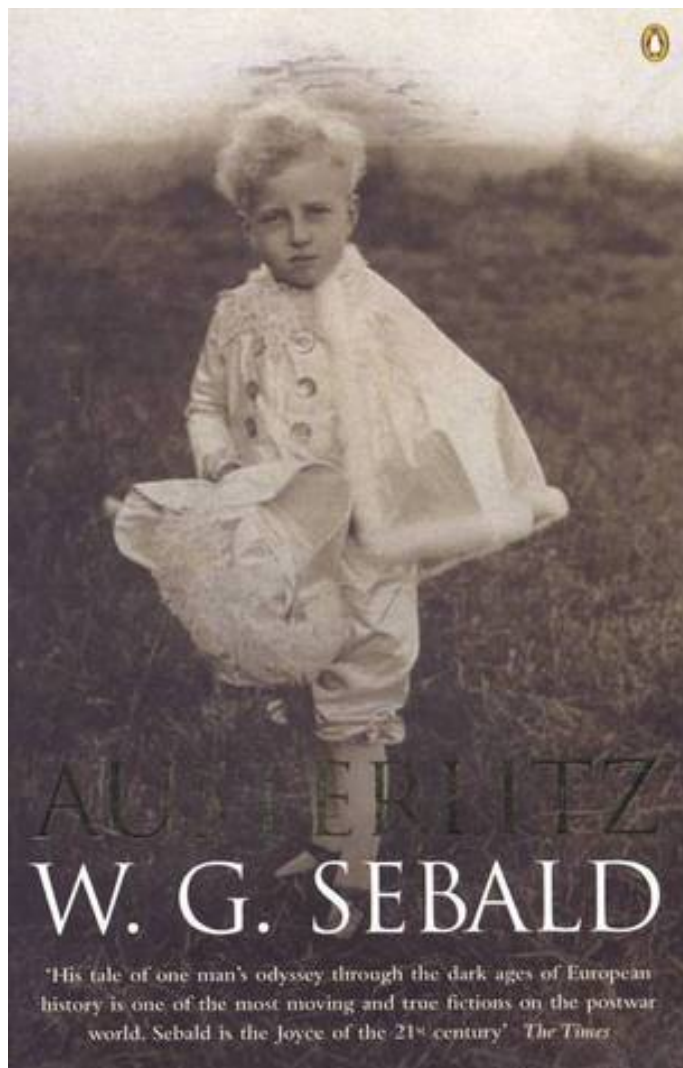

W.G. Sebald

Austerlitz



Title: Austerlitz

Author: W.G. Sebald

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Description

WG Sebald's *Austerlitz* has something of the fractured narrative and wanderlust of his novels *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*, and continues to develop their obsession with history, loss and memory--or more precisely in this case, forgetting. In the decade since the original German publication of *Vertigo*, Sebald has established himself as indisputably one of Europe's most interesting and lauded writers.

In 1967, the narrator bumps into a man in the *salle de pas perdus* of Antwerp's Central Station. Thus begins a long if intermittent acquaintance, during which he learns the life story of this stranger, retired architectural historian Jacques Austerlitz. Raised as Dafydd Elias by a strict Welsh Calvinist ministry family, it is only at school that Austerlitz learns his true name--and only years later, by a series of chance encounters, that he allows himself to discover the truth of his origins, as a Czech child spirited away from his mother and out of Nazi territory on the Kindertransport. He returns to confront the childhood traumas that have made him feel that "I must have made a mistake, and now I am living the wrong life."

In this writer's hands, Austerlitz's tale of personal emotional repression becomes a metaphor for Europe's smothered past. Sebald wittily explores the tricks of time and space, unearthing Europe as an unconscious palimpsest. Delighting in lists and unfeasibly lengthy descriptions, Sebald can turn anything to poetry--even the alleged health benefits of Marienbad's Auschowitz springs become "a positive verbal coloratura of medical and diagnostic terms" (luckily, all his characters seem to be able to hold forth this way). Indeed, Sebald writes with such preternatural lucidity that even a harrowing account of writer's block ironically becomes a celebration of his own quite clearly unblockable virtuosity.

At heart, though, *Austerlitz* is a serious indictment of modern Europe's "avoidance system", its repeated patterns of personal and institutional forgetting that, even within Austerlitz's own lifetime, have contrived to obscure, ignore and render irretrievable his past and the source of his pain. And yet, despite the bleakness of that picture, the book ends with its hero--and its readers--committed to trying, at least, to remember. --*Alan Stewart*

Insightful reviews

Geoff:

"It seems to me then as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last... And might it not be, continued Austerlitz, that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak?"

I have trouble writing about Sebald. I read *The Emigrants* and *The Rings Of Saturn* back-to-

back a few years ago, and didn't bother writing reviews on this site. I just added them to my favorites and gave the requisite 5 stars. Perhaps this silence that comes after reading Sebald is in some ways my attempt to not trivialize or minimize the effect reading his books produces; on the other hand, it might be that Sebald says what needs to be said, in just the way it has to be said; that it is difficult to follow Sebald because there is a certain emotional dusk or twilight that his prose produces that then inevitably calls forth a kind of night- one wants to silently dwell on the words and images, because they seem so fragile, almost sacred. I'm not hyperbolizing this experience. Sebald is, to me, the inheritor and refiner, perhaps the perfecter, of not only the whole body of 20th century literature of exile, but also one of the last great rememberers, the conscience that carries the lessons of the disasters of the 20th century. He represents the dying flame of Old World European literary scholars- a Sir Thomas Browne roaming the post-Relativity age. The trance-like or oneiric quality of his prose seems to me the voice of Time, but Time evacuating itself of its properties- time falling into the inner place where it dissolves within ourselves as Memory. His prose captures the essence of experience in the process of always being lost and recovered, the tenses of our lives that are always flickering into substance and de-substantiating before we might grab hold and define them.

This is a personal and a universal achievement. For all of his books are in some way about collective disappearance and the attempts we make, the various means and tactics we as individuals employ, to keep oblivion at bay. They are about how universal experience weaves the fate of the individual (thus the recurring themes of historical consequence, war, colonialism, etc.) In this sense, *Austerlitz* is a pinnacle of Sebaldian prose, as it directly confronts, through a single person, the universal history of destruction. Its main concern is the possibility of the universal forgetting of the lessons of the Holocaust to the obliterating work of Time and the caprice of Memory within the individual. This book is populated with ghosts, wavering beings, mists, fogs, smoke, *things that obscure*, grand facades of buildings housing empty labyrinths, vacant wind-sung streets, gloaming forests, cemeteries overgrown with time's lichen and tendrils, processions of those diminished by death suddenly appearing, glimmering into and retreating out of this world. The prose, of course, wanders, walks, explores- Sebald is pretty much *only* digression, in all of his books- beautiful, melancholy digression- akin to the process of meditative reflection itself the prose drifts, associates, follows leads down desolate halls, disappears into dusty vaults, peers through windows at empty landscapes in winter light, watches the clouds above silently pass away. But in all of this an utterly human voice is rising and ebbing, revealing, guiding, a tenderness pervades the melancholy (and, to me, the word *melancholy* almost always implies something achingly beautiful and tender as well as something struck with sadness and loss). A reach for the eternal and Ideal within the irretrievable. So *Austerlitz*, and Sebald, comes to find that place where hopeless hopes invest the human experience.

But really, this "review" is simply an excuse to provide some links to a few *Lieder ohne Worte*- throughout my reading of *Austerlitz* this was the music floating through mind:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wR3t6v...>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TV2LRF...>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-n_wb...

and of course

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKtkHh...>

Paola: Semplicemente: capolavoro.
Perché la storia, siamo noi.

Questo libro richiede di saper volare, di avere ali grandi che possano seguire le correnti, e che permettano di ascendere oltre le nuvole, di planare dolcemente e di atterrare senza farsi male.

Ho iniziato la lettura immaginando di andare a sbattere contro il muro delle sue pagine fitte fitte di scrittura, nessun acapo, forse un dialogo o due, nessuna divisione in capitoli, alcune fotografie, apparato iconografico che funge da testimone visivo della narrazione. (struggente il racconto della ricerca del viso della madre nel film propagandistico nazista nel campo di Teresinstadt, anche noi, io a cercare di decifrare la fotografia, a ricercare il fiore bianco nei capelli),

Invece.

Invece, che magnifica sorpresa. Il piacere allo stato puro del leggere lo provi quando il libro é scritto bene, in modo intelligente, e con la dose giusta di sensibilità e sentimento, dove si percepisce che quanto scritto é frutto di una propria esperienza, di un vissuto che ha abitato l'autore.

Gli autori (Wallace, Jung, e ora Sebald) che mi fanno vivere quest'esperienza io li abbraccerei stretti stretti, e li vorrei avere come amici, conoscenti, anche solo vicini di casa.

Ci sono passaggi di pura poesia: le falene che si smarriscono entrandoti in casa, e si uncinano con le loro zampine ad un muro della stanza, e a meno che con molta, molta, delicatezza tu non le fai uscire dalla casa, esse moriranno su quello stesso muro dove si sono fermate, paralizzate dal terrore di non sapere più dove sono, e una volta morte cadranno a terra e le ritroverai dopo tempo, in un qualche angolo polveroso; chissà racconta Austerlitz, il terrore, la paura, l'orrore, che in quelle ore prima di morire, avranno provato.

Sono qualche milione, le falene che hanno vissuto gli stessi sentimenti prima di diventare spirale di fumo grigio, che si dipanava verso il cielo.

Sebald sa narrare dell'indicibile con una sensibilità ed un empatia rare, portandoti pian piano a com-partecipare, a con-patire con lui, con la storia di Austerlitz, bambino salvato, adulto straziato, uomo anziano che ha ritrovato una specie di quietudine nel dolore, con le sue scatolette/bare ognuna contenente una piccola, fragile, smarrita falena.

Robert Ronsson: When I told a mate, who is a fine man and whose opinion I respect, that I found Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* difficult, he said, 'Read *Austerlitz*, you cantankerous old git. It's even better than *Rings*. *Austerlitz* is his Meisterwerk.' So I paid good money and started to read.

I reached page 218 before giving up. (I joked to my mate that this was halfway through the first

paragraph but actually there may have been a few paragraph breaks up to this point.) Here is the sentence that did it for me. I reached it and it was like I was running a marathon and I hit that spot where the leg muscles give up and you simply can't put one foot in front of the other. Yes, I had hit Sebald's wall. Here it is:

(Austerlitz, now an adult, meets his old nursemaid, Vera, in Prague for the first time after a gap of many years): It was through an interest in every aspect of French civilization, she added, something which as an enthusiastic student of Romance culture I shared with both Agata and Maximilian, that a friendship began to develop between us immediately after our first conversation the day they moved in, a friendship which led as if quite naturally, so Vera told me, said Austerlitz, to her offering, since unlike Agata and Maximilian she had time largely at her own disposal, to assume the duties of nanny for the few years until I started nursery school.

If any person other than Sebald wrote this sentence in the first page of their manuscripts any (and I mean any) editor or agent would shake his or her head and throw the manuscript in the bin. How did Sebald get away with it?

By the way, I've been told this extract looks bad out of context that it sits more comfortably in its place on the page. Believe me, it doesn't. Even in context it's utter goobledook.

Everybody tells me Sebald is quality - I think he's 'aving a laugh

Keith: prior to Austerlitz i used to be in simple terms dimly conscious of W.G. Sebald's literary reputation. via this I suggest that I knew it was once critical and well-established. Then in past due 2011 I learn James Wood's gloss within the London assessment of Books which solidified my curiosity. Having now entire Austerlitz i will be able to simply recognize the compliment in addition deserved and agree that Sebald's premature demise in 2001 used to be a tragedy for literature. The book, to be blunt, is just awesome and a textual content that should be, as is frequently stated, challenged and interrogated. Austerlitz in my variation is 415 pages of uninterrupted prose unbroken through chapters yet with pictures scattered throughout. It gives the look of facticity but is obviously a few kind of fiction. ancient locations and occasions are defined yet their fact isn't confirmed. what's it about? What does it mean? I definitely had no proposal and grew to become instantly to the serious literature on Sebald and especially on Austerlitz. i used to be enlightened by way of a few articles a few of that are quoted during this "review." there's little consensus between students yet all are adept at illuminating facets of Sebald's goal here. Dubow and Steadman-Jones signify the radical during this manner: W. G. Sebald's novel Austerlitz is set an lifestyles in exile: the tale of a guy with out a position on the planet and with no position within the self. it's also a couple of lifestyles between languages: a narrative of the way event reveals shape during the recalcitrant medium of speech. The pairing of exile and language isn't really coincidental. In a publication that bargains with a previous which can't easily be narratedback into being, language turns into the very mark of the exile's condition. However, Austerlitz—the made of a past due twentieth-century German recognition and of a undeniable vein of postwar thought—is now not in regards to the “failure” of language or the matter of translation. at the contrary, as readers stick to Austerlitz's travelling from position to put (always returning, by no means arriving) and paintings their manner into an assemblage of allusions (faint, oblique, and restless), Sebald continuously provides them with

the most unlikely necessity of language and the weight of at the least attempting to speak. ("Mapping Babel: Language and Exile in W.G. Sebald's Austerlitz," *New German Critique* 39:1 iciness 2012, p.3) Jacques Austerlitz's frenetic try and recover his prior coincides with the bigger subject of Europe's forgetting of its past. Austerlitz relates his trips all through Europe continuously in pursuit of himself. Austerlitz is a scholar, a lecturer at an institute of artwork historical past in London. His distinctiveness is enormous architecture; the publication relates descriptions of dysfunctional constructions equivalent to the Palais de Justice in Brussels and the Antwerp significant Station. Sebald sums up the human response to those structures: . . . not anyone in his correct brain may perhaps honestly say that he cherished an enormous edifice equivalent to the Palace of Justice at the outdated Gallows Hill in Brussels. on the such a lot we stare upon it in wonder, one of those ask yourself which in itself is a sort of dawning horror, for someway we all know by way of intuition that outsize constructions forged the shadow in their personal destruction earlier than them, and are designed from the 1st with a watch to their later life as ruins. This obsession is the grand climax to the book, if certainly you may say this ebook has this kind of thing, while Austerlitz attempts to paintings within the new French Bibliotheque National. First the problems of entry - one climbs many steps, all slippery while wet, after which descends down extra steps to the doorway - after which the utter sterility of the library which makes learn difficult. Then a librarian tells him that the hot library was once equipped at the web site of a warehouse which the Nazis used to kind and get ready for delivery estate seized from French Jews. this can be one other instance of heritage it appears intruding into the novel. it's a manner that Sebald can underline one of many grand issues of the book, the Holocaust and the forgetting linked to that. In a desirable two-part article, "Austerlitz and the nice Library: History, Fiction, Memory" (*Monatshefte* Vol. 101&102, Spring and summer season 2010). James Cowen investigates the reality of Sebald's story of the warehouse and in doing so illuminates what's maybe the foremost goal for: This rigidity among truth and fiction can render the connection of reader to textual content unstable, reminding him that he's studying a piece of fiction, now not a ancient document, keeping a undeniable uneasiness and distrust while he's absorbed within the old details, and undermining any threat of a comfy feel of closure. (p. 193) In truth, a really fascinating novel that would without doubt pay off extra study.

MJ Nicholls: extra meandering and excellent Sebaldian prose, with sentences callipered from 18thC German texts and respooled into post-war Wales, France and Germany, with one man's try to understand the horrors of the Theresienstadt workcamp and—obliquely—the Holocaust. This novel is a longer, extra distancing paintings than *The Emigrants* or *Vertigo*, either chopped into 4 chapters and separate narrative threads. The framing gadget this is unusual, with the narrator (Sebald?) quoting lengthy screeds of discussion from a talk with Jacques Austerlitz, whose tale contains the novel. inside of this frame, a sub-frame, whilst Austerlitz charges from Vera, an previous girl who is helping him discover his mystery childhood. either those units are distracting—for the narrator to bear in mind book-length dollops of dialog the interviews would have to be transcribed, and no point out is made up of this occurring. Likewise, the lengthy dreamy sentences are without end punctuated with ' . . . stated Austerlitz' to remind us we're inside of a frame. This aside, Austerlitz is a dour meditation on incredible horrors, dealt with with beautiful tenderness and power. sometimes dull, written as one non-stop block without paragraph breaks, punctuated with depressing and engaging photographs, and no more humour than usual. Listen to Sebald talk about this ebook during this ultimate interview, recorded 8 days ahead of his demise in a motor vehicle crash.

Chrissie: NO SPOILERS!!!! I have read one hundred sixty pages of 414. I'm giving this e-book up. It's not to my taste. Simply as within the final publication I read, a way to go, this is often approximately these little ones who escaped Nazi controlled international locations via Kindertransport in the course of WW2. In either books the kid was once transported clear of Czechoslovakia. Either youngsters have been approximately 5-6 years of age. Either books are approximately these little ones who by no means back are united with their parents, approximately young ones who purely at an grownup age discover they have been born in different countries, to folks they by no means knew and a spiritual history they by no means knew about. Either books are concerning the want to know our origins, to discover truths and to stand the evidence of history. Either books surprisingly sufficient specialize in trains! That's the place the comparability ends. Those books are very otherwise written. This e-book is natural fiction, whereas the opposite used to be maybe the real tale of the author's grandparents. The first difference is within the sort of writing. I'm going to now clarify how "Austerlitz" is written. There aren't any chapter, no paragraphs, little punctuation. I used to be now not conscious of this earlier than I purchased the book. My fault! The tale is advised within the first individual narrative alternating among Austerlitz, the fellow who left Czechoslovakia, and one other guy who grew to become first his acquaintance after which a friend. They met the 1st few instances just by coincidence. They met in numerous Belgian cities, then later in different countries. The e-book is set how Austerlitz discovers his previous and approximately his want to know his past. Not merely does the tale lack general grammatical thoughts of writing, it makes a speciality of one subject matter for many pages after which shifts to a different for many, many pages. For my taste, too many pages! Subject matters are architecture, moths, artists, colors, battles. The writing is erudite. I feel the extra you recognize of the sciences and background and diverse fields of knowledge, the extra you can be sucked into the book. I loved the knowledge in regards to the Palais de Justice in Brussels, yet what percentage others will take pleasure in this? I used to be bored whilst the historical battles have been the theme. I used to be bored often to a lot of the time. The writing used to be particular and approximately many various topics. Often ahead of the subject replaced it became reflective and philosophical. I didn't locate the philosophical rules enlightening. What's rather well performed is the location of images through the book. You truthfully think you're getting a real story. One thing I disliked in regards to the final ebook used to be the shortcoming of attention-grabbing part information. It used to be too wiped clean up. This e-book has the other problem. I suppose I'm by no means satisfied. Allow me be clear; while you're very familiar with every kind of subjects, you may simply consume this booklet up! My wisdom is insufficient. The booklet isn't badly written, however it doesn't healthy me. I don't have the power to continue, even supposing I might most likely examine really a lot.

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