiten sind die Vergleiche gespannt; selten aber!"<sup>22</sup> The sheer length of Proust's novel makes it much more difficult for the reader to perceive its fine structure than is the case with Butor's *L'emploi du temps*, where motivic repetitions and variations are dense and flamboyantly displayed. Nonetheless, Sebald's markings betray a degree of uncertainty about what to notice that may simply reflect the fact that he was a young student who may not yet have had extensive practice in close reading. Often, his markings draw attention to the narrator's reflections on problems of subjectivity or memory—two of the best-known themes in Proust's novel.<sup>23</sup> In the middle volumes, he often marks generalizations in the "we" or "one" form, in other words sentences that announce themselves explicitly as insights into human behavior. That is not to say that some of his markings are not perceptive: examples are his underlining in black crayon of the phrase "der Vorraum der Erinnerung" and the sentence, "Er bewunderte die furchtbare, immer neue Produktivität seiner Erinnerung" in the second volume.<sup>24</sup> In the first volume, he marks a passage about the relation between fiction and reality: "Hätten meine Eltern mir erlaubt, den Schauplatz eines Buches, das ich las, selber aufzusuchen, so hätte das meiner Meinung nach einen unschätzbaren Fortschritt in der Eroberung der Welt bedeutet."<sup>25</sup> In the final volume, he begins to notice the motif of optical instruments, as when the narrator describes the work of a writer as "lediglich eine Art von optischem Instrument, das der Autor dem Leser reicht, damit er erkennen möge, was er in sich selbst vielleicht sonst nicht hätte erschauen können."<sup>26</sup>

Whatever impulses he may have received from his reading of Proust in the mid-1960s, Sebald appears to have all but forgotten about the *Recherche* for some time. Still, French literature is never far from Sebald's mind. An essay that first appeared in the *Neue Rundschau* in 1989 and was later included in Sebald's essay collection *Unheimliche Heimat* bears a title that alludes to Aragon: "Le Paysan de Vienne: Über Peter Altenberg."<sup>27</sup> Sebald's copy, now in the archive at Marbach,

contains numerous markings; it is not clear, however, when he made them. Many of the marked passages have to do with the atmosphere of the Paris arcades: their mysterious, phantasmic and almost religious effects, the glimpses they afford of the sheen on women's clothing, their bizarre perversions of nature and reason. Repeatedly, he marks phrases suggesting that for the flâneur the cityscape has become a substitute for open nature, to which he has no access. At the same time, Sebald seems also taken by the reaction the arcades inspire in the urban wanderer: "Cette conscience exquise d'un passage est le frisson dont je parlais."<sup>28</sup> Regardless of when Sebald actually marked up Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris*, he was clearly thinking of it while writing his essay on Altenberg. This connection between wandering and narrative precedes *Die Ringe des Saturni*, where the narrator explores open countryside rather than Aragon's urban landscape.

In the 1990s, Sebald turns his attention to Flaubert, perhaps as a result of conversations with a colleague at the University of East Anglia, Janine Dakyns<sup>29</sup>, a Flaubert enthusiast. In *Die Ringe des Saturni*, the narrator devotes several pages to Janine Dakyns's/detailed knowledge of the French author's letters, from which she recites at length.<sup>29</sup> In Sebald's *Korsika* manuscripts about Corsica, Flaubert's travel report on the island forms the backdrop against which the narrator views his experiences there.<sup>30</sup> In a hotel where the narrator is staying, a Pléiade edition of Flaubert amusingly turns up in the drawer of the night table as if it were a Bible. The volume includes Flaubert's *Trois contes*, from which the narrator reads and then summarizes "La Légende de Saint Julien l'hospitalier."<sup>31</sup> Although Sebald's personal library as contained in the Marbach archives includes several volumes of Flaubert in various languages and editions, none of these appears to be marked up, as was Sebald's custom otherwise with any book he read carefully. A two-volume edition of *Madame Bovary* in French and an Everyman edition of the same novel in English are among these volumes. Yet we cannot assume from these unmarked volumes that Sebald did not read *Madame Bovary*. It is quite likely that Sebald borrowed his reading copy of Flaubert from Janine Dakyns<sup>32</sup> or the University of East Anglia library (he is known to have marked library books in the same intense way as he did his personal copies).

Sebald owned and carefully underlined Jean de La Varende's Rowohlts monograph on Gustave Flaubert.<sup>32</sup> Most of Sebald's markings in this slender book concern Flaubert's life and psychological constitution (melancholic), but one heavy line down the margin of a page takes note of Flaubert's constant struggle to write the perfect sentence: "immer mehr verwickelte sich der Schriftsteller in seine Entwüftele, änderte um, formte neu, kämpfte mit jedem Satz."<sup>33</sup> Several other markings emphasize related aspects of Flaubert's stylistic methods,

including his habit of testing the rhythms of his prose by reading it aloud.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Sebald's careful reading of an essay on Flaubert by James Wood, "Half Against Flaubert", in *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (1999), draws attention to a number of passages about Flaubert's stubborn struggle with style, his "obsession with the sentence" and his desire to "impart to prose the rhythm of verse."<sup>35</sup> Wood also discusses questions of realism, notably what he calls the "tyranny of the detail."<sup>36</sup> Sebald's pencil marks this passage, as well as one the following page, where Wood explains how Flaubert made such observations "into a style" by giving as an example the sentence, "A breeze from the window ruffled the cloth on the table...."<sup>37</sup> He also marks a passage where Wood quotes Stephen Heath's observation that "it is with [Flaubert] that literature becomes essentially problematic."<sup>38</sup> Yet it is difficult to tell whether Sebald understood what it was about Flaubert's writing that constituted this new quality.

It seems more likely that Sebald's reading of the two texts by Flaubert mentioned in *Campo Santo*, *Voyage aux Pyrénées et en Corse* (1840) and "La Légende de Saint Julien l'Hospitalier" (1877), was more significant than either of these secondary sources for his understanding of Flaubert's narrative strategies. Representing the earliest and the latest of Flaubert's writing, the travelogue and the story stand in marked contrast to each other. The travel report was written when Flaubert was nineteen; the story is the result of a gestational period of over thirty years. Whereas *Voyage aux Pyrénées et en Corse* treats violence—the heritage of banditry and the ferocity of Corsican men—with deliberate understatement, the story of Saint Julian is replete with excesses of carnage and ends with an equally excessive account of the saint's final ascension to heaven. Thematically, "Saint Julien" and the *Voyage aux Pyrénées et en Corse* confirm many of Sebald's ideas about violence and destruction in human society and in nature.<sup>39</sup> In terms of narrative strategy, this early travel narrative also confirms something of the method that Sebald had used in *Die Ringe des Saturn*, the book he completed just before setting out on his trip to Corsica. Two aspects of Flaubert's travelogue are significant in this regard: first, he writes the last section of it retrospectively, and second, he does so by reassembling and adding detail to disparate jottings from his notebooks.<sup>40</sup> By retracing Flaubert's Corsican journey, Sebald adds a second level of delay to the narration, taking stock of what has changed and what has remained the same. Characteristically, however, Sebald complicates his repetition of Flaubert's trajectory by introducing material from other sources, such as Edward Lear's journey through Corsica in the summer of 1876 and Dorothy Carrington's *The Dream Hunters of Corsica*.<sup>41</sup> Although his project on Corsica appears to have motivated his reading of and about Flaubert at this point, we can also consider it as

part of what was ultimately to become his preparation for *Austerlitz*. It has been described as the "Keimzelle" or germ of the later work.<sup>42</sup> Part of the reason for his abandonment of the Corsica project was doubtless that it was developing in a way that seemed too close to *Die Ringe des Saturn*.

I would add to that, however, an important piece of reading in which Proust reappears on Sebald's horizon. The turning-point occurs in late 1999, when Sheila Stern gives Sebald a copy of her book, *Proust: Swann's Way* (1989).<sup>43</sup> The copy in Sebald's library at Marbach includes a dated dedication: "For Max from Sheila, October 1999." Written from a sophisticated point of view that resists talking down to the audience it addresses, Stern's book gives its readers a good workout in such matters as the difference between "récit" and "discours", problems of the "realist" method, the representation of consciousness, the subtle positioning of the first-person narrator at different moments in the chronology of events, and the relation between the narrator and the reader. Although time is inevitably involved with these narrative elements and strategies—and Sebald registers Stern's comments on such imbrications—it is not the primary focus of her analysis. In order to follow her reading of *Swann's Way*, Sebald is forced to attend closely to her observations about narrative technique.

Much of Sebald's engagement with Stern's book on Proust has to do with finding support for ideas he had already been developing. One of these is the notion of "analogy-seeking". Sheila Stern introduces this idea in her discussion of Proust's allusions to other works of literature. She writes, "Such mental mannerisms as this of literary analogy-seeking, with their remote origins and models in our upbringing, exist in our innermost selves, as cultural traces."<sup>44</sup> The reason why this search for analogies works is given in a phrase that Sebald marks in the final volume of the German Proust: people contain "noch alle Stunden der Vergangenheit"<sup>45</sup> and thus all traces of their previous reading. The text itself speaks (in the German version) of "das Wunder der Analogie", a phrase that Sebald circles in pencil in his copy of the Suhrkamp translation.<sup>46</sup>

Sebald also takes careful note of Sheila Stern's analysis of consciousness in Proust. He underlines, for example, a passage about the narrator's ability to "command the recollection of a mental state with its physical conditions" while also being aware of his present situation as he converts the recollection into writing.<sup>47</sup> Sebald underlines in ballpoint pen an entire passage in Stern's book about the movements of the mind in Proust's first volume:

Still, the mind which proceeds by intuitive leaps and deductions from observation, to conclusions that are never irrevocable

certainities, and which has always, as the shifting backdrops of its inner vision, scenes from the distant past, as well as objects, tasks, affections and fears that belong to the transient present moment—this mind is after all very familiar to us, because it is our own.<sup>48</sup>

Here is an insight that may help explain the curious effect not only of Proust but also of Sebald on their respective readers. Whereas Proust could count on his readers' familiarity with certain kinds of information (a situation that is rapidly fading away and that was doubtless never entirely the case with readers outside of France), Sebald leaves his readers with much more to puzzle out, even while his narrators are informing us about largely unfamiliar material. It is possible to learn a great deal of history, for example, from Sebald's prose works, even while still remaining caught up in the conundrums posed by both his individual works and his body of work as a whole.

It is not clear to what extent, if any, Sheila Stern's book sent Sebald back to Proust's novel. His dominant use of blue-black ink in many of the volumes suggests that many of the markings were contemporaneous with his purchase of the books, in which he inscribed his name in that medium. It is not clear whether other markings in pencil or black crayon also date from that early period. We simply do not know how often he may have returned to the text at different times. One phase in his reading or re-reading, however, may have been during the lead-up to *Austerlitz*, which includes an unusual passage from volume 13 of the Sulkamp Proust edition. The passage refers to the behavior of passengers on a steamship crossing the Caspian Sea who become so seasick that they offer no resistance to any suggestion that they might simply be cast into the waters. Sebald underlines the entire passage in pencil and traces a double line against it in the margin of his Proust edition, where it reads as follows:

[...] so wie hochgradig seekranke Leute, wenn sie auf einem Dampfer über das Caspische Meer fahren, auch nicht den leisesten Widerstand andeuten, falls man ihnen sagt, man werde sie nunmehr ins Wasser werfen.<sup>49</sup>

Sebald borrows the passage almost entirely, making only two tiny changes: inserting the word "etwa" before "Dampfer" and changing "nunmehr ins Wasser werfen" into "jetzt über Bord werfen".<sup>50</sup> In essence, this borrowing is a kind of teasing on the part of Sebald, who participates in postmodernist pastiche throughout his prose works. It is rendered all the more tantalizing because Sebald is working from the German translation of Proust rather than from the French original.

At two different points in his study of Sheila Stern's *Proust*, marginal jottings (rare even in the most heavily underlined of his books) reveal

that Sebald is thinking about *Austerlitz*. When Stern describes evenings "half-remembered, half-forgotten" and the narrator's grandmother who likes to roam about in the twilight, Sebald writes at the bottom of the page: "es sei dieser Teresin & die ganze Umgegend selbst heute deart niederdrückend, daß", but does not finish the thought.<sup>51</sup> At the top of the following page he continues to think along similar lines, writing "Auss. in Paris" (possibly referring to the view of Paris from the new national library), and adding in the lower margin, "Truppenübungsplatz".<sup>52</sup> The topic of Stern's discussion here is the striking difference between the earlier and the later Swann, and the way in which we are enabled to put together in a kind of mosaic, the impressions Swann makes at various times and in many different situations. Stern goes on to explain that, "We do arrive at something resembling a precise knowledge of Swann."<sup>53</sup> In Sebald's *Austerlitz*, we get more than disparate glimpses of the protagonist, yet the lengthy accounts of his life that Austerlitz gives the narrator are separated by considerable temporal gaps: the first meeting occurs in the 1960s in the waiting room at Antwerp station; the second in a bar in London decades later; in a letter to the narrator in the late 1990s, Austerlitz explains that he has sold his house in London and will devote himself to filling in the missing details of his biography. If the reader finds Austerlitz's story mostly continuous, that is largely because it is mediated by the narrator; the sustained voice of the narrator makes the repeated backtracking and circling around in chronology less obvious than it might have been otherwise. The narrator's relation to the protagonist is quite different from that of Proust's narrator to Swann. In Proust, the narrator's observations of Swann are indebted to a perceptual model akin to that of the Impressionists; in Sebald, the narrator does not so much observe Austerlitz as reproduce the latter's own problematic narrative.

One of Sheila Stern's most telling observations concerns the narrator's ability to affect the reader. Proust, she remarks, does so through a certain "intimacy" of tone "that has the effect of an extension of the writing self, which accommodates us, while we read, like an alter ego."<sup>54</sup> It is not surprising that Sebald should register this view of the relation between writer and reader in the midst of composing *Austerlitz*, a novel of alter egos and of the strangely compelling effects of the protagonist's story-telling on the narrator. Yet Sebald's own approach to this and related problems was somewhat different from Proust's: whereas in Proust, the narrator adopts an intimate tone toward the reader, this immediacy is replaced in *Austerlitz* by the intimacy between narrator and protagonist. The point of *Austerlitz* is, after all, to explore the problem of mediation, most particularly with respect to Walter Benjamin's theory about storytelling as a mode of giving counsel.<sup>55</sup>

One question that remains open is that of the relation between Sebald's narrators and his biographical person. Is this relation similar to that between the narrator and the author of the *Recherche*? In the debate about Sebald's narrators, some scholars have decided to use the term "pseudo-Sebald", perhaps in imitation of the related term "pseudo-Marcel".<sup>56</sup> The term owes much to the Albertine section of Proust's novel, in which the notion that the narrator's first name might possibly be "Marcel" is at once suggested and retracted. In *The Distinction of Fiction*, Dorrit Cohn comments that at least in two instances Proust carries the "imbrication of his fictional world in the real world to emphatically elaborate extremes", while at the same time, the narrator insists equally emphatically that the entire book is fictitious.<sup>57</sup> Sheila Stern addresses this question in a judicious formulation that Sebald marked in the margin of her book: contrasting Proust's novel with Dickens' first-person novel *David Copperfield*, she comments: "It would not be candid to pretend that *La Recherche* is fully fictional in that sense [i.e., in the sense of *David Copperfield*], but by means of various transferences and suppressions the author frees himself from autobiographical fact for as long as the design of the novel requires it."<sup>58</sup>

Proust's attempts to disengage his narrator from an identification with the biographical author are in large measure the result of his rejection of Sainte-Beuve's argument that a literary text could only be understood in the context of biographical knowledge about its author. Sebald, in contrast, seems to challenge the now almost unquestioningly accepted notion that the narrator must never be conflated with the author. In endowing his narrators with the same interests as himself, in portraying them as visiting places he visited and as having friendships with people he actually knew, Sebald provokes questions that resist easy answers. By constructing his narrators so that they share key experiences with him, Sebald makes no claim to writing entirely fictitious works. Indeed, the fact that Sebald did not provide a genre designation for three of his prose works, *Schwindel, Gefühle*, *Die Ringe des Saturn* and *Austerlitz*, suggests that he did not consider them as novels. Furthermore, Sebald seems to have been very conscious of the scholarly attention his works would receive. By partially constructing his *Nachlass* ahead of time, Sebald reveals something of his working methods while also thumbing his nose at scholarly preoccupations. Revealing some of his sources while concealing others, the folders of photographic and other materials continue the mystifications of his literary texts in his posthumous papers.

I would like to conclude this essay with a brief discussion of what Sebald did not learn from French narrative. Most notably, he does not show any awareness that one of Flaubert's greatest achievements is his brilliant handling of free indirect discourse. Long held to be the

touchstone of fine literature, free indirect discourse is now employed by a wider range of authors; it is difficult to imagine a time when the technique could have caused the confusion that it did for readers of *Madame Bovary*, who seem to have believed that the narrator's infiltration into the thoughts of his characters meant that the author accepted those thoughts and their moral implications. One reason why Sebald does not use free indirect discourse may be that his reading of Flaubert during the gestational period of his own fictional writing did not include *Madame Bovary*; at least, there does not appear to be any evidence to this effect (though he may have read it earlier). Another reason is that Sebald's major literary texts are in the first person,<sup>59</sup> a form that does not readily accommodate the technique of free indirect discourse.

By the same token, Sebald does not plumb the depths of his characters' subconscious: the remarkable exploration of time and memory in *Austerlitz*, for example, does not include forays into the deeper recesses of the protagonist's psyche. Several episodes do suggest that there is more than meets the eye: Austerlitz's discovery of the unused waiting room at Liverpool Street Station, his stay at Marienbad, and his travel by train across Germany on his return from Prague, to name some of the most prominent moments in the novel. Yet despite these hints at something that may be concealed, the text remains on the surface of things, crossing vast amounts of terrain both literal and figurative but always stopping short of plumbing the depths. Just as Sebald's first-person narrative focus scarcely lends itself to the use of free indirect discourse, it virtually forbids interior monologue.<sup>60</sup> So too does Proust's use of first-person narration in the *Recherche*, where the narrator sometimes regards himself as a deep-sea diver but in fact never encounters anything other than the fascinating but often deceptive surfaces of his world. Rather than exploring the depths, Sebald is concerned to show us how the mind works at a more conscious level. In *Die Ringe des Saturn*, he demonstrates the fugitive nature of the mind as it establishes associative connections, takes off on digressions, gets side-tracked by chance encounters, and otherwise fails to conform to the requirements of logical thinking.

One formal feature that Sebald's narratives eschew is the combination of description, conversation and action that was a mainstay of the nineteenth-century novel. This structure, which persists in many novels today, creates a space where fictional characters speak in individual voices. Even when a novel is told by a narrator with distinctive habits of speech, the narrator's voice does not usually bleed over into the conversations of other characters.<sup>61</sup> In Sebald's *Austerlitz*, however, narrator and protagonist speak in exactly the same voice. This effect is particularly striking because Sebald uses



neither quotation marks nor the subjunctive of indirect speech.<sup>62</sup> In his earlier works, he had already practiced the seamless transition from the unnamed narrator to another source (written or oral), although there are some moments where the subjunctive still occurs, as it does for a brief moment during the conversation between the narrator and Alec Garrard in *Die Ringe des Saturn*.<sup>63</sup> *Austerlitz* is the most consistent example of Sebald's method of rendering the speech of other characters in the indicative without quotation marks. One small exception is the first sentence spoken by Vera, which is represented by double embedding ("sagte Vera, sagte Austerlitz"). Addressing Austerlitz in French, the language they had spoken together in Prague, she sounds very different from either Austerlitz or the unnamed narrator: "J'acquiesce [...] est-ce que c'est vraiment toi?"<sup>64</sup> After that, however, her words for the most part blend smoothly into the rest of the narrative. By eliminating most markers of direct or indirect speech, the text lulls our skepticism to a considerable extent. This is one reason why many readers are reluctant to entertain the notion that Austerlitz may not "really" have the past that he is convinced he has discovered. Yet what prevents us from thinking that he might be suffering from false memory syndrome? By assimilating the protagonist's voice to the narrator's *Austerlitz* takes the proverbial "suspension of disbelief" to an extreme, using uniformity of tone to create, surprisingly, an effect of narrative credibility.

Sebald's narrative innovations rest on his recognition, first, of the fundamentally digressive nature of the human mind, and second, of its powerfully assimilative mechanisms. While our attention is constantly drawn to things outside us, our understanding of them works continually to bring them into harmony with our existing expectations. This double movement, centrifugal and centripetal, can be partially traced back to the French narratives that Sebald read or read about: Butor, Flaubert and Proust present different versions of the strange loops that characterize Sebald's literary texts. Yet Sebald also strikes out on his own through the challenge he presents to modern tenets about the relation of author to narrator and the problem of credibility in fiction.

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## Notes

- 1 Sebald, *Mythos der Zerstörung*, 7.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 136.
- 3 The manuscripts, materials, and collections of images connected with Sebald's literary writing are housed at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach. I am grateful to the archive and its curators and librarians, especially to Ulrich von Bulow, for the opportunity to examine parts of this material.
- 4 I am grateful to Houghton Library, Harvard, for the chance to consult the typescripts of Michael Hulse's English translations of Sebald, carefully corrected by Sebald himself.
- 5 This copy is in the collection of books owned by Sebald that is now held at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach. I am grateful to the archive, especially to Nikolai Riedel, for the opportunity to examine this and other books from Sebald's personal library. For informative discussions of this collection, see Bulow, "The Disappearance of the Author in the Work," and Colding, "*Bibliotheca abscondita*."
- 6 Butor, *L'Emploi du temps*, 78. The phrase Sebald marks is rendered "a small private revenge" in Jean Stewart's translation (Butor, *Passing Time*, 55). Sebald comments that he "began to read *L'Emploi du Temps* for that reason", i.e., to take revenge on the city of Manchester, the model for Butor's Blesion. In what

- follows, I cite passages from Sebald's reading in the language of the book he owned and marked up; an English translation follows in the text or in a note. Sebald is quoting from p. 267 of the novel, where he has underlined in purple felt-tipped pen the phrase "traduisant, toujours traduisant" (translating, always translating)—these words are omitted in Stewart's translation (Butor, *Passing Time*, 192).
- 8 Butor, *L'emploi du temps*, 263. "This table which served me as a rampart against Blesion" (Butor, *Passing Time*, 187).
  - 9 Butor, *L'emploi du temps*, 274. "Ce cordon de phrases est un fil d'Ariane parce que je suis dans un labyrinthe, parce que j'écris pour m'y retrouver." (That rope of words is like Ariadne's thread, because I am in a labyrinth, because I am writing in order to find my way out of it; Butor, *Passing Time*, 195).
  - 10 *Die Ringe des Saturn*, 206; *The Rings of Saturn*, 173.
  - 11 See also the story "Max Auvrach" in *Die Ausgewanderten* (217–35), explicitly set in Manchester; translated as "Max Feber" (*The Emigrants*, 147–237).
  - 12 Rangaran, "Lies and Betrayals", 27.
  - 13 Kubinyi, "Defense of a Dialogue", 887–8.
  - 14 Martens, "Empty Center and Open End", 58. See also her chapter on the same work in *The Diary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 213–32. In this essay, I cite the earlier version.
  - 15 Martens, "Empty Center and Open End", 51.
  - 16 Butor, *L'emploi du temps*, 53. "It seems to me that Blesion exaggerates certain characteristics of such urban centers, that none other is as cunning or as powerful in its witchcraft" (Butor, *Passing Time*, 36).
  - 17 Butor, *L'emploi du temps*, 61; Sebald marks this passage in the margin. "This huge cancerous growth, this organism in which the different systems were picked out in appropriately colored printer's ink" (Butor, *Passing Time*, 41).
  - 18 Butor, *L'emploi du temps*, 105; Sebald marks this passage in the margin with a double line. "You must remember that this is a work of the Renaissance. The artist paid tribute to Cain as being the father of all the arts" (Butor, *Passing Time*, 75).
  - 19 In all three genres, Walter Benjamin is an important precursor for Sebald.
  - 20 The edition, using the 1953 translation by Eva Rechel-Mertens, was published in 1964. In each of the thirteen volumes, Sebald has written "ex libris/Winfried Sebald" on the blank first page, followed by the month and year. Occasional crossing-out and correction of the year suggest some uncertainty whether the year is 1964 or 1965.
  - 21 When Sebald's reading is at issue, titles are given in the language in which he read (or marked up) the work. In other instances, I use the original titles.
  - 22 "The comparisons extend over hundreds of pages; but they're rare!" (my translation).
  - 23 Building on Rainer Warning, who notes that Proust's *Recherche* begins to undermine the notion of memory as specific to individual "innerlichkeit" (interiority), Münchberg shows that in Sebald individual memory has been replaced by a socially communicative memory that endangers the structure of individual identity (Münchberg, "Glückhafte Vergegenwärtigung", 160–1).
  - 24 Proust, *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit*, vol. 2, 464, 486. "The cloakroom of his memory" (Proust, *Swann's Way*, 364). "He admired the terrible re-creative power of his memory" (*Ibid.*, 381).
  - 25 Proust, *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit*, vol. 1, 119. "If my parents had allowed me, when I was reading a book, to go to visit the region it described,

- I would have believed I was taking an invaluable step forward in the conquest of truth" (Proust, *Swann's Way*, 88).
- 26 Proust *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit*, vol. 13, 329. "Only a kind of optical instrument which he offers the reader to enable him to discern what without this book he might perhaps see in himself" (Proust, *Finding Time Again*, 220). Sebald also marks a related passage about the book as a magnifying glass for its readers (Proust, *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit*, vol. 13, 493; Proust, *Finding Time Again*, 342-3).
- 27 Sebald, *Uhlerritische Hehnal*, 65-66.
- 28 Aragon, *Paysan*, 155. This is one of the passages Sebald marks in his copy.
- 29 Janine Dakyns was a colleague of Sebald at the University of East Anglia. See *King's Work*, 16-19. Her published work was on nineteenth-century literature, including a book on the Middle Ages in late nineteenth-century French literature; she also wrote a book on letters from Tennyson to an ancestor of hers. In her annotated bibliographic report on work in post-Romantic nineteenth-century literature during the year 1991, she shows wide-ranging knowledge and informed judgment (on Flaubert, see Dakyns, *Year's Work*, 95-9). As recorded in *King's Work*, she died in 1994.
- 30 Sebald's manuscripts about Corsica were published posthumously: one selection by Sven Meyer under the title *Campo Santo* (2009), and additional versions assembled and introduced by Ulrich von Bülow (2008).
- 31 Ulrich von Bülow reports that Sebald had taken Flaubert's "Un Coeur simple" with him on his trip to Corsica (Bülow, "Sebalds Korsika-Projekt", 144). "Un Coeur simple" and "La Légende de Saint Julien l'Hospitalier" are the first two stories in Flaubert's *Trois contes*; the third is "Hérodote".
- 32 Varande, *Gustave Flaubert*.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 28. "Increasingly, the writer got caught up in his drafts, made changes, reformulated, struggled with every sentence" (my translation).
- 34 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 35 Wood, *Broken Estate*, 48-9. The book includes an essay on Sebald himself, which he also carefully marked.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 53. Countering Wood's suggestion that Flaubert's use of detail is a mannerism, Sebald writes in the margin: "but the change of level or view makes it work."
- 38 Wood, 59. The italics are Stephen Heath's. See his *Gustave Flaubert*, 145.
- 39 Mary Orr comments that Flaubert's account of his first trip, *Voyage aux Pyrénées et en Corse*, "sets in place foundational tenets of his oeuvre: that nature is culture and culture nature, and civilization is barbarianism in another guise" (Orr, "Provincial Transfers", 96). The similarity with Sebald's conception of human and natural destruction is apparent.
- 40 Flaubert, *Voyage aux Pyrénées et en Corse*, 104.
- 41 Bülow "Sebalds Korsika-Projekt", 198, 217.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 218.
- 43 Also in the late 1990s, Sebald seems to have purchased the Rowohlft monograph on Proust by Mauriac, *Marcel Proust in Selbstzeugnissen*. While the volume shows very scant markings, it does testify to Sebald's revived interest in Proust at that time.
- 44 Stern, *Proust: Swann's Way*, 80.

- 45 Proust, *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit*, vol. 13, 516. "Every hour of the past" (Proust, *Finding Time Again*, 356). Sebald underlines this passage in blue ink in the German.
- 46 Proust, *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit*, vol. 13, 275. "The miracle of an analogy" (Proust, *Finding Time Again*, 180).
- 47 Stern, *Proust: Swann's Way*, 35.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 49 Proust, *Die wiederzufindene Zeit*, 506. This is the final (13th) volume of the German Proust translation: its title is a direct rendering of the French volume title, *Le Temps retrouvé*. Prendergast's English title is *Finding Time Again*, which avoids the more familiar but less accurate *Time Regained*. The quoted passage means "just as extremely seascif people, when crossing the Caspian Sea on a steamboat, don't show even the slightest resistance if they are told that they will be thrown into the water" (my translation from the German version that Sebald read).
- 50 Cf. *Austerlitz*, 182. For a discussion of this textual appropriation, see Richard Bales, "Home and Displacement", 464. Bales compares Sebald's version with the French original, but not with the German translation Sebald owned and marked. Anthea Bell's translation of *Austerlitz* naturally follows Sebald's adapted version: "about to be thrown overboard" (123).
- 51 In the lower margin of Stern, *Proust: Swann's Way*, 45. "This Terezin and its whole surroundings were, even today, so depressing, that" (my translation). The German verb is in the subjunctive of indirect speech, suggesting that Sebald is sketching part of Austerlitz's narrative (though, in the end, this novel does not use the subjunctive for its characters' narration).
- 52 These jottings are in Stern, *Proust: Swann's Way*, 46. The phrase "Aus. in Paris", short for "Aussicht in Paris", means "view in Paris"; "Tiruppenübungsplatz" means "military exercise ground".
- 53 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 55 See Benjamin's essay "Der Erzähler" in *Illuminationen*, 385-410.
- 56 See Descombes, *Proust: Philosophie du roman*.
- 57 Cohn, *Distinction*, 64-5.
- 58 Stern, *Proust: Swann's Way*, 5-6.
- 59 Narrative theorists do not agree on whether first-person narratives can include free indirect discourse. Among those who believe it can, Joe Bray argues that "first-person narrators can dramatize their own consciousness when recalling their own past thoughts" (Bray, "The Source of 'Dramatized Consciousness'", 21).
- 60 One can hardly reproach him for not referring to Dujardin's *Les Lauriers sont coupés*, the earliest version of a complete narrative in the form of interior monologue; but he certainly knew its German successors, Schützler's "Lehnant Gustl" and "Fräulein Elise". As for depth psychology more generally, Sebald did write an essay on Schützler's "Traumnovelle". See his essay "Das Schrecknis der Liebe. Überlegungen zu Schützlers 'Traumnovelle'" (Sebald, *Beschreibung des Unglücks*, 38-60).
- 61 Richard Walsh points out that just because many characters in *Huckleberry Finn* speak in dialect, we do not assume that the narrator of the novel (Huck himself) is a master mimic (Walsh, "Narrator", 508).
- 62 Sebald's measured style has often been compared with the characteristically even tone of Adalbert Stifter; yet unlike Sebald in *Austerlitz*, Stifter uses the

subjunctive to indicate indirect speech by a character other than the narrator. It is true, however, that in direct speech, Stifter's individual figures do not tend to differ in their style of expression. See, for example, the conversation between the narrator and his host in chapter 6 of *Der Nachsommer*.

- 63 In a transition from Garrard's direct speech in English (rendered in italics without the use of quotation marks), an entire sentence uses the subjunctive of indirect speech: "Man müsse die Mishna studieren, fuhr er fort, und sämtliche anderen verfügbaren Quellen [...] denn nur so komme man auf die richtigen Ideen" (*Rings of Saturn*, 291). Garrard's remarks then continue for over half a page in the indicative, again without quotation marks. In the typescript of Michael Hulise's English translation of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald changes the name Alec Garrard to Thomas Abrams. The German subjunctive is rendered by the past tense in English: "You had to study the Mishnah" (*Rings of Saturn*, 245).

64 Austerlitz, 224.