

Bringing the Past Back to Life:  
Classical Motifs and the Representation of History in the Works of W. G. Sebald  
by  
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## List of Abbreviations

For ease of reference, I have abbreviated the following titles by W. G. Sebald and cited them within the text:

*Ae: Austerlitz* (English)

*Ag: Austerlitz* (German)

*Ee: The Emigrants* (English)

*Eg: Die Ausgewanderten* (German)

*Le: "Air War and Literature"* (English)

*Lg: Luftkrieg und Literatur* (German)

*Ne: After Nature* (English)

*Ng: Nach der Natur* (German)

*Re: The Rings of Saturn* (English)

*Rg: Die Ringe des Saturn* (German)

*Ve: Vertigo* (English)

*Vg: Schwindel, Gefühle* (German)

## Abstract

This dissertation argues that the German author W. G. Sebald (1944-2001) uses motifs drawn from classical epic poetry to articulate a new mode of historical representation suited to the traumatic historical events of the twentieth century. Sebald's works represent the past in evocative images, while at the same time maintaining a focus on the highly constructed nature of the representations they thus create. This hybrid modernist-realist mode of representation, which I call *nekyiastic modernism*, is modeled on the idea of raising the dead past and bringing it into the living present. To articulate this mode of representation, Sebald draws on three linked classical motifs: *nekyia* (the raising of the dead), *ekphrasis* (the description of a work of art), and *katabasis* (the journey into the underworld). In doing so, he builds on the work of post-Holocaust authors and critical theorists, including Primo Levi, Peter Weiss, Paul Celan, and Siegfried Kracauer, who use these same classical tropes as metaphors for the work of memory and the writing of history in the wake of the Holocaust. Sebald's work highlights an ambivalent relationship towards realist modes of representation in these authors' works, a desire for realism but an ultimate disillusionment about its promise to capture the past as it really was. I argue that Sebald re-stages and subverts this desire for the real in the uncannily intense descriptions in his works. By moving the classical trope of raising the dead to the center of his aesthetic program, he also articulates a

fundamentally different relationship to the past: For Sebald the present is the underworld in which the past is always present, waiting to be brought back to life. This dissertation seeks to go beyond the binary established by Hayden White between events that can be represented using realist techniques and modernist events that demand modernist techniques. Complex and traumatic events such as the Holocaust, I argue, call for hybrid modes of representation, like Sebald's nekyiastic modernism, that transcend this distinction.

## Introduction

The clearest statement of W. G. Sebald's poetic philosophy may be the one he makes at the end of the speech he delivered on the occasion of the opening of the Stuttgart Literaturhaus on Nov. 17, 2001, less than a month before his death. There, Sebald quotes from an elegy by the poet Hölderlin with a particularly classical theme:

So what is literature good for? Am I, Hölderlin asked himself, to fare like the thousands who in their springtime days lived in both foreboding and love, but were seized by the avenging Parcae on a drunken day, secretly and silently betrayed, to do penance in the dark of an all too sober realm where wild confusion prevails in the treacherous light, where they count slow time in frost and drought, and man still praises immortality in sighs alone?<sup>1</sup>

Hölderlin is writing here in a self-consciously classical mode. Elegy is a genre with deep roots in both classical Greek and Latin literature, and the underworld Hölderlin describes, to which the classical Fates, the Parcae, might doom his poetic persona, is clearly the same one described by classical poets: a gloomy place of changeless eternity

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<sup>1</sup> The speech is published under the title "An Attempt at Restitution," in *Campo Santo*. Here, English 204-5, German 247-8. In both texts, the line breaks of the original poem have been elided, and the verse has been integrated into Sebald's prose. The original lines Sebald quotes are as follows:

Soll es werden auch mir, wie den Tausenden, die in den Tagen  
Ihres Frühlings doch auch ahndend und liebend gelebt,  
Aber am trunkenen Tag von den rächenden Parzen ergriffen,  
Ohne Klag und Gesang heimlich hinuntergeführt,  
Dort im allzunüchternen Reich, dort büßen im Dunkeln,  
Wo bei trügerischem Schein irres Gewimmel sich treibt,  
Wo die langsame Zeit bei Frost und Dürre sie zählen,  
Nur in Seufzern der Mensch noch die Unsterblichen preist?

Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 2, 77.



and never-ending punishment. This underworld, however, is more fully explored in another classical genre related to elegy: epic poetry. Odysseus peers into it in the *Odyssey*, calling its spirits up to him; both Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Orpheus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* visit it. And it is, I would argue, through the lens of classical epic that it is best to understand Sebald's appropriation of Hölderlin here. This becomes apparent when Sebald goes on to explain what this passage means to him and why it is important for him as a modern author:

The synoptic view that wanders across the barrier of death in these lines is both overshadowed by and at the same time illuminates the memory of those to whom the greatest injustice was done. There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution, over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

It is only the synoptic view that Hölderlin provides that, by wandering across the boundary between this world and the next, can see the “thousands” snatched from life before their time and can visualize the injustice they endured. By reading along with Hölderlin, Sebald too can see them through this synoptic view. The poet Hölderlin is Sebald's guide to the underworld, as the poet Virgil is the pilgrim's guide in Dante's *Inferno*, or as the prophetic Sibyl is Aeneas' guide in Dante's own model, Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Sebald can see something in this underworld, however, that Hölderlin, writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, could not have seen. For Sebald, the “thousands” Hölderlin describes unjustly snatched from life become millions: the “greatest injustice” Sebald speaks of here, as the rest of his speech makes clear, includes the Holocaust (and perhaps the allied air war on the German cities during World War II that decimated

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<sup>2</sup> “An Attempt at Restitution,” English 205, German 248, translation modified.

Stuttgart as well).<sup>3</sup> Hölderlin's synoptic view is both overshadowed by and illuminating of this greatest injustice: overshadowed because "after Auschwitz" it is impossible to think of masses unjustly snatched from life without reference to the Holocaust; illuminating because it offers a mode of representation that can at least attempt to do justice to its victims.<sup>4</sup> The synoptic view Hölderlin provides us with does not take a position of scopic mastery, an overview, but instead "wanders" over the borders of life and death and into the classical underworld explored by Odysseus, Aeneas, and Orpheus. It sees the dead and their fate from no fixed position that could claim to be the definitive master perspective. It does not, in other words, attempt to put the dead in their place by asserting control over the representation of their fates. It is, therefore, for Sebald, the only view suited to serve as the basis for an attempt at restitution for the crimes of the Holocaust and the air war. In writing, this view cannot be provided by bureaucratic registries of facts or the annals of academic knowledge, but only by literature.

In his Stuttgart speech, Sebald uses the classical underworld journey as a way to outline a kind of literary writing that could do justice to the victims of traumatic and catastrophic historical events such as the Holocaust and the air war on the German cities. This dissertation is about the way Sebald uses motifs drawn from classical epic to articulate a new mode of historical representation and the way this makes him also fundamentally reorder the relation of the historical observer in the present to the

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<sup>3</sup> Immediately before asking his question, "So what is literature good for?", Sebald discusses the fate of those in the town of Tulle who were executed there or deported to concentration camps. Earlier in the essay, however, he also discusses the air war: "Why, when I take the S-Bahn to Stuttgart city center, do I think every time we reach Feuersee Station that the fires are still blazing above us [...]" Ibid., English 201, 204, German 244, 247.

<sup>4</sup> I refer here to Adorno's famous formula from "Cultural Criticism and Society": "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Adorno, 34.

historical past. In particular, I focus on classical motifs linked to the idea of raising the dead. Let me give one example of the way this trope permeates Sebald's literary works.

One of the leitmotifs running through Sebald's book *The Emigrants* is the idea of the dead returning to the world of the living: "And so they are ever returning to us, the dead [So also kehren sie wieder, die Toten]" (*Ee* 23/ *Eg* 36). Here Sebald means this literally, at least in one sense. His narrator has just discovered a newspaper article about an alpine guide, Johannes Naegeli, who had fallen into a glacier crevasse many years before, and whose bones have just been recovered. By an uncanny coincidence, this guide was the friend of the subject of this chapter, Dr. Henry Selwyn, whom the narrator has met in England. Selwyn is one of the four "emigrants" made both literally and existentially homeless by the traumatic events of the first half of the twentieth century, whose stories the narrator reconstructs in the book.

This phrase—"And so they are ever returning to us, the dead"—also, however, serves as a metaphor for the reconstructions of the past the narrator enacts in *The Emigrants*, something that becomes clear a little later, in another passage in which this motif appears. In the second chapter the narrator travels to Yverdon, Switzerland to speak with Lucy Landau, who knew another of his emigrants, his old primary school teacher, Paul Bereyter, intimately:

Mme Landau put before me a large album which contained photographs documenting not only the period in question but indeed, a few gaps aside, almost the whole of Paul Bereyter's life, with notes penned in his own hand. Again and again, from front to back and back to front, I leafed through the album that afternoon and since then I have returned to it time and again, because, looking at the pictures in it, it truly seems to me, and still does, as if the dead were coming back, or as if we were on the point of going in to join them [als kehrten die Toten zurück oder als stünden wir im Begriff, einzugehen zu ihnen]. (*Ee* 45-6/ *Eg* 68-9, translation modified)

It is largely from this photo album that the narrator tells Bereyter's life story—"The earliest photographs told the story [erzählten] of a happy childhood [...]" (*Ee* 46/*Eg* 69). We might then read the narrator's statement that he feels "as if the dead were coming back, or as if were on the point of going in to join them" as the embrace of a certain naïve realism, a belief that, by means of this photo album, he can experience and represent the past "as it actually was."<sup>5</sup> It also strangely situates the agency of this representation not with the narrator who is reconstructing this past, but with the dead themselves, whose photographs he holds in his hands. They seem to return, although the narrator qualifies this by revising his metaphor—it may be, rather, a case of us going into their realm, like the synoptic view in Hölderlin's poem. Nevertheless, there is a certain elision of the narrator's role, his mediation, in reconstructing this past. Or at least Sebald feints towards this naïve elision on the part of his narrator while hinting that this may not be the whole story after all (it is those "few gaps" in the photo album and the aporia they represent, which will hold the key to the narrator's attempt to solve the mystery of Bereyter's suicide).

As is typical with Sebald, he later undermines the troubling implications of this formulation. In the case of Paul Bereyter, it is a matter of reconstructing the dead man's life from a photo album. In the story of his fourth emigrant, Max Aurach, however, he shows us that photographs can be used to mislead as well. There he describes a photograph that appeared in a German newspaper of a book-burning that occurred in Würzburg in 1933:

That photograph, said Uncle, was a forgery. The burning of the books took place on the evening of the 10th of May, but since it was already

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<sup>5</sup> This is the famous formula of the nineteenth-century historian, Leopold von Ranke, which has become the byword of realism in historical writing.

dark, and they couldn't take any decent photographs, they simply took a picture of some other gathering outside the palace, Uncle claimed, and added a swathe of smoke and a dark night sky. In other words, the photographic document published in the paper was a fake. And just as that document was a fake, said Uncle, as if his discovery were the one vital proof, so too everything else has been a fake, from the very start. (*Ee* 183-4/ *Eg* 274)

The photograph is included in the text at this point, and one can clearly see that Aurach's uncle's verdict, at least about this particular image, is correct. We might, however, ask ourselves whether, if the narrator is willing to admit that this photograph of a historical event can be fake, this also reflects on his readiness to believe that he is immediately connected to the past through the photographs in Paul Bereyter's album? Sebald's insistence, in other words, on highlighting the false assumptions that went into the public acceptance of a patently false photographic representation of an event makes us re-read the eagerness of his narrator to believe in the connection to the past the photographs in Bereyter's album could provide in a more skeptical light. The disturbing implication here is not just that photographs can be falsified, but that representations of the past in any form can be a lie, even photographic representations, which seem to carry with them an implicit claim of authenticity.<sup>6</sup> We may believe that the representation brings the past back to life, but we must always beware of the potentially misleading mediation of representation, whether in pictures or words. The past does not come to life of its own accord; the representation brings it back to life, but only in a mediated, limited, and potentially misleading way. Maintaining a focus on this mediation while at the same time evoking the past in striking images—both literal, photographic images and imagistic prose—is Sebald's hallmark.

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<sup>6</sup> As Roland Barthes says, photography has the power to “compel me to believe its referent had really existed.” Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77.

The argument of this dissertation is that Sebald uses this classical trope of *nekyia*, raising the dead, and other classical motifs associated with it to articulate a hybrid mode of historical representation that combines modernist and realist representational techniques. This mode of representation, which I call *nekyiastic modernism*, is realist in the sense that, through its use of evocative images which combine to form a “synoptic view,” it embraces the realist aspiration to make the events of the past feel present to us. At the same time, it has the modernist quality of eschewing the assumption of a single master perspective on events that defines traditional realism. It undermines this sense of scopic mastery by using techniques associated with literary modernism: as in Sebald’s description of Holderlin’s “synoptic view” in his Stuttgart speech, it provides multiple perspectives on events, not a single fixed perspective; and as in *The Emigrants*, it constantly calls attention to the potentially misleading mediation of the representation itself.<sup>7</sup> I am thus making a connection not only between Sebald’s work and the classical epic tradition, from Homer to Virgil to Ovid, but between Sebald and post-Holocaust authors and critics who use the same classical motifs as well. The way these writers use these classical tropes, I argue, betrays a profound ambivalence towards realism in the representation of the Holocaust. These writers are attracted to the promise of realism to make the past come to life, to present it as it actually was. At the same time, they are aware that realism is no longer a culturally relevant mode of representation and, as the historical theorist Hayden White has pointed out, that it is particularly ill-suited to the

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<sup>7</sup> I am borrowing the term, “scopic mastery,” from Julia Hell, who uses it to describe the way in which scenes of gazing at the ruins of ancient civilizations, which, she argues, have often been staged in the service of imperial regimes, rely on the sense that the ruin gazer has mastered the historical lessons contained in the ruins of past empires and thereby gained control of the fate of his own empire. For example: “Moreoivier, Mussolini’s mise-en-scène of imperial power made its participants into imperial ruin gazers who occupied a position both of scopic mastery and of the mastery that comes with giving life to the past.” Hell, “Imperial Ruin Gazers, or Why Did Scipio Weep?”, 182.

representation of the Holocaust. According to White, the traumatic and complicated historical events of the twentieth century are “modernist events.” They are no longer amenable to representational techniques associated with literary realism. They demand, rather, the techniques of literary modernism.<sup>8</sup> Yet Sebald shows that, at least in literature, realism can be combined with modernism to create a hybrid mode of representation suited to traumatic and complex historical events such as the Holocaust and the allied air war on the German cities. The validity of this nekyiastic modernism, as I call it, rests, for Sebald, on the fact that it vividly reproduces the events of the past while at the same time making an important intervention in the public memory of these events by fundamentally reordering the relationship between the historical observer in the present and the past. Sebald’s nekyiastic modernism makes us see that the past is all around us, like the spirits in the classical underworld, waiting to be brought back to life.

This dissertation is divided into three chapters, each of which focuses on a specific classical motif through which Sebald elaborates this mode of representation. The first chapter focuses on *nekyia*, the raising of the dead. I argue that Sebald uses this classical trope to answer the question: What is an appropriate mode of representation for the traumatic and catastrophic events of the modern period? The second chapter focuses on *ekphrasis*, the description of a work of art. Sebald uses *ekphrasis*, I argue, to explore the relationship between this nekyiastic modernist mode of representation and other modes of representation, especially realism. The third chapter is about *katabasis*, the journey into the underworld. I argue there that Sebald uses *katabasis* to show how this mode of representation reorders our relationship to the historical past.

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<sup>8</sup> This is the argument Hayden White makes in his essay, “The Modernist Event.”

Before I begin, however, I would like to fill in the background of this dissertation in two ways: first by sketching the critical framework I am using, and second by giving a broader overview of the tradition of classical motifs associated with raising the dead in post-Holocaust literature and photography that Sebald draws on. With regards to my critical approach, I would like to address two questions: What do I mean by a hybrid modernist-realist mode of representation? And what is the concept of public memory Sebald relies on to suggest the utility of this mode of representation?

### Realism and Modernism

In his essay, “The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel,” Theodor W. Adorno never uses the word “modernism.” Nevertheless, it is clear that modernism is precisely what the essay is about. Adorno’s examples of the “contemporary novel” are drawn from the great figures of “high modernism,” James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Franz Kafka, whom he sees as part of a single literary movement.<sup>9</sup> According to Adorno, these authors’ novels constitute a “rebellion against realism.” This rebellion is entirely justified because:

The identity of experience in the form of a life that is articulated and possesses internal continuity—and that life was the only thing that made the narrator’s stance possible—has disintegrated. One need only note how impossible it would be for someone who participated in the war to tell stories about it the way people used to tell stories about their adventures. A narrative that presented itself as though the narrator had mastered this

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<sup>9</sup> “A common feature of the great novelists of the age is that in their work the novelistic precept ‘this is how it is,’ thought through to its ultimate consequences, releases a series of historical archetypes; this occurs in Proust’s involuntary memory as in Kafka’s parables and Joyce’s epic cryptograms.” Adorno, “The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel,” 35.



kind of experience would rightly meet with impatience and skepticism on the part of its audience.<sup>10</sup>

It is precisely this claim of “mastery” over the represented experience that, for Adorno, is the hallmark of realism. This effect of mastery, he tells us, is no longer valid, because the events of the modern period, of which his example is “the war,” i. e. World War II, defy our ability to fully comprehend and communicate. That this mastery, which realism implicitly claims, is also a scopic mastery, one whose primary metaphoric is that of visuality, however, only becomes clear later, when Adorno describes Proust’s literary technique and its departure from the techniques of “the traditional novel”:

The traditional novel, whose idea is perhaps most authentically embodied by Flaubert, can be compared to the three-walled stage of bourgeois theater. This technique was one of illusion. The narrator raises a curtain: the reader is to take part in what occurs as if he were present [...]. When, in Proust, commentary is so thoroughly interwoven with action that the distinction between the two disappears, the narrator is attacking a fundamental component of his relationship to the reader: aesthetic distance. In the traditional novel, this distance was fixed. Now it varies, like the angle of the camera in film: sometimes the reader is left outside, and sometimes he is led by the commentary onto the stage, backstage, into the prop room.<sup>11</sup>

The distinction between the “traditional novel,” whose avatar is the arch-realist, Flaubert, and Proust’s modernism is analogous to the distinction between two visual media, theater and film. Flaubert’s realism, like a play in a traditional theater, both stages events and enforces a fixed view on the events it stages. Proust’s modernism turns its lens to focus on the staging of the events—it is like a documentary film of a theatrical production. This is, however, more than a metaphor. The difference between realism and modernism, for Adorno, is the difference between two distinct ways of seeing embodied by these two media. Realism’s claim to mastery relies on keeping the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 34.

perspective it provides at a fixed distance from its staging of events—only thus can it create the illusion that we are seeing those events as if we were present at them.

Modernism dissolves this distance—it shows us the events from different perspectives, now closer, now farther away, and sometimes it even shows us how it is showing us these events. It reminds us, in other words, of the mediation of its own representation.

Modernism, for Adorno, is thus essentially a reaction to literary realism’s attempt to project a sense of control over the reality it represents. Adorno, however, is not the only critic to argue that literary realism often uses coercive means to achieve the effect of a mastery over reality. At the heart of realism is the idea of verisimilitude, the sense that what the representation is showing us could be real. Roland Barthes, however, in his seminal essay, “The Reality Effect,” which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 1, tells us that the verisimilitude which realist writers of both literature and history strive for is fundamentally different from that which was current in antiquity:

All classical culture lived for centuries on the notion that reality could in no way contaminate verisimilitude; first of all because verisimilitude is never anything but *opinable*: it is entirely subject to (public) opinion [...]. ‘Real,’ fragmented, interstitial notation, the kind we are dealing with here [...] is free of any such postulation that occurs in the structural fabric. Hence there is a break between the ancient mode of verisimilitude and modern realism; but hence, too, a new verisimilitude is born, which is precisely *realism* [...]. The new verisimilitude [...] proceeds from the intention to degrade the sign’s tripartite nature in order to make notation the pure encounter of an object and its expression.<sup>12</sup>

Realism, in other words, integrates verisimilitude into a false syllogism: I can represent something that could be real, therefore all of reality is amenable to representation. This is what Barthes describes as the “reality effect” and Adorno describes as the inherent preconception of the “traditional novel”: the sense that reality

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<sup>12</sup> Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” 147.

can be mastered, that it can be made always amenable to representation. And as Adorno has shown us, this mastery is a scopic mastery, one that claims not only to be able to represent reality, but to provide us with a perspective from which we can see all of its events and circumstances in their entirety. For both Barthes and Adorno this sense of mastery is an illusion, and as Barthes tells us it is an illusion that writers before the modern period did without, even while they often strove to produce an effect of verisimilitude. Verisimilitude is, therefore, not constitutive of realism. It is, however, at the very heart of realism, because it establishes the premise of the false syllogism through which realism seeks to produce its illusion.

In addition to the coercive means, described by both Barthes and Adorno, which realism uses to convince us of its “reality effect,” its verisimilitude is often maintained by vivid description. It shows us the reality it chooses to represent in vivid images—and often distinctly visual images.<sup>13</sup> High modernism, in its reaction against realism, often strives to banish verisimilitude as well, but there is no reason why the two must remain incompatible.<sup>14</sup> Verisimilitude can be created by a mode of representation that dispenses with the reality effect, and that, in fact, seeks to undermine it by offering us a shifting perspective that often turns its focus on the creation of the representation itself. This is what I argue Sebald’s *nekyiastic modernism* accomplishes, with its combination of

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<sup>13</sup> Barthes’ example of this descriptive element of realism is Flaubert’s description, in *Madame Bovary*, of the landscape around Rouen, which is full of vivid visual images. Flaubert emphasizes the visual nature of this description by explicitly comparing the landscape to a painted picture: “Thus, seen from above, the whole landscape had the motionless look of a painting” (quoted by Barthes). *Ibid.*, 144-5.

<sup>14</sup> This lack of verisimilitude is exactly what Sebald, in “Air War and Literature,” cites as the key deficiency in Arno Schmidt’s modernist depiction of the allied air war on the German cities in *Aus dem Leben eines Fauns*: “The author certainly intended to conjure up a striking image of the eddying whirlpool of destruction with his exaggerated language, but I for one, reading a passage like the following, do not visualize the supposed subject: life at the terrible moment of its disintegration [...]. I do not see what is being described; all I see is the author, eager and persistent, intent on his linguistic fretwork. (Le 57-8/ Lg 69-70).

evocative images seen from different perspectives and its focus on the mediation these images create. For Barthes, this would mean turning to an ancient model of verisimilitude rather than a modern one that is tied up with the “reality effect,” and this is one of the reasons, I would argue, why Sebald turns to the motifs of classical epic to articulate this mode of representation.

### History and Memory

Adorno, in “The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel,” tells us that it is precisely the complex and traumatic events of the modern period that give the lie to realism’s claim of mastery over reality. For Adorno, the crisis of realism is not only a crisis of literary representation, but one of historical representation, too—it is a historical event, World War II, which serves as his example of what can no longer be represented by realist means. Hayden White, in his essay, “The Modernist Event,” essentially agrees with Adorno. For White, the complex and traumatic events of the modern period defy the techniques of representation associated with literary realism: “This is not to say that such events are not representable, only that techniques of representation somewhat different from those developed at the height of artistic realism may be called for.”<sup>15</sup> These events, according to White, call for representational techniques associated, instead, with literary modernism: “And this is why it seems to me that the kinds of antinarrative nonstories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for adequate representations of the kind of ‘unnatural’ events—including the Holocaust—that mark

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<sup>15</sup> Hayden White, “The Modernist Event,” 79.

our era and distinguish it absolutely from all of the history that has come before.”<sup>16</sup> Here, White’s example is the Holocaust, although he makes it clear elsewhere that, like Adorno, he includes the “total war” waged by both sides during World War II as a similar “modernist event.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, both of the historical events of the twentieth century that serve as Sebald’s predominant preoccupations, the Holocaust and the air war on the German cities, fall under White’s definition of “modernist events.”

White’s main concern is with history as a discipline. Given that representation is an inherent part of history writing, he asks, which representational techniques are suitable for historians to use in writing about which historical events? One of the arguments I am making in this dissertation is that Sebald essentially agrees with White that the events of the modern period are no longer amenable to realist representation. This concerns him, however, for wholly different reasons. Sebald’s main concern, rather, is with what has come to be called, in the contentious debates about public memory in Germany, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, coming to terms with the past.<sup>18</sup> One can see this most clearly in his essay on the inadequate German literary response to the air war on the German cities during World War II, “Air War and Literature.”<sup>19</sup> There he draws on one of the key texts of the debates about *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Alexander and Margerete Mitscherlich’s 1975 study, *The Inability to Mourn*, to argue that the air war

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>17</sup> “Looked at in this way, however, modernism appears less as a rejection of the realist project and a denial of history than as an anticipation of a new form of historical reality, a reality that included among its supposedly unimaginable, unthinkable, and unspeakable aspects: the phenomena of Hitlerism, the Final Solution, total war, nuclear contamination, mass starvation, and ecological suicide [...]” White, “The Problem of Truth in Historical Representation,” 41.

<sup>18</sup> The book, *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse*, edited by Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove, and Georg Grote, is an excellent summary of the direction these debates have taken since German unification. The essay, “What Exactly is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*?”, in that volume gives a good introduction to the various meanings the term, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, has taken.

<sup>19</sup> This essay has the same name as the volume in which it appears in German, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, but the English edition of this volume has the title, “On the Natural History of Destruction.”

represents a trauma that the German people have never fully worked through, and which they have, in fact, repressed: “The almost entire absence of profound disturbance to the inner life of the nation suggests that the new Federal German society relegated the experiences of its own prehistory to the back of its mind and developed an almost perfectly functioning mechanism of repression [...]” (*Le* 11-12/ *Lg* 20).<sup>20</sup> This is the problem which he laments that German literature has been unable to correct.

Sebald also, however, seems to agree with Adorno’s contention, in his own famous essay on public memory in Germany, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” that working through the traumatic past (Adorno’s term is *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*) should not mean merely getting over that past. According to Adorno:

Despite all the psychological repression, Stalingrad and the night bombings are not so forgotten that everyone cannot be made to understand the connection between the revival of a politics that led to them and the prospect of a third Punic war. Even if this succeeds, the danger will still exist. The past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken.<sup>21</sup>

The air war may represent a trauma that the German people have suffered, but both Adorno and Sebald refuse to make the artificial distinction between Germans as victims and Germans as perpetrators. The “pre-history” Sebald tells us has been “pushed to the back of [the] mind” of German society includes the Holocaust as well as the air war. The two cannot be regarded as entirely distinct events with no connection between them. In “Air War and Literature,” he tells us that both events were part of the same

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<sup>20</sup> “The case studies presented by Alexander and Margerete Mitscherlich in their *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (“The Inability to Mourn”) makes one at least suspect some connection between the German catastrophe ushered in under Hitler’s regime and the regulation of intimate feelings within the German family” (*Le* 84/ *Lg* 97).

<sup>21</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” 103.

“pall of smoke in the air all over Europe,” and in his Stuttgart speech, as I have said, they are both part of the “greatest injustice” that still needs to be addressed (*Le* 71/ *Lg* 84). Coming to terms with the past of the air war, therefore, is not merely a matter of healing a psychic wound that has remained covered but untreated. It is about facing an entire history whose events have inspired a complex blend of emotions.

Facing this past, however, is not all that Sebald has in mind. German cultural figures have been attempting to bring German society face to face with its troubled past almost since the end of war. A list of those involved with this project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* might include politicians like Theodor Heuss, critics like Adorno and Hannah Arendt, writers like Peter Weiss and Paul Celan, composers like Arnold Schönberg and Karlheinz Stockhausen, artists like Anselm Kiefer, filmmakers like Claude Lanzmann, etc. Writing after the unification of Germany and after nearly half a century of attempts to come to terms with the past (his first literary prose work, *Schwindel, Gefühle*, was published in 1990, although the book-length poem *Nach der Natur* was published in 1988), Sebald does not seek to be just another member of this group. He aims, instead, to change the terms in which we think of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* relies implicitly on a concept of public memory which holds onto these traumatic events. The idea that a society can “work through” or seek to atone for an event by means of public discourse implies that it has recorded this event in some form of shared memory. To understand how Sebald seeks to change the terms of the discussion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, we must understand how he offers us a fundamentally different conception of public memory.

Maurice Halbwachs is, if not the first, then among the most influential to make the argument that, in order to understand the effect events in the past have in the social milieu of the present, we need a concept analogous to personal memory on the mass, societal level. In *On Collective Memory*, published posthumously in 1950, he outlines the concept which he uses to fill this role, “collective memory,” which “is a living history that perpetuates and renews itself through time and permits the recovery of many old currents that have seemingly disappeared.”<sup>22</sup> For Halbwachs, collective memory of an event derives from the individual memories of those who were part of a social milieu affected by that event. The “collective memory” of an event dies, therefore, with the last contemporaries of that event.

The idea that public memory cannot be unlinked from the personal memories of individuals is an implicit assumption underlying all of Sebald’s works, which explore the impact of historical events precisely through the individual memories of survivors of those events and those who have come into contact with these survivors. And even “Air War and Literature,” in making its argument about German society’s repression of its past, moves back and forth between the societal impact of these events and detailed accounts of the recollections of individuals.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to Halbwachs, however, Sebald extends his concept of public memory beyond the range of those who were part of the social milieu immediately affected by the event. For Sebald, the mass-psychological impact of an event, and therefore its recording in something analogous to the memory of

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<sup>22</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 64.

<sup>23</sup> For example, after discussing the genesis of the aerial bombardment strategy and giving a truly shocking account of one particular air raid, Sebald moves on to a discussion of Solly Zuckerman, who had been a voice of dissent in the planning of the air war strategy in Great Britain: “When I questioned Lord Zuckerman on the subject in the 1980s, he could no longer remember in detail what he had wanted to say at the time. All that remained in his mind was the image of the blackened cathedral rising from the stony desert around it, and the memory of a severed finger that he had found on a heap of rubble” (*Le* 32/ *Lg* 42).



an individual clearly extends at least into the generation of what Marianne Hirsch calls “post-memory.”<sup>24</sup> For both Hirsch and Sebald the psychological impact of an event can be passed from one generation to the next, if the second generation has an intense experience of the effect of this event on the first generation.<sup>25</sup> Sebald clearly sees this transfer of memory from one generation to the next as something that has occurred on a mass scale to German society. In “Air War and Literature,” for example, he discusses the deep psychological impact the war had on him, along with many other Germans of his generation, even though he was too young to experience the war directly: “Yet to this day, when I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war I feel as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge” (*Le* 71/ *Lg* 83). Sebald is speaking about himself here, but he is, of course, not the only “child of the war”; he is part of a whole generation that might describe themselves this way.<sup>26</sup>

What makes Sebald’s conception of public memory unique, however, as I argue in Chapter 3, is his emphasis on how this memory is sedimented not just in the specific memories of the individuals who make up a society, but all around them in the traces of

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<sup>24</sup> “Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right.” Marianne Hirsch, “Surviving Images,” 9.

<sup>25</sup> Sebald’s concept of public memory, may, in fact, have more in common with Jan Assman’s “cultural memory.” Assman seeks to extend Halbwachs’ “collective memory” by including, as the mechanisms of this more broadly defined memory, “traditions” including “Memorials, days of remembrance with the corresponding ceremonies and rituals (such as wreath-laying), flags, songs, and slogans [...]” These traditions can create cultural memories of events in the far distant past, so long as these events are still memorialized by the society in the present. Assman, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> “Post-memory” has become an important tool for critics addressing the relationship to the past embodied by Sebald’s works. J. J. Long, for example, has argued that this is one way to look at the way Sebald describes his own relationship to the past of the air war in “Air War and Literature”: “These ‘Spuren im Gedächtnis’ correspond to Hirsch’s postmemories: the events in question took place before the author’s birth, and yet cannot be consigned to mere ‘history’ because of the profound affective connection to the recent past that no member of the so-called second generation can escape.” Long, “History, Narrative, and Photography in W. G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten*,” 123.

the past contained in writing and other public media of communication as well as in the places where the evidence of these events in the past is still legible. It is through their encounters with these traces of the past that they awaken their shared, societal memory of the events of the past. As he tells us in “Air War and Literature,” for example:

But I do not necessarily have to return to Germany and my place of origin to visualize that period of destruction. It often comes back to my mind where I live at present. Many of the more than seventy airfields from which the war of annihilation was waged against Germany were in the county of Norfolk [...]. Grass has grown over the runways, and the dilapidated control towers, bunkers, and corrugated iron huts stand in an often eerie landscape where you sense the dead souls of the men who never came back from their missions, and of those who perished in the vast fires. (*Le* 77/ *Lg* 89-90)

Sebald’s description of the connection to the events of the air war that he, and presumably others as well, can still feel in Norfolk, is a kind of Proustian “involuntary memory” on a mass scale. This is how the form of public memory Sebald describes is accessed and maintained: through the kind of involuntary memory aroused by encounters with photographs, diaries, and architectural spaces.

We might also, however, describe this in slightly different terms as a kind of institutionalized traumatic memory. Traumatic memory, after all, also functions involuntarily, flashing up and haunting its victims against their will. If the goal of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is to work through the traumas of the events surrounding World War II, the form of public memory Sebald sketches for us here seems to resist this therapeutic project. It seems, in fact, to imply an acceptance of the continued intrusion of traumatic memory into the lives of individuals and societies in the present. Andreas Huyssen, in his essay on Sebald, “The Gray Zones of Remembrance,” tells us that there is “a gray zone that haunts Sebald’s imagination—the gray zone between the living and the

dead that is the zone of traumatic memory itself, that one wants to see and not see, to feel and not feel.”<sup>27</sup> If there is a program of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Sebald’s works, it is not to work through the past, much less to get over it, but instead to grow comfortable in this gray zone. The past, Sebald seeks to show, is always present, waiting to come back to life in the encounter with the scattered traces it has left behind everywhere. This is what Sebald’s representations of historical events seek to accomplish—to allow this past to remain part of the living present, to bring it back to life while refusing to produce a definitive master perspective on events which would allow one to cast the process of working through these events as complete, and the events themselves now as firmly in the past. Sebald does not preclude the idea that history writing can aid in the performance of this function. It is clear, though, that it is primarily literature—a literature that can access the shared, public memories stored in the traces of the past all around us and make them conscious—that, for Sebald, is burdened with this task.<sup>28</sup>

### Classical Motifs in Post-Holocaust Literature

The mode of representation Sebald employs to bring the past all around us back to life is the nekyiastic modernism, based on classical motifs, which I have already described. Sebald, however, is not the first writer to turn to classical tropes in discussing the traumatic and complicated events of the twentieth century. There is, in fact, a

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<sup>27</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “The Gray Zones of Remembrance,” 973.

<sup>28</sup> In “Air War and Literature,” Sebald is not very positive about the role history writing can play in public discourse and public memory: “Even in later years, when local and amateur war historians began documenting the fall of the German cities, their studies did not alter the fact that the images of this horrifying chapter of our history have never really crossed the threshold of the national consciousness” (*Le* 11/ *Lg* 19).

substantial tradition of classical motifs in post-Holocaust literature. Post-Holocaust authors use these motifs to explore the memory, both private and public, of the Holocaust. Their use of classical tropes, I would claim, betrays a deep ambivalence about realist techniques of representation, an attraction to realism's promise to reproduce the past "as it actually was" and a simultaneous awareness that, in the wake of the Holocaust, the quintessential "modernist event," this promise has been once and for all foreclosed.

I would like to give two brief examples of the way classical motifs associated with the raising of the dead have fulfilled this role in post-Holocaust literature, one drawn from the work of Peter Weiss, the German Jewish writer who survived the war in exile in Sweden and who is one of Sebald's greatest influences, as I discuss in Chapter 3; the other by Primo Levi, the Italian Holocaust survivor whose memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*, is one of the most important literary texts about the Holocaust.

In his short prose piece, "My Place," Peter Weiss tells the story of a trip he made to Auschwitz in 1964. Weiss describes this visit to the former concentration camp very much in the terms of a communion with the dead:

In the moment in which the sun sinks out of sight, the ground mist rises and hovers around the low barracks. The doors stand open. I step through one of them. And this is how it is now: here the breathing, the whispers and the rustles are not yet entirely smothered by the silence: these bunks, stacked one above the other three deep, along the side walls and down the middle of the barracks, are not yet entirely deserted; here in the straw, in the heavy shadows, the thousand bodies can still be sensed [...]; here one can still expect a movement inside there, a head lifting, a hand reaching out.<sup>29</sup>

We might read this as the embrace of a naively realist theory of historical representation. Weiss, in his visit, can sense the past around him as it actually was. He

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<sup>29</sup> Peter Weiss, *My Place*, 150. I follow the translation by Karen Jackiw.

can therefore present a realistic vision of what happened here to his readers. Weiss' language, however, is strangely tentative. It is full of passive constructions: the breathing of the victims interned here is "not yet entirely smothered by silence [noch nicht ganz von der Stille verdeckt]"; the bodies "can still be sensed [sind ... noch zu ahnen]"; it is "still to be expected [noch zu erwarten]" that a hand reaches out. Nowhere does Weiss say that he himself senses, much less sees or hears any of this in the barracks. And in fact, if we look back, the story of Weiss' visit up to this point has been the story of his disappointment at being unable to sense the horrific events that occurred here. Of the place where prisoners were hanged, he tells us, "I had seen it before me when I heard about it and read about it. Now I see it no longer."<sup>30</sup> He not only fails to visualize what occurred here but to hear it, as well: "I look into these rooms which I myself escaped, stand still between the fossilized walls, hear no feet shod in boots, no calls of command, no moans and no whimpers."<sup>31</sup> It is only in the barracks that he feels momentarily that the past can return to life, can be sensed again. Even this comes to an end, however:

Yet after a time silence and immobility enter here too. One still living has come, and that which happened here closes itself in his presence. The one still living, who comes here from another world, possesses nothing but his knowledge of numbers, of written reports, of eyewitness accounts, they are a part of his life, he carries them with him, but he can grasp only that which happens to himself. Only if he himself is pulled away from his table and laid in chains, only if he is kicked and whipped, will he know what this is. Only if it happens next to him that they are rounded up, beaten to the ground, loaded into wagons, will he know how this is.

Now he only stands in a world gone under. Here he can do nothing more. For a time the utmost silence reigns.<sup>32</sup>

Here, once again, the language is that of a classical visit to the land of the dead.

Weiss' reference to himself as "one still living [ein Lebender]" reinforces the sense that

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 151.

what he has felt around him, but could not quite see or hear, were the spirits of the dead, as does his reference to finding himself “in a world gone under [in einer untergegangen Welt].” In the *nekyia* in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus journeys to a liminal place, a border zone between this world and the next, to raise the dead spirits from the underworld, but he himself cannot enter the land of the dead. Nor can he see all the way into the realm where the figures out of the past dwell. Homer, as I explain in Chapter 1, thereby thematizes the limits of the poet’s connection to the past and of his ability to bring this past back to life for his audience. Likewise, although Weiss clearly desires to commune with the spirits of those who suffered and died here in the concentration camp, to see this past come back to life around him, he ultimately fails to do so. If realism, as I have argued, demands the construction of a master perspective from which the events it describes can be seen, this is a gesture towards which Weiss is attracted, but which he ultimately finds untenable.

One of the reasons Peter Weiss is wary about claiming to be able to represent the Holocaust realistically is that he did not experience it directly. He feels a strong connection to Auschwitz. It is “his place,” the place for which, as a German Jew, he was destined by the Nazi bureaucracy that put itself in the position of the classical fates, deciding with absolute authority about the life and death of those it interned. That he escaped this destiny was, so to speak, a twist of fate. Primo Levi, on the other hand, did experience the Holocaust firsthand. He survived being interned at Auschwitz. Nevertheless, in his essay, “Shame,” published in the collection, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989), he too expresses a hesitancy to claim the authority to definitively represent the experience of the victims of the camp. For, as one who did not experience the very

worst deprivations and punishments of the camp and thus managed to survive, he cannot claim to fully understand and communicate the experience of those who were called the “Muslims,” those prisoners of the camp who, through exhaustion, undernourishment, and demoralization, had ceased to be capable of the kind of contemplative thought and purposeful action that we think of as constitutive of human life:

I must repeat, we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the “Muslims,” the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.<sup>33</sup>

We might see this phrase, “those who saw the Gorgon,” first and foremost as a reference to Dante’s *Inferno*. In Canto IX of the *Inferno*, Virgil covers the pilgrim’s eyes so that he does not see the Medusa, who represents a potentially fatal impediment on his spiritual journey through the underworld.<sup>34</sup> Dante also refers to the Medusa as “the Gorgon” (Medusa is traditionally one of three Gorgons). Certainly Dante is a constant companion of Levi—as he is of Weiss as well—and Levi often describes the concentration camp as a Dantesque hell on earth.<sup>35</sup> He has even been called “a Dante of our time,” because of his reliance on Dante as a cultural touchstone.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Primo Levi, “Shame,” 83-4.

<sup>34</sup> *Inferno*, 9.52-60.

<sup>35</sup> One of the things Levi in particular, but other post-Holocaust authors as well, hit upon in turning to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is a coincidence between the hierarchical, totalitarian power structures of the *Inferno* and the earthly realization of these structures in the concentration camp, as well as an even more horrifying coincidence between the actual tortures dealt out in Dante’s imagined place of eschatological punishment and those in the camps. The *Inferno*, with its divine will carried out by devils and mythical beasts, becomes, for these authors, the analogue of the concentration camp, the “absolute biopolitical space, both *Lebensraum* and *Todesraum*” as Giorgio Agamben has described it, where authoritarian power structures permeate all aspects of life (and death)—in other words, hell on earth. The topography of Dante’s *Inferno* thus becomes the analogue of the experience of the camp from the perspective of the victim. The

Levi, however, does not specifically say, “Medusa,” here, as Dante does; he says, “Gorgon,” which evokes more strongly, once again, the *nekya* in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, telling the story of his communion with the dead spirits to the court of Phaiakia, says that he broke off his communion with the dead souls because he was afraid the Queen of the Dead would send up “the head of a Gorgon” to him, to hinder his departure.<sup>37</sup> Seeing the Gorgon, for Odysseus, seems to mean potentially never returning from his visit to the dead, and likewise, for Levi, becoming a “Muslim” means almost definitely never returning from the underworld of the camps. Levi’s statement about the “Muslims” here, however, is in the context of a concern with the possibilities for and limitations of writing about the experience of those in the camps. Odysseus’ reference to the Gorgon is by way of an excuse as to why the story of his visit with the dead must break off where it does, why he could not see the spirits of those from even earlier periods, and why he therefore cannot recount their tales now. Likewise, for Levi, his discussion of “those who saw the Gorgon” is an occasion for him to reflect on the limits of his own recounting of the experience of those in the camps. Seeing the Gorgon means experiencing something that Levi and other Holocaust survivors could not write about, not only because experiencing it meant almost certain death, but also because it is by definition an experience not amenable to communication. Being a “Muslim” in the camps meant being cut off from those things which lend a coherent structure to experience: the ability to reflect on what is happening around one and to make choices

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spatial floorplan of the *Inferno*, which Dante's Pilgrim traces from top to bottom, from bad to worse, is adopted as an organizing principle for the victim's potential experiences, roughly following the temporal sequence of events endured by a victim from entry into the camp, through confinement and labor in the lager, and finally to the gas chamber. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 86.

<sup>36</sup> Risa B. Sodi, *A Dante of Our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz*.

<sup>37</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.634.



based on those reflections. Levi puts this in visual terms—the “Muslim” *saw* the Gorgon, or, as Giorgio Agamben puts it in his reading of Levi in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, he “[saw] the impossibility of seeing.”<sup>38</sup> The Muslim’s perspective thus remains a blind spot for potential representations of the Holocaust and a rebuke to any attempt to construct a perspective that claims a mastery over the experience of the Holocaust. It is this kind of perspective which, I have argued, is one of the aspirations of realism. Here, Levi admits that this aspiration is not feasible—there can be no realist program of representation suited to what happened in the camps. Although Levi feels that he is called upon to bear witness for the “Muslims,” his witnessing has to take the form of calling attention to a lacuna in his testimony. He can only represent the Holocaust, in other words, by pointing to a failure to be able to represent it in any way that could be considered complete. Levi, of course, is not alone in highlighting the unrepresentability of the experiences of Holocaust victims. This, as I will argue in Chapter 2, is one of the reasons why Peter Weiss and Sebald turn to *ekphrasis*, the description of a work of art, as a tool for historical representation—*ekphrasis* is an especially apt tool for representing something while simultaneously pointing to the limitations of this representation.

### Classical Motifs and the Photographic Memorialization of the Holocaust

Literary writing, however, is not the only medium that has appropriated classical motifs for the representation of the Holocaust. Classical motifs also play an important role in the photographic memorialization of the Holocaust. And, as I argue in Chapter 3, Sebald, who draws on the photographic record of the Holocaust in the photographs he

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<sup>38</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 54.

includes in his books, highlights the presence of these classical motifs in some of the most iconic images of the Holocaust. Marianne Hirsch has pointed out that, although literally millions of photographs were taken during and immediately after the liberation of the camps, only a small number of these photographs have become part of the public iconography of the Holocaust. There are very few photographic images, in other words, that one sees reproduced everywhere, in books, articles, and museum exhibits about the Holocaust. “Why,” Hirsch asks, “with so much imagery available from the time, has the visual landscape of the Holocaust and thus our opportunity for historical understanding been so radically delimited?”<sup>39</sup> Hirsch goes on to argue that these photographs have become so iconic partially because they can be read as thematizing our own memorial engagement with the past of the Holocaust:

I would like to suggest, not without some hesitation, that more than simply “icons of destruction,” these images have come to function as tropes for Holocaust memory itself. And they are also tropes for photography, referring to the act of looking itself. It is as such tropes, and not only for their informational value about the Holocaust, whether denotative or connotative, that they are incorporated into the visual discourse of postmemory as pervasively as they are.<sup>40</sup>

For example, a famous image of the gate of Auschwitz with the chillingly ironic motto, *Arbeit macht frei*, also includes a sign with the word, *Halt*, “Stop,” which may be taken as a reminder to us as viewers of this image that in remembering and memorializing this past we may be opening ourselves up to a potentially traumatic experience.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hirsch, “Surviving Images,” 8. Hirsch is not the only one to notice the obsessive repetition of the same photographic images in the record of the Holocaust. Barbie Zelizer, in her study of the changing memorialization of the Holocaust in photographs over time, *Remembering to Forget*, tells us: “The photos used to remember atrocity gave new meaning to the act of bearing witness, as images anchored memory to specific scenes: a set of railroad tracks, a familiar barracks, a gateway into one of the camps. Certain atrocity photos resurfaced time and again, reducing what was known about the camps to familiar visual cues that would become overused with time.” Zelizer, 158.

<sup>40</sup> Hirsch, 16.

<sup>41</sup> This is Hirsch’s reading of the photograph. *Ibid.*, 17-8.



Figure 1. Photograph: Buchenwald, April 1945. Margaret Bourke-White, *Life Magazine*.

I would argue that Hirsch is essentially right, but also that one of the ways in which these photographs have come to thematize the work of memory done by the representation of the Holocaust is through allusions to classical tropes associated with the raising of the dead. If one looks closely, one finds that one of the commonalities that unites this photographic “canon” of the Holocaust, and that perhaps partially explains its limited nature, is that the images seem to allude in subtle ways to these classical tropes—I am not claiming that it was the intent of the original photographers to allude to these tropes, but that these allusions are available for artists, writers, and critics working with these photographs, like Sebald, to pick up on, and that they may even have played a

subtle role in the selection of this photographic canon. The concentration camp these photographs depict is distinctly otherworldly. The spectral shapes of the emaciated and exhausted inmates, who have been described as the “living dead,” loom up out of the shadows to a barbed wire threshold separating our world from theirs (fig. 1).<sup>42</sup> In other images we find ourselves in an eerie ruinscape with no signs of present, human life. The otherworldly quality of these images may, in part, be due to the pervasiveness of the metaphor of the concentration camp as Dantesque Hell on earth in discourse about the Holocaust, including, as I said above, the works of literary authors like Primo Levi. I would claim, however, that it is also due to the fact that these images can be read as thematizing the engagement with the past of the Holocaust, enacted partially through the images themselves, as a visit to the dead.

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<sup>42</sup> Agamben discusses the description of the camp inmates as the “living dead” in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 54.



Figure 2. Photograph: Railway Entrance of Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1945.

I would like to examine briefly one example of this prevalence of classical motifs in Holocaust photography, the famous photograph of the so-called “Gate of Death” at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the main railway entrance through which prisoners were brought into the camp (fig. 2). Sebald, I argue in Chapter 3, alludes specifically to this photograph in at least one of the photographic reproductions in *The Rings of Saturn*. The image clearly has an otherworldly quality to it. It positions us, the viewers, between sets of tracks all leading to a single gateway in what looks strangely like the fortifications of a medieval castle. Behind this gate we see only empty air and an eerily glowing sky.

There is no sign of life. This is how Hirsch interprets the photograph:

[...] it is the threshold of remembrance, an invitation to enter and, at the same time, a foreclosure. The electric fences, towers and lights, the forbidding warning signs, repeat cultural defenses against recollection,

and, especially, against looking beyond the fence, inside the gate of death, at death itself. The postmemorial generation, largely limited to these images, replays, obsessively, this oscillation between opening and closing the door to the memory and the experiences of the victims and survivors.<sup>43</sup>

This gate, however, may also remind us of the gate that is said, in the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and the *Inferno*, to separate this world from the next.<sup>44</sup> If the world behind that gate is a kind of land of the dead, the hell on earth designed by the Nazis and meant to be the final resting place of their victims, the photograph reinforces the sense that, in condemning their victims to this place, the Nazis put themselves in the position of the classical fates. The tracks on which we stand, in the position of those heading towards that destiny, lead inevitably into the gate. They are, like the strands of the Parcae woven into the fabric of fate, the visual metaphor for this destiny, hard, rigid, and leading immutably towards one destination.

The strength of this figural undercurrent of the photograph, which relies for its force on allusions to these classical tropes, is evidenced by the fact that the photograph, in fact, produces a kind of optical illusion. Everything about the image leads us to believe we are on the outside staring into the maw of hell—and Hirsch, too, seems to be guilty of this assumption—but in fact the photograph was taken from the other side, from the inside looking out. The figurative level of the image, in other words, overpowers and then rewrites what might be called the “literal” level. Nevertheless, despite this interference between the two levels of signification on which the photograph operates,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>44</sup> In Book 19 of the *Odyssey*, Penelope says that there are two gates through which dreams enter the world, one of ivory for false dreams and one of horn for true ones (*Odyssey* 19.560-9). In the *Aeneid*, Virgil situates these two gates at the exit to the underworld. Aeneas, he tells us, leaves the underworld at the end of his *katabasis* through the gate of ivory (*Aeneid* 8.893-8). Dante’s Pilgrim also enters the *Inferno* through a gate with the famously stark motto inscribed on it, “Abandon all hope, you who enter here” (*Inferno*, 3.1-9, here 3.9). I follow, here, the Petrocchi translation of the *Divine Comedy*, published online by the Princeton Dante Project.

the figurative significance of the image goes even further: the photograph does not just act as a visual metaphor for the Holocaust as event, casting the concentration camp as destiny and Hell on earth; it also thematizes the act of remembering and representing the Holocaust. The land of the dead on the “other side” of the gate is not just the camp; as Hirsch suggests, it is the past of the Holocaust as well, a past that, like Odysseus at the threshold of the underworld, we can peer into but never fully know. As Primo Levi and Peter Weiss tell us, there is only so much of what happened there that we can know much less understand. The representation of this past, enacted partially through photographic images such as this one, can only bring us so close to it.

### The Underworld of History

Both post-Holocaust literature and the photographic record of the Holocaust allude to the classical trope of raising the dead to highlight the impossibility of producing a definitive representation of the Holocaust. Sebald, as I have said, draws on both of these strands, post-Holocaust literature and the iconic photographs of the Holocaust, in his works which combine text with photographic images. By moving the motif of raising the dead to the center of his engagement with the past, he makes their ambivalence about the possibilities of representing this past, and especially about the claim to mastery made by realism, an essential part of his historical representations. In doing so, however, he also reorders the relationship to the past embodied by his works more broadly as well and gives a new meaning to the idea of “coming to terms with the past.” Both post-Holocaust literature and the iconic photographs of the Holocaust bring their audiences face to face

with what we might call the underworld of history (which is perhaps another way of describing Huyssen's "gray zone between the living and the dead that is the zone of traumatic memory itself") in the encounter with the past of the Holocaust.<sup>45</sup> The implication, however, is that, like the epic heroes who journey to the land of the dead and return to tell the tale, we can leave this underworld when we turn our attention from this specific past. Sebald's underworld of history contains not just the Holocaust but the entire gamut of linked traumatic events which haunts German society and the broader Western world, and especially the air war during World War II. He asks us to make this underworld, which is all around us in the traces which remain of this past, our home, to accept that living in the modern world means living with the continued presence of this past.

This, then, is another way of putting the thesis of this dissertation, which I stated earlier: Sebald draws on the tradition of classical motifs in post-Holocaust literature and the photographic record of the Holocaust to articulate a new mode of historical representation based on the idea of raising the dead, and doing so forces him to propose a fundamentally different relationship to the historical past he represents, one that acknowledges and accepts the continued presence of the traumatic past.<sup>46</sup> Each of the

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<sup>45</sup> Huyssen, 973.

<sup>46</sup> In making this argument I am drawing on the work of a number of critics who have written about Sebald. Many critics have noted that Sebald uses a metaphoric of ghostliness and otherworldliness to describe the engagement with the past in his literary works. Andreas Huyssen's influential article on Sebald in *A New History of German Literature*, "The Gray Zones of Remembrance," is especially insightful in this regard. He connects this ghostly quality to the "gray zone between the living and the dead that is the zone of traumatic memory itself, that one wants to see and not see, to feel and not feel." Huyssen, 973. Russell Kilbourn, in "Architecture and Cinema: The Representation of Memory in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*," has even connected this ghostly quality in Sebald's works to classical *katabasis*. Sebald, according to Kilbourn, draws on "Western culture's long-standing association between memory and death, a relation often figured in spatial terms as a realm of enigmatic forms and meanings." I rely on Kilbourn's insight that *katabasis* functions for Sebald as a spatial metaphor for memory in Chapter 3. Kilbourn, "Architecture and Cinema," 141, 148-52. I also build on Todd Presner's argument, in "'What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals': Extreme History and the Modernism of W. G. Sebald's Realism," that Sebald blends



three chapters of this dissertation is centered around a specific classical motif. I begin each chapter by examining a classical example of this motif, followed by its appropriation in the work of one or more post-Holocaust authors or critical theorists. Then I turn to Sebald's works to show how he builds on this tradition of classical motifs to articulate his theory of the representation of history.

The first chapter, "Bringing Remembered Events Back to Life," argues that Sebald uses the classical motif of *nekylia*, raising the dead, to articulate a hybrid modernist-realist mode of historical representation. I begin this chapter with an analysis of the *nekylia* in Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*. I argue that already in Homer's *Odyssey*, the raising of the dead serves as a means to articulate a mode of poetic representation based on the idea of bringing the past back to life in vivid images. From there, I move on to a discussion of the photographic theories of Roland Barthes and Siegfried Kracauer. For both of these critical theorists, I argue, photography serves as a means of bringing the dead back to life. They thus articulate a role for photography in public memory remarkably similar to that Homer finds for his poetry. Finally, I discuss two texts by Sebald, his last completed literary prose work, *Austerlitz*, and his essay on the cultural

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realism and modernism in his representations of historical events. I essentially agree with Presner that "Sebald produces a realistic history of the present, which, through his use of modernist techniques of narration, unlinks history from the literal reproduction of the past." Presner, "What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals," 345. Julia Hell's related point, in "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes, or the Gothic Beauty of Catastrophic History in W. G. Sebald's 'Air War and Literature,'" that Sebald's profound concern with the ethics of the representation of the past is expressed in primarily visual metaphors has also been an important touchstone for this dissertation. Hell connects the gaze Sebald directs into the historical past to that of one of the classical explorers of the underworld, Orpheus, when he looks back at the spirit of his wife, Eurydice, as they are ascending out of the underworld and thus unwittingly causes her to return to the land of the dead. Many critics have also commented on the ghostly quality of the photographs in Sebald's books. Stefanie Harris, for example, in "The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*," argues that through this ghostly quality, Sebald emphasizes the way his photographs "present a loss that cannot be transcended or put to rest, will not stay buried, but will remain a haunting that gazes relentlessly into the future, that returns again and again, that cannot be cleaned up or swept away." Harris, "The Return of the Dead," 390. Harris, in other words, demonstrates that the photographs in Sebald's works also reside in Huyssen's gray zone "between the living and the dead that is the zone of traumatic memory itself [...]."

and literary reaction to the air war on the German cities during World War II, “Air War and Literature.” Sebald, I argue, uses this motif of *nekyia* as a means to articulate a mode of representation that simultaneously brings the past back to life in evocative images—both imagistic writing and literal, photographic or pictorial images—and maintains a focus on the constructedness of the images that make up these representations.

The second chapter, “The Work of Art at the Entrance to the Underworld,” argues that Sebald’s *ekphraseis*, descriptions of works of art, reject a realist mode of historical representation, and, in fact, become examples of the nekyiastic mode of historical representation he favors. I begin by examining two descriptions of works of art in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, to show how they articulate two different poetic programs. In the first example, a description of murals the hero Aeneas encounters at Carthage in Book 1, Virgil addresses what literature can do, how it can engage in political and social discourse. In the second example, sculpted reliefs Aeneas encounters shortly before descending into the underworld in Book 6, Virgil addresses what literature can represent, what it can and cannot capture for its readers. The first of these examples, I argue, serves as a model for understanding the use of *ekphrasis* in the works of the post-Holocaust German Jewish author Peter Weiss, while the second serves as a model for understanding *ekphraseis* in Sebald’s works. After discussing *ekphraseis* in Weiss’ literary and critical texts and how Sebald, in his own essay on Weiss, differentiates his use of *ekphrasis* from that of Weiss, I move on to examples of *ekphrasis* in Sebald’s *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*. These *ekphraseis*, I argue, highlight the failure of art works that adhere to the precepts of realism in their attempts to represent the past and the success of art works that abandon these precepts. Moreover, these descriptions themselves, which stage

an encounter with the past through a work of art, become examples of Sebald's nekyiastic mode of historical representation. They present the past in images that come to life while highlighting the constructedness of these images.

The third chapter, "The Undiscovered Country," argues that Sebald uses the motif of *katabasis*, the journey into the underworld, to articulate a peripatetic, spatial, and visual mode of historical thought. In this chapter I begin once again with Virgil's *Aeneid*. The *katabasis* in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, I argue, is a journey into and through a "memory space" full of figures out of the past that each represent different historical moments and events. By allowing the temporal perspectives represented by each of these figures to interact in a spatial setting, Virgil undermines an understanding of history as progressing teleologically toward the reign of the first Roman emperor, Augustus. Next, I examine Siegfried Kracauer's book on the writing of history, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, which brings *katabasis* into the context of modern historical thought. Kracauer describes two figures who represent, for him, the ideal historian: Orpheus, who himself journeyed into the underworld, and Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew, who according to folk lore is doomed to wander through all the ages and all the lands of the earth until the second coming of Christ. As Orpheus, Kracauer's ideal historian engages with the past in spatial and visual terms. Ahasuerus represents a peripatetic mode of engagement with the historical past. Sebald, I argue, synthesizes these two visions of the engagement with the past to articulate a mode of historical thought, modeled on classical *katabasis*, which is spatial, visual, and peripatetic. In each of the many episodes in Sebald's works described metaphorically as a journey into the underworld a character journeys into and through a "memory space" filled with images that represent different moments out of the past. The

juxtaposition of these various images and the different temporal perspectives they provide undermine a naive and ideological notion of history as guided ever forward by progress. This, I argue, is how Sebald asks us to think of the historical past: not as a straight line, but as a space where we visualize the past, and through which we choose our path.

## Chapter 1

“Bringing Remembered Events Back to Life”:

*Nekyia* in Homer’s *Odyssey*, the Theory of Photography, and the Works of W. G. Sebald

At the beginning of his last completed literary prose work, *Austerlitz*, W. G. Sebald offers us what might be read as a description of his own philosophy of historical representation. The narrator tells us of his first encounter with the architectural historian, Jacques Austerlitz, that he was immediately impressed by “the way in which, for him, the passing on of his knowledge in narrative seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, in which remembered events came back to life” (*Ae* 13 translation modified, “wie für ihn die erzählerische Vermittlung seiner Sachkenntnisse die schrittweise Annäherung an eine Art Metaphysik der Geschichte gewesen ist, in der das Erinnererte noch einmal lebendig wurde” [*Ag* 22-3]). Leaving aside, for now, the question of what could make this a “historical metaphysic,” it is, at least, an apt description of the many episodes in Sebald’s oeuvre where a character describes an event from the historical past. This character’s presence as historical observer engaging with the traces of the past does not disappear, to be replaced by a realist narrative. The character does not attempt to capture the past as it really was and reproduce it in words. Instead, Sebald’s historical observers highlight their role in recreating the past by means

of the traces left behind in the places of historical memory they have visited. They thus call attention to the inherently phantasmatic nature of their historical representations while simultaneously evoking the past in strongly imagistic prose. By doing so, they bring the events entombed in these places of memory “back to life.” If the key insight of the historical theorist Hayden White, in *Metahistory*, is that it matters how we emplot the historical narratives we tell, Sebald’s works point to the importance, as well, of the emplotment of the framing narrative of the historical observer’s engagement with the past.<sup>1</sup> The model he chooses, time and again, for this engagement with the past is one in which “remembered events come back to life.”

On closer inspection, though, there is something strange about the way Sebald puts this. It is not, after all, the “remembered events” (“das Erinnererte”) but the people who participated in them and especially the victims, who are dead and need to be “brought back to life” metaphorically in historical memory. Description, *descriptio* in Latin, *ekphrasis* in Greek (although we will see in Chapter 2 that this word has a much more specific meaning as well, referring to the description of a work of art), has

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<sup>1</sup> “But a given historian is forced to emplot the whole set of stories making up his narrative in one comprehensive or *archetypal* story form.” As White goes on to show, the “story form” the historian chooses, which he categorizes according to literary genres such as Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire, profoundly affects the complexion of the historian’s work. White, *Metahistory*, 7-8. With regard to the “emplotment of the framing narrative” I mention here, one might point to Nietzsche’s classification of types of history into “monumental history,” “antiquarian history,” and “critical history,” or Fredric Jameson’s classification, “antiquarianism,” “existential historicism,” “structural typology,” and “Nietzschean antihistory,” each as implying a set of distinct framing narratives of the historical observer’s engagement with the historical past. Jameson might file Sebald’s version of historical representation under “existential historicism.” He, in fact, makes reference to the *nekyia* in the *Odyssey* in describing “existential historicism”: “the historicist act revives the dead and reenacts the essential mystery of the cultural past which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak its mortal speech and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings unfamiliar to it.” Jameson, “Marxism and Historicism,” 51-2. According to Nietzsche’s classification, in “The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” I believe I will show that Sebald’s version of historical representation belongs more in the category of “critical history,” that which does not seek to honor the past, like “antiquarian history,” or to inspire great deeds, like “monumental history,” but instead to change social conditions.

classically been defined as the art of “bringing the subject matter vividly before the eyes,” in other words making the scene “come alive” for the reader.<sup>2</sup> There is, though, no sense, in the classical discussions of description, that the events described have a life of their own that could end, and that they can then begin this life anew in historical memory. Description (of concentration camps, Napoleonic battlefields, etc.) is certainly a large part of Sebald’s historical representations. However, this formulation of his method of historical representation is, in fact, more reminiscent of another classical poetic motif, *nekyia*, the raising of the dead.

The archetypal example of *nekyia* appears in Book XI of Homer’s *Odyssey*. There, Odysseus offers the dead spirits of the underworld the still warm and vital blood of a sacrificial animal, in order to infuse them with enough life to tell him their own stories. More generally, in classical *nekyia*, the dead spirits of individuals are brought, temporarily, back to life. Only then can they tell the hero about the events of the past.<sup>3</sup> In Sebald’s *nekyiastic* version of the representation of historical events, however, it is the events themselves that are “brought back to life,” in other words reconstructed via the historical traces they have left behind. The individuals are only then revived in the historical imagination through the mediation of this reconstruction of the events in which they took part and, perhaps, lost their lives.

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<sup>2</sup> This quote is from the *Progymnasmata*, or manual of declamation exercises for students, of Aelius Theon, from the first century A. D. It is quoted in Janice Hewlett Koelb, *The Poetics of Description: Imagined Places in European Literature*, 92. Koelb also has an excellent discussion of the topic of “vividness” in ancient discussions of description.

<sup>3</sup> I am drawing here a distinction between *nekyia*, the raising of the dead, and *katabasis*, the descent into the underworld. The episode in Book XI of the *Odyssey* is a *nekyia* but not, strictly speaking, a *katabasis*, because Odysseus never actually enters the land of the dead. Odysseus Tsagarakis argues that there are two distinct traditions that the *nekyia* draws upon in ancient Greek culture, one a religious tradition of the *nekyomanteia* or ritual consultation with the dead, the other a poetic tradition of the *katabasis*, or journey to the underworld enacted by mythical heroes such as Theseus and Herakles. Tsagarakis discusses the argument, among scholars, as to whether there is an implicit *katabasis* in the *nekyia* in the *Odyssey* (see especially 94-104). He concludes, however, that the *nekyia* in the *Odyssey* is “not a true *katabasis*.” Tsagarakis, *Studies in Odyssey 11*, 36.

This might, at first glance, seem to be merely a retread of nineteenth-century romanticist historiography. The famous romanticist historian, Jules Michelet, after all, described his own historical method as allowing the dead to “begin to speak” through his writing; only then will they “let their urns be sealed again.”<sup>4</sup> It is, however, precisely because it is a mediated and not a direct version of this communion with the figures of the past that Sebald’s version of historiography turns out, in fact, to be markedly different. Unlike Michelet, Sebald does not promise an immediate sympathy with the victims of violence in the historical past, does not promise to “speak for them.” Indeed, every scene in his literary works which seems to establish such a connection between the historical observer in the present and individuals in the past is undercut by the suggestion that this connection may merely be the historical observer’s projection onto the past, a sort of historical “screen memory.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Sebald does offer us a historiographic methodology that both brings the events of the past to life for the reader and simultaneously stresses the way in which this recreation is highly mediated through the historical observer’s encounter with the traces of the past.

In this chapter, I will argue that Sebald uses the language of classical *nekylia* to frame this unique mode of historical representation which “bring[s] remembered events back to life” in striking images, while at the same time maintaining a focus on the constructedness of the representations these images create. I will begin by looking closely at Homer’s *nekylia* in Book XI of the *Odyssey*, to highlight the way in which it

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Roland Barthes from a fragment by Michelet, in *Michelet*. Hayden White has characterized Michelet’s conception of his “task as a historian” as “the custodian of the dead [...] in the interest finally of serving that justice in which the good are finally liberated from the ‘prison’ of human forgetfulness by the historian himself.” Barthes, *Michelet*, 102. White, “Michelet: Historical Realism as Romance,” 161.

<sup>5</sup> In the essay “Screen Memories” (1899), Freud describes a “screen memory” as a constructed memory which masks a more primal one.



may be read as a model for historical representation which Sebald both builds upon and modifies. It is not merely Sebald's prose, however, which draws upon classical *nekyia*. There are nekyiastic aspects to the photographs he includes in his texts, which seems to highlight, once again, their position as highly mediated and yet deeply affecting documents in the representation of the historical past. Indeed, as I will show, Sebald draws on a tradition in photographic theory that sees photography as inherently connected to the idea of raising the dead. In turning to Sebald, therefore, I will examine three elements of his works: 1) representations of the historical past which draw upon classical *nekyia*, 2) the discussions of photography as a means of historical representation within these texts, and 3) the photographs themselves and the way they are used in the book. I will focus on two of Sebald's works, *Austerlitz* and his essay on the literary representation of the aerial bombardment of the German cities during World War II, "Air War and Literature." One could extend this argument to the rest of Sebald's oeuvre, but it is in these two works that he most clearly articulates and enacts his unique mode of historical representation.

### *Nekyia in Homer's Odyssey*

Andrew Ford, in *Homer: The Poetry of the Past*, puts "vividness," which he describes as "a sense that the past is somehow present before us," at the center of the Homeric poet's relationship to the past.<sup>6</sup> According to Ford, the purpose of the Homeric epics' depiction of the past of the Trojan War and its aftermath is not "to convey

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<sup>6</sup> Ford, *Homer: The Poetry of the Past*, 49.

‘historical’ truth.”<sup>7</sup> Nor is it truly to instruct its audience in moral behavior or some other “‘higher’ truth.”<sup>8</sup> If poetry must, according to the Augustan poet Horace’s famous formula,<sup>9</sup> either teach or delight, Ford comes down on the side of delight, but, he notes, this is not merely an “aesthetic pleasure”:

The delight in the tale is not the satisfaction of accuracy or the communication of some higher truth but the pleasurable of a convincingly full picture [...]. This effect has been variously named as a sense of “participation” or “Vergegenwärtigung,” but I prefer to take a name out of Homer, via the Greek literary critics, *to enarges*, “vividness.”<sup>10</sup>

The idea that “a sense that the past is somehow present before us” might itself be a source of non-aesthetic pleasure is a fairly novel approach to Homeric poetics. However, Ford takes this argument one step further. He gives this pleasure a spiritual element by connecting the idea of “vividness” to Homeric eschatology and the ancient Greek cult of the dead:

Though epic is by definition poetry of the past, it is poetry that claims to transport us to an *au delà*, not a beyond buried in the vault of recollection but a place as present as our own, though elsewhere. According to Homeric eschatology, after death the heroes’ bodies are destroyed in one way or another, and their souls fly off to Hades, the realm of the unseen. The fundamental promise of his poetry is the paradox of restoring through mere voice these vanished heroes and rarely appearing gods to visibility.<sup>11</sup>

Homeric “vividness”, then, is about bringing the dead back to life and making them visible once more. It privileges the visual modality: visual images of the dead are what the Homeric epics strive first and foremost to produce in the audience. It is worth noting

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 49. Ford quotes from M. I. Finley’s *The Use and Abuse of History*: “Yet, whatever else it may have been, the epic was *not history*. It was narrative, detailed and precise [...], all very real and vivid; it may even contain, buried away, some kernels of historical fact—but it was not history.”

<sup>8</sup> Ford, 51.

<sup>9</sup> “Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae/ aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae” (“Poets desire either to instruct or to delight, or to tell of things simultaneously pleasing and helpful in life”). Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 333-4.

<sup>10</sup> Ford, 53-4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 55.

that this seems to propose a function for Homer's poetry akin to that of photography (although this is, admittedly, a highly anachronistic idea). Photography, after all, also has the ability to return the dead "to visibility" (provided they were captured by the camera in the first place), something which will be important when we discuss the role of photography in Sebald's representations of the past.

Ford's description of vividness as the Homeric ideal for the representation of the past points to Homer's depictions of the afterlife, and especially the *nekyia* in Book XI of the *Odyssey*, as a key locus for interrogating the Homeric relation to the past. The *nekyia*, which takes up the whole of Book XI, has a central place both literally and figuratively in the *Odyssey*. In Book VII, Odysseus has washed up, alone, on the shore of the island of Phaiakia. In Book IX, he has begun to narrate the adventures he has had, during the course of his journey, to King Alkinoos and Queen Arete at the Phaiakian court. In Book XIII he will journey from Phaiakia back to his home, the island of Ithaka, where he will spend the rest of the epic, till Book XXIV, taking his revenge on the suitors of his wife Penelope who are occupying his house and then dealing with the consequences of this revenge. The poet has thus placed the *nekyia* "as close to the mid-point as possible."<sup>12</sup> It is both structurally at the center of the plot and at the center of the over twelve-thousand lines of the poem. It is also, however, the one episode mentioned to Odysseus as a necessary step in his journey home by the goddess Circe, whom, as he tells Alkinoos and Arete, he visited immediately before his journey to the land of the dead. Odysseus, Circe tells him, must speak to the spirit of Teiresias, the famous blind seer of Greek mythology, among the dead, and hear from him the path he is to take home

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen V. Tracy, "The Structure of the *Odyssey*," 368.

and what he must do upon his arrival.<sup>13</sup> He must, in other words, die and be reborn with a new sense of purpose and a new understanding of his mission.<sup>14</sup>

It is not only the spirit of Teiresias, however, that Odysseus both sees and speaks to in the land of the dead, but numerous figures out of the past, both those he has known in his own life and his mythic precursors. The Homeric model of the poet's relationship to the past is about raising the dead and making them visible again. The *nekyia*, therefore, might be said to thematize this relationship. In other words, the *nekyia* may be read as an allegory of the poet's relationship to the past.

That the *Odyssey* has a "reflexive quality," in other words that it is constantly addressing the role of the poet, has been noted by many critics.<sup>15</sup> With its many bards and seers, singing for their bread, and its heroes who happen to be great storytellers as well, it constantly draws the act of telling epic tales into sharp focus.<sup>16</sup> In Books IX-XII, it is Odysseus himself who takes up the poet's mantle, narrating his own adventures on his ten year long voyage home from the Trojan War to the Phaiakian court.<sup>17</sup> In fact, in Book XI, where Odysseus narrates the *nekyia*, this role is highlighted by an *intermezzo*, a

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<sup>13</sup> *Odyssey*, 10.488-495.

<sup>14</sup> This is how Stephen V. Tracy puts it: "It is perhaps accurate to say of Odysseus that he does not conquer death by going to the underworld so much as that he symbolically dies and is reborn." Tracy, 368. William B. Thalmann has pointed to the importance of the *nekyia* in establishing Odysseus as a different kind of hero from the heroes out of the past he meets there: "Thus at the center of Odysseus's account of his experience the *Odyssey* defines its concept of heroism, partly through the contrast between life and death, partly with reference to heroes of tradition, and especially by confronting its hero with those from other epic narratives about Troy." Thalmann, *The Odyssey: An Epic of Return*, 93.

<sup>15</sup> "On the level of narrative structure, the episode contributes to the reflexive quality of the work—what might be called its attention to its own reception." Lillian Eileen Doherty, "The Internal and Implied Audiences of *Odyssey* 11," 146. For further discussion of this quality of the *Odyssey*, see, for example, Bruce Loudon, "Eumaios and Alkinoös: The Audience and the *Odyssey*."

<sup>16</sup> The *Odyssey* was originally an oral poem, so the comparison between the singers of songs and the tellers of tales it depicts and the poet's role is one that works on a literal level. They are literally doing what the epic poet would have done.

<sup>17</sup> "By allowing the hero to take over, in effect, the narration of the poem, and by then dramatizing an audience reaction to the narration, the epic narrator sets up an implied double comparison: on the one hand, a comparison between himself and Odysseus in the narrator's role; on the other hand, a complementary comparison between the Phaeacians as internal audience and the implied audience of the epic as a whole." Lillian Eileen Doherty, *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey*, 89.

break in the narration that emphasizes the comparison between Odysseus and a singer of epic verse. The break not only draws the audience's attention, once again, to the fact that it is Odysseus who is telling this tale; Odysseus is also explicitly compared to a bard: As Queen Arete tells him, "expertly, as a singer would do, you have told the story of the dismal sorrows befallen yourself and all of the Argives."<sup>18</sup>

Odysseus, then, is not just any old storyteller; he possesses the virtues of an "expert" bard. As such, it is logical to assume that the effect he has on his audience is the effect the Homeric poet would strive to have on his own audience. Indeed, the Phaiakians are spellbound by Odysseus' tale: "So he spoke, and all of them stayed stricken to silence, held in thrall by the story all through the shadowy chambers" (11.333-4). Although he wants to break off his tale at the intermezzo, they will not let him. This is a tale that has not only been interesting or amusing, but vivid as well. It has made the past present before the audience and made them forget their present circumstances. In fact, we can, perhaps, see the lingering effect of this vivid past in the fact that the chambers are "shadowy," *skioenta*. Odysseus, after all, has just been speaking about the "shades" of the underworld. The word, *skia*, from which *skioenta* derives means both "shadow" and "ghost." It is as if a bit of the shadowiness of Odysseus' subject has really become present in the chamber around his audience.

Precisely in the middle of Odysseus' tale of his journey to the land of the dead the poet chooses to emphasize that Odysseus' performance in narrating the past is akin to that of the ideal poet. This implies that we might look to the story Odysseus narrates around this break to tell us more about the relationship the *Odyssey* envisions between the poet and the past. The structure of the *nekylia* is as follows: Odysseus and his crew sail to the

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<sup>18</sup> *Odyssey* 11.368-9. I follow the translation by Richmond Lattimore.

site of the *nekylia* and prepare a sacrifice (1-33). There, Odysseus sees first the souls of the “untimely dead” (34-50). Among them is the spirit of his companion Elpenor who has died on Circe’s island just before his departure and who demands to be buried so that he may enter Erebus (the home of the dead) (51-83). After speaking to Elpenor, Odysseus encounters the spirit of his mother but he is forced to hold her at bay until he can speak to Teiresias (83-89), who lays out a program for Odysseus’ future adventures and explains the ways of the dead (90-149). It is only then that Odysseus can speak to the spirit of his mother, Antikleia (150-224). Afterwards, he sees the “wives and daughters of heroes” (225-332), followed by the intermezzo described above (333-384). After this break, Odysseus speaks with the spirits of Agamemnon (385-464) and Achilles (465-540). He tries to speak to the spirit of Ajax, but he turns away from him (541-567). Finally, Odysseus sees the male heroes and villains of the past prior to the Trojan War (568-626) before leaving the spirits of the dead for fear of seeing a gorgon (627-640).

One might be tempted to say that the first three spirits Odysseus addresses (Elpenor, Teiresias, and Antikleia) are about his future, while the last three (Agamemnon, Achilles, and Ajax) are about his heroic past.<sup>19</sup> On closer inspection, however, things turn out to be a bit more complicated than this. Each of the figures Odysseus encounters expands Odysseus’ story, past, present, and future, in a unique way. The encounter with Elpenor is really more about the present than the future or the past. Elpenor, one of Odysseus’ companions, has died by falling off of Circe’s roof, shortly before Odysseus left Circe’s island to speak with the dead. His presence, here, awaiting admittance to the land of the dead, emphasizes the connection between Odysseus’ journey and the land of

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<sup>19</sup> “The first three spirits tell [Odysseus] about his personal future and his family; the second three are figures from his past, who teach him by their actions [...]” Tracy, 376.

the dead. The land of the dead is not merely for heroes out of the past; it is the consequence of death in the present for any character.<sup>20</sup> Teiresias, indeed, does tell Odysseus' of the future, or rather he provides him with a future program, even beyond the scope of the main action of the *Odyssey*, which he ought to follow. Antikleia, Odysseus' mother, discusses the conditions Odysseus will find on returning to Ithaka, and thus, in some sense, his future course. She is, though, first and foremost, a figure out of his own, remembered past, and she fills him in, as well, on the past he has missed in his long absence from home. In fact, the poem emphasizes a structural parallel between her and the three heroes alongside whom Odysseus fought in the Trojan War, Agamemnon, Achilles, and Ajax: as the story of Odysseus' encounter with these heroes is followed by a catalogue of the male heroes and villains out of the mythic past which preceded the Trojan War, so the story of Odysseus' encounter with his mother's spirit is followed by a catalogue of the "wives and daughters of heroes" (11.329) who preceded her.<sup>21</sup> As the spirits of the three Trojan War heroes mark the point where the stories of the dead men of the past intersect with Odysseus own life and memory, so Antikleia is the one woman out of the past whom Odysseus encounters in the *nekylia* whose story is entwined with his own.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Elpenor "embodies death in its personal and individual aspect and perhaps serves as a reminder that death is ever present as a possibility and can come when it is least expected." Thalman, 90.

<sup>21</sup> The intermezzo which separates the encounter with Antikleia and the catalogue of famous women from the three male heroes and the catalogue of famous men "divides the narrative roughly along gender lines." Doherty, "The Internal and Implied Audiences of *Odyssey* 11," 146.

<sup>22</sup> Tsagarakis argues that the *nekylia* is different from the rest of the adventures Odysseus narrates in its focus on the relationship to the past in memory and "history": "A latent 'collective memory' in [Odysseus], essential to his survival and to the realization of his goal, comes to life [...]. [T]he *Nekylia* differs from the rest of the *apologoi* in that it allows the hero to relive the past and to glimpse into the more remote past [...], which sheds additional light on himself and his *nostos*. While Odysseus battles with external forces on his way home, in the *Nekylia* he deals, as it were, with his memories. Conscious of his 'history,' vividly presented in the *Nekylia*, within the framework of a poetic stereotype, the hero could, with fresh hope and courage, struggle on to reach his ultimate goal." Note, as well, that Tsagarakis refers to the 'history' in the *nekylia* as "vividly presented." Tsagarakis, 69.

Although the encounters with Elpenor and Teiresias point to the story's present and future as well, the *nekyia* is at pains, from the very beginning, to emphasize the pastness of the figures Odysseus sees. The first group of shades he encounters are the "untimely dead:" "brides, and young unmarried men, and long-suffering elders, virgins, tender and with the sorrows of young hearts upon them, and many fighting men killed in battle, stabbed with the brazen spears, still carrying their bloody armor upon them" (38-41).<sup>23</sup> Neither in outward appearance nor in disposition have these spirits changed since their death. The virgins are "tender and with the sorrows of young hearts upon them" and the warriors are "still carrying their bloody armor upon them." If, according to the wisdom of Solon,<sup>24</sup> it is only at the moment of death that a life acquires meaning and may be judged either fortunate or unfortunate, these figures are frozen both physically and emotionally in this moment of the meaning-giving coup-de-grace, the moment that could provide a storyteller with the point of the lives they lead.

The dead spirits in the land of the dead, then, are not characters in the sense that Odysseus is. They are not meant to represent people with real agency and the ability to change. They are, instead, images out of the past, with the possible exception of Elpenor who, not having been buried, is not yet fully integrated into the society of the spirits, and Teiresias, who, Circe tells Odysseus, is the one spirit among the dead who has been allowed to keep his *noos*, "mind" or "purpose" (10.494). It is not by accident that Odysseus asks his mother's shade, "Or are you nothing but an *image* [*eidolon*] that proud Persephone sent my way, to make me grieve all the more for sorrow?" (11.213-14).

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Iles Johnston argues that these figures, the *aōroi*, the "untimely dead," and the *biaiothanatoi*, those who have died from violence, are, like Elpenor, kept from entering the underworld proper, because of their "abnormal status." Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*, 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> "Count no man happy until he is dead." Herodotus, *Histories* 1.30.



Moreover, the “image” of Herakles, who also looks as he did in life, is among the heroes Odysseus sees in the underworld, although Odysseus tells us that the hero himself is enjoying eternal life with the gods on Olympus (11.601-4). The character Herakles, in other words, lives on among the immortals, but having left the mortal realm, he leaves behind a trace, in the unchanging image of him that lingers in the land of the dead. The three heroes of the Trojan War Odysseus encounters do not seem to have changed much, either, in death: Ajax, who killed himself because he lost out to Odysseus in the competition for the arms of Achilles, is still nursing his hurt feelings; Agamemnon is still consumed by self-pity; Achilles is still as belligerent as ever, although he seems to regret the choice he made to die and win glory rather than to escape death and remain among the living (of course, this is what we might expect from the indecisive and moody Achilles who spends almost all of the first eighteen books of the *Iliad* brooding on the beach at Troy).<sup>25</sup>

Not only, however, are the dead spirits in the underworld unchanging in form and disposition; they also lack the physical fortitude and the mental awareness that are the prerequisites for agency in the mortal realm.<sup>26</sup> In describing the spirit of Agamemnon,

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<sup>25</sup> “For what my opinion is worth, I would say that Odysseus, Nestor, Agamemnon, Menelaos, Helen, and Achilleus are the same ‘people’ in both poems [...]. Nestor in his garrulity, Agamemnon in his self-pity, Menelaos in his courtesy and strong moral sense, Achilleus in his devotion to the ideal of the warrior, all repeat striking characteristics of the persons in the *Iliad*.” Richmond Lattimore, introduction, *The Odyssey of Homer*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> One counterargument to this idea of the dead souls as mere “images” is the presence of certain spirits, Tityos, Tantalos, and Sisypchos, enduring punishment for the sins they committed while they were still among the living. Both Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood and Odysseus Tsagarakis argue that there two distinct traditions of thought about the fate of the soul after death blended together in the *nekylia*, one according to which the spirits are witless images, and the other, according to which they retain some of their corporeal substance and mental awareness. Still, I do not believe that the fact that Odysseus sees these spirits suffering punishments means that they are necessarily fully sentient beings. They are still images, not, it is true, corresponding to how they were in life or how they died, but rather a cautionary tableaux. The point, however, is that the *Odyssey* foregrounds the role of the dead spirits as images out of the past seen by the hero, Odysseus, and not as dynamic characters. Sourvinou-Inwood, *Reading Greek Death to the End of the Classical Period*, 77-94. Tsagarakis, 105-119.

Odysseus tells us that “there was no force any longer, nor any juice left now in his flexible limbs, as there had been in times past” (11.393-4). When he tries to embrace the spirit of his mother, he finds that “three times she fluttered out of my hands like a shadow or a dream” (11.207-8). Although he can see them and recognize them, the dead spirits Odysseus meets have no physical substance. Nor do they have the mental capacities we associate with sentience. Teiresias informs Odysseus that the dead will only recognize him and be able to speak to him if they have borrowed some of the vitality from the still-warm sacrificial blood: “Any one of the perished dead you allow to come up to the blood will give you a true answer, but if you begrudge this to any one, he will return to the place where he came from” (11.147-9). Indeed, in confirmation of what Teiresias says, neither the spirit of his own mother nor that of Agamemnon recognizes Odysseus or addresses him until they have drunk from the sacrificial blood.<sup>27</sup>

This distinction between the living character and the dead image out of the past carries over, as well, into the language the *Odyssey* uses in describing the dead. The words most commonly used to describe the spirits in the *nekylia* are *eidolon*, “image”; *skia*, “shadow”; and *oneiros*, “dream.” All of these things—images, shadows, and dreams—are things that make a sensory impression but have no substance in and of themselves. They are things, as well, that can easily deceive, as Penelope, Odysseus’ wife, points out to Odysseus, with regards to dreams, later in the epic: “There are two

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<sup>27</sup> The dead spirits “exist in a sort of twilight state, incapable of any meaningful interaction with the living. They are, in a word, *aphradeis*, lacking all those qualities expressed by that complex notion *phradē* and its cognates that make converse between intelligent creatures possible: wit, reflection, and complexity of expression. It is only by means of the blood—a striking emblem of the vigorous life they have left behind forever—that they temporarily become capable of normal human converse. Even after they have drunk the blood, the souls of the dead remain physically insubstantial, unable to embrace, much less affect, those who are still alive [...].” Johnston, 8. For more on this topic of the relationship between the blood and the ability of the dead spirits to speak to Odysseus, see John Heath, “Blood for the Dead: Homeric Ghosts Speak Up.”

gates through the insubstantial dreams issue. One pair of gates is made of horn, and one of ivory. Those of the dreams which issue through the gate of sawn ivory, these are deceptive dreams, their message is never accomplished” (11.562-5).

The description of the dead as “shadows,” which is a ubiquitous trope in classical Latin and Greek poetry as well as classically-inflected poetry in English, Italian, and German, has its own set of intriguing implications. Shadows make a specifically visual impression, preserving, to some extent, the form of the figure to which they are connected. They are, however, a negative image, almost like the photographic negatives that used to store all of our photographic images before they could be turned, once again, into prints. They represent the absence of light created by a figure’s presence, blocking and reflecting the light shining on its opposite side. They cannot exist without the figure and the visual positive image represented by that reflected light. They point, therefore, to the presence of the figure and its visual image, but they also mark their absence, where they are not and cannot be. There is, then, a certain poignancy in calling the dead “shadows.” It not only implies a diminished corporeality and visibility; it points, as well, to the absence of the living person (who once cast a shadow), visible in the mortal realm, who now exists only in this attenuated form and in this liminal place.

In fact, this description of the dead souls as “shadows” ties into an entire metaphoric of light and dark, visibility and invisibility, at work in Homer’s land of the dead. Classical scholars have pointed out that the word “Hades,” which refers both to the land of the dead and its ruler, probably derives from a word meaning “invisible” or “unseen.”<sup>28</sup> The land of the dead, then, is the zone of the unseen, those who can no

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<sup>28</sup> On this etymology of Hades as “unseen,” see Jan Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife*, 4; and especially Robert S. P. Beekes, “Hades and Elysion,” 17-19.

longer be seen in the realm of the living, but whom the hero, Odysseus, nonetheless sees and presents for his audience at the Phaiakian court. It is also a place suffused by, as Milton so aptly put it in describing the Hell into which his Satan falls in *Paradise Lost*, a “darkness visible.” Homeric descriptions of death are often tied to an idea of descending into darkness.<sup>29</sup> The entire realm occupied by these “shadows” is dark, and yet, at the same time, visible to the hero who encounters them.

There is, then, an opposition that the poem establishes between Odysseus, alive in the present, and the dead images out of the past, and this opposition is one that the *nekyia* is at pains to emphasize in a spatial sense as well. There is always a distance preserved between Odysseus and the spirits of the dead. Odysseus does not, like the mythical heroes who preceded him (Theseus, Orpheus, and Herakles) or the epic heroes who will follow him (for example, Aeneas in the *Aeneid*) journey into the land of the dead. Instead, he digs a trench, fills it with the blood of a sacrificial ram, and stands behind it with his sword drawn while the dead swarm up to drink the still vital blood (11.23-41). Indeed, as we have seen, even when he tries to break that boundary and embrace the spirits of his friends and loved ones, he comes up, literally, empty-handed.

The poetics of the past represented allegorically by the *nekyia*, then, is one with several distinct features. It is, first of all, characterized by a healthy awareness of the gap between the poet’s life in the present and the dead past. The poet, like Odysseus, does not journey into the realm of the dead, but engages with it from a certain well-defined distance. He does not, in other words, travel through time and see the past as it really was, but peers into the past from his vantage in the present. He can only go so far in

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<sup>29</sup> On metaphors of darkness and death in Homer, see Emily Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, 24-6; and James V. Morrison, “Homeric Darkness: Patterns and Manipulation of Death Scenes in the *Iliad*.”

sympathizing and commiserating with the figures of the past. Secondly, the *nekylia* emphasizes the poet's active role in recreating this past. It is Odysseus, after all, who pours out the still-warm blood and allows the dead to drink from it or not. The agency is wholly on his side; the dead can neither speak nor act without the living energy he grants them. The poet is not the passive recipient of the past; the representation of the past is, in part, a product of his own work and his own effort. Thirdly, the *nekylia* highlights the insubstantiality, indistinctness, and possible deceptiveness of the images of the past which the poet brings forth before his audience. The dead are "images, "shadows," or "dreams," without distinct form and with no real substance. The past is indeterminate, and any poetic representation of it can, therefore, not be definitive. Fourthly, the *nekylia* highlights the necessary incompleteness of any representation of the past. When he breaks off his narration after the catalogue of famous women, Odysseus tells his audience, "But I could not tell over the whole number of them or name all the women I saw who were the wives and daughters of heroes, for before that the divine night would give out" (11.328-330). And when he ends his communion with the dead, it is not because he has seen all there is to see from the past. In fact, he regrets that he did not get to see "men earlier still" (11.630), before the fear that the Queen of the Dead would send up a gorgon to challenge him and perhaps stop him from leaving this place forces him to beat a hasty retreat. Odysseus, like the poet, can only tell so much of what it is possible to know of the past, and he can only see so far into that past. There is a limit, in other words, both to what the poet can say and what he can know of the past.

Counterbalancing this, however, on the positive side, the *nekylia* does point to the potential vividness of poetic representations of the past. The poet, like Odysseus, can

return the dead to a kind of life. He can make them visible and grants them a voice through the words of his tale. Indeed, the tale Odysseus tells of his communion with the dead, with its stirring images, has exactly this effect on his audience at the Phaiakian court. It makes “the past somehow present” for them.

### *Nekyia* and Textual Representation in *Austerlitz*

When Sebald tells us that Austerlitz’ “historical metaphysic” brings “remembered events back to life,” it is not hard to imagine that he has the *Odyssey* specifically in mind. Indeed, the *Odyssey* is one of the literary touchstones of Sebald’s final completed literary prose work. It is, for example, in the antiquarian bookshop of a certain “Penelope Peacefull” in London in 1993 that the protagonist, Jacques Austerlitz, listens with rapt attention to a radio broadcast about the Kindertransporte, through which, as a child, he was rescued from the fate of his Jewish parents in Prague during World War II (*Ae* 140ff/*Ag* 207ff). By listening to this broadcast and finally allowing himself to understand this period of history, which he had largely blocked out, he begins to reconnect with his forgotten past. The similarity, however, between this scene and Odysseus’ return to his wife, Penelope, in the *Odyssey*, is more than just a superficial coincidence of names. Penelope in the *Odyssey* is the arbiter of Odysseus’ identity, the only one who can guarantee that, yes, after all of these years it is the great hero who has returned, at last, to Ithaka. In fact, she grounds his identity in memory by testing his knowledge of something that only her husband would know, that their marriage-bed, made out of an old

stump, is literally rooted to the ground of Ithaka.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, in Penelope Peacefull's shop, Jacques Austerlitz begins to remember his past, and by remembering it to reclaim his identity. The world-wise Penelope who cross-stitches the shroud of Odysseus' father, Laertes, every day, only to unstash it at night, in order to fool the suitors into allowing her to stay faithful to her absent husband, and the Penelope doing the daily crossword puzzle in the *Telegraph*, are, after all, not that far apart.<sup>31</sup>

It is not, however, the *nostos*, or "homecoming," that most seems to be on the author's mind in *Austerlitz*, but Odysseus' encounter with the dead in the *nekya*.<sup>32</sup> *Austerlitz*, in fact, seems to be a journey from one underworld to the next, an encounter with one ghost after another.<sup>33</sup> The novel even begins in a sort of nether-realm. During a more or less aimless stroll through Antwerp in the late '60s, the narrator wanders down "Jeruzalemstraat, Nachtegaalstraat, Pelikaanstraat, Paradijsstraat, Immerseelstraat" (*Ae 3/Ag 9*), streets, in other words, named after biblical images of redemption in the afterlife.

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<sup>30</sup> 23.173-206.

<sup>31</sup> It is, first and foremost, the women in Austerlitz' life who most seem to recall the characters of the *Odyssey*. As it is Odysseus' nursemaid who helps him upon his arrival in Ithaka, so it is Austerlitz' childhood nursemaid, Vera, who helps him recover his past in his childhood home in Prague. As Odysseus attempts to embrace the "image" of his mother three times in the *nekya*, so Austerlitz finds three "images" of his mother, only the last of which seems to be authentic.

<sup>32</sup> Both Bianca Theisen and John Zilcosky have discussed Sebald's use of the Homeric trope of *nostos* and its relationship to the genre of travel-writing. They come, however, to very different conclusions. Theisen argues that there are no true homecomings in Sebald's works: "And unlike the epitome of the Western world's traveler, Ulysses [i. e. Odysseus], the journeys of Sebald's protagonists never end in a return home, even if their travels take them to Ithaca (New York)." Theisen, "Prose of the World: W. G. Sebald's Literary Travels," 171. Zilcosky argues that there is a proliferation of homecomings in *Austerlitz*: "Consider [...] the relation of Austerlitz to the text that it sometimes cites, *The Odyssey*. One often forgets that the conclusion of the *The Odyssey* [sic], too, is relatively "open-ended": Odysseus is on the battlefield again (not resting beside Penelope in their bed), barely held back from starting another war. Open-endedness, here, is part of the larger structure of the *nostos*: the new journey allows for the new possibility of coming home; "fort/da" all over again. Far from undermining a nostalgic narration, Austerlitz' journey south only sets the stage for another homecoming." Zilcosky, "Lost and Found: Disorientation, Nostalgia, and Holocaust Melodrama in Sebald's *Austerlitz*," 692-3.

<sup>33</sup> Russell J. A. Kilbourn has discussed the relationship between these journeys to the land of the dead and the spatialization of memory Sebald enacts by having these encounters with the dead take place in large, complex architectural spaces. Each of these journeys to the land of the dead includes, according to Kilbourn, "the conflation of different architectural metaphors for memory—memory as both labyrinth and city of the dead." Kilbourn, "Architecture and Cinema," 141.

Finally, he finds himself in the Nocturama in the Antwerp Zoo, where nocturnal animals live behind glass in the same sort of “darkness visible” as in Homer’s land of the dead and repeatedly enact the same sort of futile gestures<sup>34</sup> as the Sisyphos Odysseus sees rolling his boulder or Tantalos reaching for his food and water.<sup>35</sup> Here, the point is more about historical reality than historical representation. The nocturnal creatures in the Nocturama, with their enormous eyes, are like “certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking” (*Ae 5/ Ag 11*). Modern life is, for these painters and philosophers (the human eyes belong to the artist, Jan Peter Tripp, and the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein) an endless repetition of the same, like Sisyphos pushing his boulder, enacted largely in ignorance of the true state of affairs. Only they can understand the futility of this endless toil, but this does not help them to escape it.

Homeric *nekyia* in *Austerlitz*, however, is not only about the modern condition, but also about the relationship to the past. It is a particularly Odyssean and nekyiastic mode of historical representation that Sebald valorizes, in having the narrator praise Austerlitz for his “historical metaphysic” of “bringing remembered events back to life,” as well as enacts himself in the historical representations in his literary prose works. This nekyiastic model of historical representation, similar to the relationship between the poet and the past thematized in the *nekyia* in the *Odyssey*, has, as Julia Hell has said about another of Sebald’s works, “Air War and Literature,” a “hybrid character [...] It

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<sup>34</sup> The animals in the Nocturama are illuminated by an “artificial dusk” (*Ae 4/ Ag 10*). The only animal, however, of which the author has a clear recollection is the raccoon, which “sat beside a little stream with a serious expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again, 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” (*Ae 4/ Ag 10-11*).

<sup>35</sup> 11.582-600.



positions us between the illusion of immediate visual access and the consciousness that our ‘seeing’ is highly mediated.”<sup>36</sup> Sebald’s nekylastic mode of historical representation manages, in other words, both to highlight its mediation and to present the past in evocative visual images. It “makes the past present” for us, and yet reminds us of the historical observer’s role in recreating the past, calling attention to the provisionality and the potential for distortion in his historical representation.

As I discussed in the last section, Andrew Ford, in *Homer: The Poetry of the Past*, has argued that Homeric epic stives to produce an effect of vividness in representing the past. Ford connects this poetic program to the eschatology that underlies the Homeric epics, according to which the dead spirits out of the past reside in “a place as present as our own,” even if the living cannot usually see them.<sup>37</sup> Homeric epic, according to Ford, attempts to return the dead to visibility through vivid representations of the past events in which they took part. I extended Ford’s reading to argue that we can therefore see the *nekylia* in the *Odyssey* as an exploration of the way the poet can achieve this effect of bringing the dead past back to life and the difficulties and limitations the poet encounters in attempting to do so. It may seem strange to connect Sebald’s historical representations to a poetics of vividness. Critics have tended to emphasize the uncanny, disjointed, and mediated qualities of his representational technique. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate, Sebald’s descriptive writing as well as the photographic and artistic images he includes with his texts do bring us face to face with evocative details that make aspects of past events present to us, make them come to life. At the same time, these representations of

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<sup>36</sup> Julia Hell, “The Angel’s Enigmatic Eyes,” 369.

<sup>37</sup> Ford, 55.

the past refuse to cohere into a totalizing picture of the event and, in fact, often highlight the futility of attempting to create such a picture.

The main historical event with which *Austerlitz* is concerned is the Holocaust. The bulk of the book is made up of the story, narrated by Austerlitz to the narrator, of the recovery of his repressed memories of his childhood and his researches into the fate of his parents, both apparently victims of the Holocaust. The Holocaust is the prime example, for Hayden White, of a “modernist event,” one of the many “holocaustal events” of the twentieth-century that, according to White, cannot be represented using techniques associated with realist literature, but instead, are more suited to the techniques of literary modernism.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, according to the critics Saul Friedländer and Dominick LaCapra, historical representations of the Holocaust must be part of a “working through” in public memory which does not allow for closure.<sup>39</sup> The forestalling of closure demands a kind of historical representation that can call attention to its own construction, in order to reduce the impression of absolute verisimilitude and narrative completion.<sup>40</sup> It also, however, demands the inclusion of evocative details

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<sup>38</sup> Hayden White, “The Modernist Event,” 70.

<sup>39</sup> “working through [...] entails, for the historian, the imperative of rendering as truthful an account as documents and testimonials will allow, *without giving in to the temptation of closure*. Closure in this case would represent an obvious avoidance of what remains indeterminate, elusive and opaque.” Friedländer, “Trauma, Memory, and Transference,” 261.

<sup>40</sup> According to LaCapra, we have a tendency to transfer our desires onto the past and to look to past events to validate our sense of identity, a “transferential relationship” to the past that, especially in the case of the Holocaust, must be counteracted: “Working-through requires the recognition that we are involved in transferential relations to the past in ways that vary according to the subject-positions we find ourselves in, rework, and invent. It also involves the attempt to counteract the projective reprocessing of the past through which we deny certain of its features and act out our own desires for self-confirming or identity-forming meaning.” LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, 64. Friedländer also argues for the presence of a “commentary” in historical writing about the holocaust which would “disrupt the facile linear progression of the narration, introduce alternative interpretations, question any partial conclusion, withstand the need for closure. Because of the necessity of some form of narrative sequence in the writing of history, such commentary may introduce splintered or constantly recurring refractions of a traumatic past by using any number of different vantage points.” Friedländer, “Trauma, Memory, and Transference,” 261.

drawn from individual experiences in order to maintain the emotional impact of the material.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, the nekyiastic representations of the events of the Holocaust enacted in *Austerlitz* fulfill all of these demands.<sup>42</sup> They reject the techniques of classical realism, in favor of techniques which one might associate with modernist literary texts, but which I would argue bear just as much affinity with the classical mode of representation of the past embodied by Homer's *Odyssey*. They also, though, paint a picture of the past using evocative images, while at the same time calling attention to their own provisionality and potential for distortion, as Friedländer and LaCapra have demanded.<sup>43</sup>

I will now turn to several examples of this nekyiastic mode of historical representation in *Austerlitz*. The opening section of *Austerlitz*, in which the narrator

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<sup>41</sup> "Working through means confronting the individual voice in a field dominated by political decisions and administrative decrees which neutralize the concreteness of despair and death." Friedländer, "Trauma, Memory, and Transference," 262.

<sup>42</sup> Other, more general demands of the representation of the Holocaust have been laid out by Michael Rothberg: "In order to provide an overarching framework for thinking through the perplexities of understanding and representing the Holocaust, I have identified three fundamental demands that confronting the Holocaust makes on attempts at comprehension and representation: a demand for documentation, a demand for reflection on the formal limits of representation, and a demand for the risky public circulation of discourses of the event." Sebald's representations of the Holocaust might be said to meet this set of demands, too. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> There has been a significant amount of critical discussion of Sebald's engagement with the Holocaust in *Austerlitz* as well as in his other literary prose works. John Zilcosky addresses this in terms of a "desire to reveal everything" inherent in the genre of melodrama, a desire which, in *Austerlitz*, Sebald does not entirely resist. Zilcosky, "Lost and Found," 697 (see, also 693-5). Todd Presner discusses this in terms of Sebald's "modernist realism" which refuses "to restage, reproduce, or represent [...] any victim's suffering realistically." According to Presner, Sebald skirts the problems of Holocaust representation by focusing, instead, on the production of cultural memory about the Holocaust in the present. Presner, "What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals," 351. Richard Eder discusses how Sebald produces a "Holocaust-in-absence." Eder, "Excavating a Life." According to Eder and Mark M. Anderson who expands upon this idea, the Holocaust is a pointed lacuna in Sebald's works, an unrepresentable traumatic core around which his texts orbit. Anderson, "The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald," 105. Brad Prager addresses Sebald's representation of the Holocaust in terms of the dialectic of identification (or "empathy" as Prager says) and distance, especially problematic for a German author, even one who lived and wrote his works, primarily, in England. According to Prager, Sebald does not always maintain the requisite distance from the victim's suffering: "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." Prager, "The Good German as Narrator: On W. G. Sebald and the Risks of Holocaust Writing," 101.

describes his first encounter with Jacques Austerlitz, functions as sort of overture, establishing the themes which will recur throughout the book. I will begin, therefore, with an example from this section, and then turn to later examples to show how the pattern of nekyiastic historical representation established in the “overture” plays out in the rest of book.

Several pages after the narrator tells us of Austerlitz’ “historical metaphysic,” we find our first example of this nekyiastic mode of historical representation. It is not Austerlitz, though, who enacts this first nekyiastic historical representation, but the narrator himself, in describing his trip to the fort of Breendonk, a one time concentration camp and Nazi torture chamber. The narrator’s journey to Breendonk is, like his trip to the Nocturama, itself a sort of journey to the land of the dead. He delves deep into the gloomy interior of the fort and there experiences a Dantesque fainting-spell, in the room where victims of the Gestapo were tortured.<sup>44</sup> This episode, however, unlike that first episode in the Nocturama, is not about the absurdity of the human condition, but about the past entombed in a place of historical memory. The fort is filled with an otherworldly darkness that

does not lift, but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in our mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on. (*Ae* 24/ *Ag* 39)

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<sup>44</sup> “Black striations began to quiver before my eyes, and I had to rest my forehead against the wall, which was gritty, covered with bluish spots, and seemed to be perspiring with cold” (*Ae* 25-6/ *Ag* 41). Dante’s pilgrim faints several times in the *Inferno*, whenever he sees something that is too much for him to handle, just as the narrator begins to faint in the place where “I did not really want to see what it had to show” (*Ae* 23/ *Ag* 38). I have discussed this connection in somewhat greater depth in my essay, “‘Eine Art Eingang zur Unterwelt’: *Katabasis* in Sebald’s *Austerlitz*.”

The artifact which the narrator uses to exemplify this principle of the emptying out of history is the straw mattresses which he describes as “shadow-like,” that is, perhaps, like the shades of the Homeric underworld. He then imagines the mattresses as “the mortal frames of those who lay there in the darkness,” like the bodies, in other words, of the victims of the Nazis interned there (*Ae* 24/ *Ag* 39). By attempting, then, to tell the story of one of these “countless places” and the “objects” that inhabit it, he puts himself in the place of Odysseus, communing with the shadowy images out of the past, bringing them, so to speak, back to life by allowing them to tell their stories through his imaginative recreation of the past. Indeed, throughout the episode in Breendonk, the narrator enacts several imaginative recreations of the past (of which this encounter with the mattresses and the traces they bear of those who once lay on them is a very small example) mediated by his encounter with artifacts from the period when the fort was put to gruesome use by the Nazis. These recreations of the past, emplotted as a kind of raising of the dead, typify Sebald’s nekyiastic mode of historical representation.

Before entering the fort, the narrator sees the path that “led past the tarred black posts of the execution ground, and the labor site where the prisoners had to clear away the earthworks around the walls, moving over a quarter of a million tons of soil and rubble with only shovels and wheelbarrows to help them” (*Ae* 22/ *Ag* 36). The numerical detail, “over a quarter of a million tons,” signals the factual basis of the historical representation to follow. It gives us an idea of the scale of the forced labor done in Breendonk but does not necessarily help us to picture that labor or sympathize with those who endured it. Next, the narrator describes the wheelbarrows with which the prisoners worked in minute detail, “one of which can still be seen in the anteroom of the fort,”

highlighting how “primitive” and enormous they were (*Ae 22/ Ag 36*). He gives us a frame of reference: they were, he tells us, like the “handcarts used by farmers where I lived as a child for clearing muck out of the stables, except [...] twice as big” (*Ae 22/ Ag 36*).

From here, however, the narrator’s engagement with the fort’s past as a Nazi concentration camp takes an abrupt turn from the scrupulous listing of details and description of artifacts, towards a more imaginative recreation of the forced labor of which those artifacts were a part:

I could not imagine [Es war mir undenkbar] how the prisoners, very few of whom had probably ever done hard physical labor before their arrest and internment, could have pushed these barrows full of heavy detritus over the sun-baked clay of the ground, furrowed by ruts as hard as stone, or through the mire churned up after a single day’s rain; it was impossible to picture [undenkbar] them bracing themselves against the weight until their hearts nearly burst, or think of the overseer beating them about the head with the handle of a shovel when they could not move forward. (*Ae 22/ Ag 37*)

In this passage, the narrator presents us with a representation of the work done at Breendonk in striking images. The ruts as hard as stone, the mire churned up by the rain, the prisoners “bracing themselves against the weight until their hearts nearly burst” and the overseer abusing them, specifically, about the head and, specifically, with the handle of a shovel. These details make this horrible past present for us, and, indeed, this is not meant to be a representation of the labor performed just at Breendonk. It is meant, as well, to give us a sense of the “drudgery performed day after day, year after year, at Breendonk and all the other main and branch camps” where the Nazis forced their prisoners to work in unspeakable conditions (*Ae 23/ Ag 37*). It confronts us, in other

words, in moving detail with one facet of the Holocaust, the forced labor done by the prisoners and the inhumanity of their captors.

The narrator, though, does not merely lay out this vision of the past before us without context. He frames it in terms of what he, in engaging with the wheelbarrows which he encounters in the present of the late sixties, can and cannot imagine. There is, of course, a certain irony in his telling us that he could “not imagine” the labor he describes, “could not envisage the drudgery performed” (“was ich [...] mir [nicht] vorstellen konnte”) at the camps, while at the same time laying out a scene full of evocative and imaginative details (*Ae* 23/ *Ag* 37). This may seem like a familiar topos of the literature of the Holocaust, as well as trauma theory more generally: the idea that the event is “unspeakable,” in other words incapable of representation, at least in words, for the victim of the trauma.<sup>45</sup> It is important to note, however, that the narrator is approaching this from a fundamentally different angle, not that of the victim, but that of the secondary witness, trying to reconstruct an event that he did not experience in the first place. His problem, in other words, is one of reception rather than communication. The victim can remember the event but not explain it; the narrator cannot imagine or think of the event. The use of this trope, here, even if it seems to be mainly a rhetorical gesture

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<sup>45</sup> Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is “always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.” The experience of trauma, in other words, cannot be communicated on a literal level. Since the experience of trauma is fundamentally different from other experiences, marked, as Caruth says, by a certain “latency,” a failure to experience the event on time, its communication must also be marked by incompleteness and fragmentation. Trauma can only be communicated in “a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding.” Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4-5.

embedded in a detailed historical representation, reminds us that this representation of the past is one with certain limits and, perhaps, certain errors.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast to the work of the Nazis' victims, the narrator tells us he could, in fact, imagine ("was ich [...] mir vorstellen konnte") the daily routines of the SS-officers employed there. This he recreates, once again, from the historical traces left behind at the fort, the "so-called mess of the SS guards with its scrubbed tables and benches, its bulging stove and various adages neatly painted on its walls in Gothic lettering." These SS-officers would have been "the good fathers and dutiful sons from Vilsbiburg and Fuhlsbüttel, from the Black Forest and the Bavarian Alps, sitting here when they came off duty to play cards and write letters to their loved ones at home." This he can well imagine, because "After all, I had lived among them until my twentieth year" (*Ae 23/ Ag 37*). There is much to say, here, about the subject-position the narrator, as well as Sebald himself, can occupy, as a German expatriate. He cannot identify himself too closely with the victims of the Holocaust, cannot claim to "imagine" their suffering, but he can sympathize with them. On the other hand, he can at least imagine the perpetrators of the Holocaust, who, after all, cannot be too different from those he grew up with in Germany, but he cannot sympathize with them. He tacitly criticizes their inhumanity. He depicts them, once again in striking detail inspired by an encounter with the artifacts they have left behind, calmly entertaining themselves with banal diversions while they are taking a break from inflicting the unimaginable suffering upon their victims he has already recreated in his encounter with the wheelbarrows.

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<sup>46</sup> In discussing the Breendonk episode, Todd Presner tells us that, "An inextinguishable uncertainty thus resides at the core of Sebald's modernist realism: the experiences of the past might be lost; the story might not be right; the narrator's perceptions might be nothing more than arbitrary, limited, or even fallacious. For this reason, the narrator cannot reenact or replicate the reality of the past in any authoritative or definitive sense." Presner, "What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals," 350.



## Holocaust Memory and *Nekyia* in *Austerlitz*

If the subject-position of the narrator makes an imaginative and sympathetic recreation of the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust problematic, this is not a problem shared by the character Austerlitz.<sup>47</sup> Much of Austerlitz' story, after the recovery of a good portion of his childhood memories, is made up of his attempt to reconstruct the fate of his mother, Agáta, who was interned in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt, now the town of Terezín in the Czech Republic. Here, as well, there is an echo of the *Odyssey*—Austerlitz, like Odysseus, is really trying to raise an *image* of his mother, as I will explain below. Austerlitz' journey to Terezín is staged, once again, as a journey to the land of the dead, with eerie gateways (*Ae* 190-93/ *Ag* 276-80), ghostly figures who immediately disappear (*Ae* 188-9/*Ag* 274), and the sense of a spectral presence lurking everywhere in the gloom about him.<sup>48</sup> It is not, however, primarily in the narration of the trip to Terezín itself that we see Sebald's nekyiastic mode of historical representation at work. It is, instead, in two recreations of the horrors endured

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<sup>47</sup> Brad Prager has addressed the problematic relationship to the traumatic past of the Holocaust Sebald bears as a German author most directly. He attempts "to account for the specific moral and epistemological consequences of narrating the Holocaust from a German position. When it came to illuminating the saddest spaces of the human spirit, Sebald was an empathetic and articulate scribe, yet just as there are limits imposed on the sensible depiction of the Holocaust, one should consider whether there are boundaries around the empathy that an author can sensibly display. Empathy may run the risk of undermining the possibility of exchange, potentially implicating an empathetic listener in their subject's past. While often productive, emulating another's trauma can undercut the laudable goals of critical analysis." Prager, "The Good German as Narrator," 76.

<sup>48</sup> "[W]hen I was out in the deserted town square again, it suddenly seemed to me, with the greatest clarity, that [the ghetto inmates] had never been taken away after all, but were still living crammed into those buildings and basements and attics, as if they were incessantly going up and down the stairs, looking out of the windows, moving in vast numbers through the streets and alleys, and even, a silent assembly, filling the entire space occupied by the air, hatched with gray as it was by the fine rain" (*Ae* 200/ *Ag* 289). For more on Austerlitz' trip to Terezín as a journey to the land of the dead, see my essay "'Eine Art Eingang zur Unterwelt': Katabasis in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*."

by the victims of the camp which frame this trip to Terezín: first of all, in the conversation with Vera, Austerlitz' childhood nursemaid, about the journey made by prisoners to the camp, among them Austerlitz' mother—this conversation inspires his trip to Terezín; and, second, Austerlitz' nuanced description to the narrator of the workings of the concentration camp which is the culmination of what Austerlitz learns about the camp both during his trip to Terezín and in his own researches afterwards.

The description of the horrifying conditions endured by prisoners in transit to Theresienstadt, housed for several days in an unheated exhibition hall in Prague, is told to Austerlitz in direct speech by Vera within Austerlitz' narration of his story, also in direct speech, to the narrator. Giving the effect of distance from the original story one more turn of the screw, Vera herself claims to have heard it from "one who had survived the ordeal" (*Ae* 179/ *Ag* 261). This is a prime example of what Sebald has called, in describing the debt he owes to the works of the Austrian author, Thomas Bernhard, a "periscopic form of narrative."<sup>49</sup> The framing of the narration of the prisoners' journey first through Vera's speech to Austerlitz, and then Austerlitz' speech to the narrator, and then finally the narrator's recounting of it to us, like the framing of Odysseus' journey to the underworld through the story he tells to the Phaiakians, calls attention to the act of recreating this past, and the potential for unreliability which increases with every iteration. The story is told not once or even twice, but four times, by the survivor who

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<sup>49</sup> "He only tells you in his books what he heard from others. So he invented, as it were, a kind of periscopic form of narrative. You're always sure that what he tells you is related, at one remove, at two removes, at two or three. That appealed to me very much, because this notion of the omniscient narrator who pushes around the flats on the stage of the novel, you know, cranks things up on page three and moves them along on page four and one sees him constantly working behind the scenes, is something that I think one can't do very easily any longer. So Bernhard, single-handedly I think, invented a new form of narrating which appealed to me from the start." This quote is taken from an interview with Michael Silverblatt on the KCRW radio program, *Bookworm*, in Santa Monica, CA, on December 6, 2001, printed as "A Poem of an Invisible Subject," 83.

spoke to Vera, by Vera herself to Austerlitz, by Austerlitz to the narrator, and finally by the narrator, who is not an omniscient narrator but a character participating in the action in the outermost layer of narration. As in the *Odyssey*, the narrator becomes a character, participating in the action, just as each of the characters becomes, in their turn, a narrator.

Once again, the description is full of evocative details. The prisoners were forced to stay in a large, unheated exhibition hall for several days, where they were questioned and sorted, their identity papers stamped and their belongings confiscated. The hall

was a bleak place where, under faint, glaucous lamplight, the utmost confusion reigned [...]. A great mound of silver cutlery lay on a table, along with fox furs and Persian lamb capes. Personal details were taken down, questionnaires handed out, and identity papers stamped EVACUATED or GHETTOIZED [...] there was much shouting and cursing, and blows as well [...]. Most of them were silent, some wept quietly, but outbursts of despair, loud shouting and fits of frenzied rage were not uncommon. (*Ae* 179/ *Ag* 261-2).<sup>50</sup>

The details in this passage, both visual and aural, conjure up powerful images, while at the same time not allowing us an easy identification with any of the individual victims. Sebald's description is full of a number of impersonal constructions: details "were taken down, questionnaires handed out, and identity papers stamped"; "outburst of despair, loud shouting and fits of frenzied rage were not uncommon." The subject of these sentences is not the victims engaging in these actions, or even the perpetrators

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<sup>50</sup> The images in this passage are aural as well as visual, and, indeed, it is hard not to think of the Pilgrim's first aural impression on his entry into Dante's *Inferno*: "Now sighs, loud wailing, lamentation resounded through the starless air, so that I too began to weep. Unfamiliar tongues, horrendous accents, words of suffering, cries of rage, voices loud and faint, the sound of slapping hands—all these made a tumult, always whirling in that black and timeless air, as sand is swirled in a whirlwind" (*Inferno* 3.22-30). That all of the various scenes of the Holocaust, the camps, waystations, and railway cars, are each a sort of hell on earth is one of the clichés of Holocaust discourse. More importantly, though, Sebald's description of the victims' stay in the exhibition hall in Prague shares with the Pilgrim's first impressions of the *Inferno* an incredible vividness, while, at the same time, managing to preserve a certain personal distance from the suffering they describe. The aural impression in the *Inferno*, not yet matched to the sight of the damned souls' suffering, which the Pilgrim will experience in due time, allows the horror of the immense suffering endured in this place to be divorced from an individual character and an individual story.

forcing them to it, but the actions themselves and the tools by which they are accomplished. The technique Sebald employs, here, is not one of communing with the dead victims and allowing them to speak through him, but bringing the past events they endured back to life in evocative prose, and only thereby giving us some impression of what their experience must have been like. Furthermore, both the refraction of the narration through the various narrative frames, the “periscopic form of narrative” Sebald favors, and the impersonal syntactic constructions he employs allow the construction of this representation of the past to come into focus. This is, we are forced to recognize, a highly mediated recreation of the past. Like the objects seen through a periscope, it is at one time present before our eyes and at the same time undeniably separated from us by distinct barriers and mediated through several layers of refraction.

Similarly, in the larger description of the organization of the concentration camp, Theresienstadt, Sebald is at pains to highlight the mediation, this time through Austerlitz’ researches into the past, of the representation. First, Austerlitz spends hours in the concentration camp museum in Terezín, where he is confronted with the evidence of the Holocaust in all of its horrifying dimensions. Among this evidence are physical artifacts of every shape and size, “luggage”; “handbags, belt buckles, clothes brushes, and combs”; “balance sheets, registers of the dead, lists of every imaginable kind, and endless rows of numbers and figures” (*Ae* 199/ *Ag* 286-7). Then, after returning home to England, he begins painstakingly translating for himself a book about the camp, by H. G. Adler, from the original German (*Ae* 232-6/ *Ag* 334-9). In both cases, what is stressed is the work that Austerlitz must do in order to gain at least some understanding, both of what went on specifically in Theresienstadt, and in the Holocaust in general. More than

this, however, both instances highlight the impossibility, in fact, of ever truly understanding the events of the Holocaust, let alone being able to communicate this understanding, that is to represent those events. As Austerlitz says about his trip to the museum in Terezín, “I understood it all now, and yet I did not understand it, for every detail that was revealed to me [...] far exceeded my comprehension” (*Ae* 199/ *Ag* 287). About H. G. Adler’s book, he tells us, “in its almost futuristic deformation of social life the ghetto system had something incomprehensible and unreal about it [den Charakter des Irrealen behielt], even though Adler describes it down to the last detail in its objective actuality” (*Ae* 236/ *Ag* 339). Just as the narrator cannot “imagine” the suffering of the victims at Breendonk, Austerlitz is unable to truly “understand” what occurred at the camp of Theresienstadt.

Once again, however, this topos of the unimaginable is more of a rhetorical gesture than a real aesthetic restraint. The description Austerlitz offers us of the camp following this proviso taking up roughly ten pages in the German edition, is both vivid and comprehensive. It catalogues the life-cycle of the camp inmates from their entrance to the camp, to their labor in various workshops, to their death and the disposal of the bodies. It moves from the very small, the tiny space in which each prisoner had to exist, to the very large, the crowds of the living and the piles of the dead, and includes, as well, several prominent events that took place during the existence of the camp. All of this is described, once again, in strongly imagistic prose. A long list of the professions and places of origin of those interned in Theresienstadt is followed, for example, by the detail that “each of [them] had to make do with about two square meters of space in which to exist” (*Ae* 236/ *Ag* 341). If the dimensions of the Holocaust seem too big, too monstrous

to understand, this detail, brought down to the individual level, suddenly makes intelligible the crowded conditions faced by all of these various people from all of these various places.

Similarly incomprehensible would seem to be the sheer scale of the mass-death induced by the difficult journey to the camp, the poor conditions, and the forced labor of the prisoners. Once again, however, the striking images of the description help us to visualize this:

the number of the dead [...] rose to well above twenty thousand in the ten months between August 1942 and May 1943 alone, as a result of which the joiner's workshop in the former riding school could no longer make enough deal coffins, there were sometimes more than five hundred dead bodies stacked in layers on top of each other in the central morgue in the casemate by the gateway to the Bohusevice road, and the four naphtha-fired incinerators of the crematorium, kept going day and night in cycles of forty minutes at a time, were stretched to the utmost limits of their capacity. (*Ae* 240-41/ *Ag* 344-5)

If the idea of twenty-thousand human beings dying in the span of ten months seems impossible to imagine, the detail of the joiner's workshop and the crematorium stretched to the limits and the orderly stack of dead bodies bring us a step closer to having this past before our minds' eyes.

Austerlitz also describes, here, two events that occurred outside of the normal routines of the camp. First, one day the inmates were marched outside of the camp to be counted by the SS and left to stand out in the rain for hours. No one had given the order for them to return to the camp. The prisoners were "drenched to the skin and increasingly distressed until well after dark, bowed and swaying like reeds in the showers that now swept over the country" (*Ae* 242/ *Ag* 346). Second is the infamous "Verschönerungsaktion," the cleaning up of the camp supervised by the SS in order to

fool Red Cross inspectors scheduled for a visit. Among the many details at odds with the prior gruesomeness of the camp, are “a coffeehouse with sun umbrellas and folding chairs outside it” and the fact that the “residents of the town flocked out in their thousands on the ramparts and bastions to take the air, almost as if they were passengers enjoying an evening stroll on the deck of an oceangoing steamer” (*Ae* 243-4/ *Ag* 348-9). If Sebald, through Austerlitz’ description, has made this past present for us in evocative visual images, with these final details he gives us a sense of the terrible absurdity of the place, the quality of the “unreal,” as Austerlitz’ says, which makes the techniques of realism inadequate to the representation of the events that occurred there.

#### *Nekyia* and Textual Representation in “Air War and Literature”

Hayden White would almost certainly categorize the aerial bombardment of the German cities during World War II as a “modernist event” that resists representation by means of techniques associated with literary realism.<sup>51</sup> Sebald addresses the bombing of the German cities, and in fact tries his hand at a representation of the bombing of Hamburg, in his essay “Air War and Literature,” which began its life as a series of lectures delivered in Zurich in 1997. Sebald viewed “Air War and Literature” as a kind of poetics.<sup>52</sup> By this, however, he does not mean a set of rules or guidelines for the production of literature in general. If it is a poetics, it is specifically a poetics of historical representation. The main question that occupies Sebald throughout the essay is

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<sup>51</sup> White does include “total war,” i. e. the destruction of civilian as well as military targets in war, as an example of the “new form of historical reality” that demands modernist techniques of representation. White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation,” 41.

<sup>52</sup> “[T]he ostensible subject of my lectures was poetics” (*Le* viii/ *Lg* 6).

how German literature has, by and large, failed to adequately address the air war and how this failure relates to German culture's inability to assimilate the air war into public memory. The air war, as Sebald tells us at the beginning of the essay, "never became an experience capable of public decipherment" (*Le* 4; "zu einer öffentlich lesbaren Chiffre geworden" *Lg* 12),<sup>53</sup> in part because "the new Federal German society relegated the experiences [Erfahrungen] of its own prehistory to the back of its mind and developed an almost perfectly functioning mechanism of repression" (*Le* 12/ *Lg* 20).<sup>54</sup> The German people never fully came to terms with the traumatic and confusing events of the air war, a task in which German literature should have, but did not, come to their aid.

One might argue that a realistic representation of the event is exactly what is called for to make this experience of the air war "decipherable." Indeed, reality, "Wirklichkeit," is one of the key terms of "Air War and Literature," and it would be hard to argue that Sebald does not favor a documentary approach to the representation of the Air War, one with a certain "objectivity" and backed up by authentic, documented facts.<sup>55</sup> Both in his own description of the bombing of Hamburg and in his discussion of the literature dealing with the air war which he considers acceptable, it is decidedly this documentary approach that he favors.<sup>56</sup> In fact, Sebald goes so far as to imply that representations of the air war ought not to violate a sense of reality—otherwise, we doubt

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<sup>53</sup> Sebald's words here are in part a quote from Alexander Kluge's *Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945*, 97.

<sup>54</sup> Sebald's critique of the culture of the German Bundesrepublik has its roots in a sort of pop mass-psychology exemplified by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern*, which he cites later in the essay (*Le* 84/ *Lg* 97).

<sup>55</sup> Of Hans Erich Nossack's *Der Untergang*, Sebald tells us that "The ideal of truth inherent in its entirely unpretentious objectivity [Sachlichkeit], at least over long passages, proves itself the only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction" (*Le* 53/ *Lg* 64).

<sup>56</sup> "The discontinuous notes made by Jäcki in Hubert Fichte's novel *Detlevs Imitationen 'Grünspan'* [...] during his researches on the Hamburg raid seem to me a very plausible literary approach, probably mainly because they are not abstract and imaginary in character, but concrete and documentary" (*Le* 58/ *Lg* 70).



their authenticity—although this turns out to be impossible in certain cases. Of a description in the diary of Friedrich Reck of the corpse of a child falling out of the suitcase of a woman in Hamburg, for example, Sebald says that although “it is difficult to think of a reason why Reck should have invented this grotesque scene, it is also hard to fit it into any framework of reality [Wirklichkeitsraster], so that one feels some doubt of its authenticity” (*Le* 88/ *Lg* 102).

Nevertheless, if by “realism” we mean, following Roland Barthes, a text that produces a “reality effect,”<sup>57</sup> in other words a sense that the representation captures the past “as it actually was” according to the famous formulation of the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke,<sup>58</sup> this does not really seem to be what Sebald has in mind.<sup>59</sup> The texts written in a documentary style which he admires, such as *Detlevs Imitationen* “*Grunspan*”, made up of “discontinuous notes,” tend to call attention to their own incompleteness, rather than striving to produce a sense of narrative or scientific wholeness which would enhance their claim to capturing the reality of the event (*Le* 58/ *Lg* 70). In

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<sup>57</sup> “This is what we might call the *referential illusion*. The truth of this illusion is this: eliminated from the realist speech-act as a signified of denotation, the ‘real’ returns to it as a signified of connotation; for just when these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do—without saying so—is *signify* it; [...] [they] say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of ‘the real’ (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the *reality effect* is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity.” Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” 148.

<sup>58</sup> According to Ranke it was the task of the historian to show the past “wie es eigentlich gewesen,” “as it actually was.” Barthes refers to this idea as well in “The Reality Effect,” (146).

<sup>59</sup> Todd Presner has argued that Sebald strives to produce a “reality effect of extreme historical events by decidedly modernist means.” Presner, “What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals,” 357. While I would agree that verisimilitude is important to Sebald’s theory of the literary representation of the past, verisimilitude, as Barthes stresses in “The Reality Effect,” is not always the same thing as realism. Barthes sketches two modes of verisimilitude, an “ancient mode,” where “the contrary is never impossible, since notation rests on a majority, but not an absolute, opinion,” and *realism*, which rejects “any such postulation that occurs in the structural fabric.” Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” 147. Realism, in other words, unlike the ancient mode of verisimilitude, does not carry the implicit assumption that the representation only bears a hypothetical and probable correspondence to the actual object of representation. Therefore, I would argue, Sebald does not seek to produce a “reality effect” by modernist means, but actually resists such a reality effect, while still embracing verisimilitude as a necessary component of a successful literary representation. I have discussed this in more detail in the Introduction.

fact, Sebald's discussion of "reality" in "Air War and Literature" is always strangely mediated. The author who attempts to represent the air war, he says, must have a "steadfast gaze bent on reality" in order to combat a tendency toward ideological inflexibility (*Le* 51; "einen unverwandten Blick auf die Wirklichkeit" *Lg* 62).<sup>60</sup> This, however, is not the same thing as saying this author must strive to reproduce the reality as it actually was. The author's gaze must remain on the reality of the event, whatever that is, but must he attempt to convince the reader that he is delivering that reality to him unmediated?

In fact Sebald often finds the attempt to produce this sort of reality effect odious. Peter de Mendelssohn, in *Die Kathedrale*, for example, cites "all manner of horrors as if to show that he does not shrink from depicting the reality of destruction [die Wirklichkeit der Zerstörung] in its most drastic aspects. Even so, an unfortunate tendency towards melodrama remains dominant" (*Le* 54/ *Lg* 65). Despite a mass of gory details intended to convince the reader that he is receiving the reality of the event unvarnished, literary representations can still succumb to melodramatic effects which mar their quality.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Sebald does not favor the type of representation we might describe as most "realistic," the accounts of local and amateur historians, which "often seemed curiously untouched by the subject of their research, and served primarily to sanitize or eliminate a

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<sup>60</sup> Julia Hell connects this gaze to that of Benjamin's famous "angel of history." Sebald quotes Benjamin's description of the angel from "Theses on the Philosophy of History" at length at the end of his discussion of the works of Alexander Kluge: "For all Kluge's intellectual steadfastness, therefore, he looks at the destruction of his hometown with the horrified fixity of Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history'" (*Le* 67/ *Lg* 80). According to Hell, Sebald is torn between "looking at" the air war, with the voyeuristic potential for aestheticization of the destruction it carries with it, and "looking away." He hits, however, on a third possibility, a "deadened" gaze which attempts to "forestall, if not control, the reader's voyeuristic tendencies [...]. Sebald moves in 'Air War and Literature' from the demand for intense scrutiny to a practice of descriptive writing that operates with dead eyes—not eyes that are blind, nor the transcendent gaze of the Romantic poet, but deadened, ruined eyes that look upon the world without pleasure." Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 377.

<sup>61</sup> For more on the discussion of melodrama in Sebald's works, see Zilcosky, "Lost and Found," 691-8.

kind of knowledge incompatible with any sense of normality” (*Le* 11/ *Lg* 20). Nor does he much prefer eyewitness accounts, which “generally have something discontinuous about them, a curiously erratic quality so much at variance with authentic recollection that it easily suggests rumor-mongering and invention” (*Le* 24/ *Lg* 34) and tend to be full of clichés.

Important here is not that Sebald rejects a purely realist mode of historical representation, but how he uses this distinction to establish his own unique mode of historical representation. The idea that one should strive to represent the past “as it actually was” has long been outmoded, and numerous historiographers and literary critics have pointed to the fundamental inadequacy of this conceit to the events of the twentieth century. This inadequacy has been described most clearly by Hayden White in his discussion of the “modernist events” of the twentieth century. In line with White’s observations, the air war, according to Sebald, seems to have resisted the original witnesses’ ability to fully experience it, let alone the attempt afterwards to represent it realistically. The experience is “beyond our ability to comprehend” (*Le* 25; “die über das Fassungsvermögen gehenden Erlebnisse” *Lg* 34), and “true stories [wahre Geschichten]” circulated in the aftermath of the bombings that “exceeded anyone’s capacity to grasp them” (*Le* 23/ *Lg* 33). The twin dangers, the *Skylla* and *Charybdis* of the representation of the air war, are the cold realism of the amateur historians, which has no impact, and the clichéd poeticism of eyewitness accounts which “cover up” more than they reveal (*Le* 25/ *Lg* 34). The ideal, in fact, that seems to guide Sebald’s taste in literary representation of the air war is not “reality.” It is not his main concern to capture the event “as it actually was.” It is, instead, a desire for the communication of the truth, “Wahrheit,” of

the air war that guides his literary preferences. “Truth” and “reality” are different epistemological categories.

By truth, Sebald means something from which one might learn, something that might help an entire society, in fact, such as the German people, collectively to understand the consequences of certain courses of action and to change its behavior. On this, Sebald cites Alexander Kluge, whose “Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945” is one of his lauded examples of proper representation of the air war:

Central to Kluge’s detailed description of the social organization of disaster, which is preprogrammed by the ever-recurrent and ever-intensifying errors of history, is the idea that a proper understanding of the catastrophes we are always setting off is the first prerequisite for the social organization of happiness. (*Le* 64/ *Lg* 76)

Sebald is, of course, famously pessimistic about the possibility of us ever truly learning our lessons. Nevertheless, it is the attempt to communicate “truth” of this sort that he cites as the key qualification for an acceptable representation of the air war. Of Nossack’s *Der Untergang*, he tells us:

The ideal of truth [Das Ideal des Wahren] inherent in its entirely unpretentious objectivity, at least over long passages, proves itself the only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction. Conversely, the construction of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world is a process depriving literature of its right to exist [ihrer Berechtigung]. (*Le* 53/ *Lg* 64)

This question of whether literature still has a “right to exist” was famously raised by Theodor Adorno, with reference to the Holocaust, in his famous dictum, “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”<sup>62</sup> This is not to say that the two events, the air war and the Holocaust, can be equated. For Sebald, however, they are part of a continuum of interlinked historical violence which reached its climax during World War II.

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<sup>62</sup> Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” 34.

Throughout “Air War and Literature,” he is at pains to point out this connection—the smoke rising from the smoldering German cities is like the smoke rising from the chimneys of Auschwitz;<sup>63</sup> the gruesome scenes left by the bombings were cleaned up by “punishment labor gangs and camp inmates” (*Le* 28/ *Lg* 38). Sebald’s statements about this “ideal of truth” can thus be seen as a kind of rejoinder to Adorno. To write after Auschwitz is also to write after Hamburg. Writing after this epoch of destruction is possible only if one adheres to this “ideal of truth.”

The communication of this “truth,” however, might naturally demand that the representation of the event have a certain impact on us. It cannot, like the work of the amateur historians, which, as Sebald tells us, tended rather to quarantine a potentially disturbing knowledge, remain detached from the event. The primary mode of this impact on the reader that Sebald demands for satisfactory representation of the air war is strong visual imagery.

One might have noticed, in my discussion of Sebald’s theorization of the literary representation of the air war above, that he primarily favors visual metaphors for the engagement with the past. Sources on the air war “are notable for a curious blindness to experience [Erfahrungsblindheit], the result of extremely narrow, biased, or skewed perspectives” (*Le* 20/ *Lg* 29). Survivors of the air raids “were unreliable and partly blinded witnesses” (*Le* 24; “mit halber Blindheit geschlagene Zeugen” *Lg* 33). And of course, as we have said, the remedy for ideological inflexibility is a “steadfast gaze bent on reality” (*Le* 51/ *Lg* 62). Even Sebald’s famous dictum, immediately preceding the description of the bombing of Hamburg, that eyewitness accounts “need to be

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<sup>63</sup> “There was a pall of smoke in the air all over Europe, over the rearguard actions in east and west, over the ruins of the German cities, over the camps where untold numbers of people were burnt” (*Le* 71/ *Lg* 84).

supplemented by what a synoptic and artificial view reveals [was sich erschließt unter einem synoptischen, künstlichen Blick” (*Le* 26/ *Lg* 35), is steeped in visual metaphors. The Greek, *synopsis*, from which “synoptic” derives, means roughly “seeing together,” and, of course, the word “view” can be read both literally and figuratively, an imaginary vantage point from which visual images may be constructed, and a “point of view,” or in other words a particular understanding of the event.

It is not, however, merely the metaphors Sebald employs in discussing the air war that slants heavily towards the visual modality. What Sebald highlights, time and again, as one of the primary requirements for a successful literary representation of the air war is quite literally the ability to make the reader “visualize” the event. Of a particularly “abstract and imaginary” passage in Arno Schmidt’s *Aus dem Leben eines Fauns*, for example, he tells us:

The author certainly intended to conjure up a striking image of the eddying whirlpool of destruction [den Strudel der Zerstörung... sinnfällig werden zu lassen] with his exaggerated language, but I for one, reading a passage like the following, do not visualize [sehe] the supposed subject: life at the terrible moment of its disintegration [...]. I do not see [sehe] what is being described; all I see is the author, eager and persistent, intent on his linguistic fretwork. (*Le* 57-8/ *Lg* 69-70)

The problem with the passage of Schmidt’s which Sebald cites is not that it is not written in imagistic language, but that the images are, rather, too abstract and diverse, and thus do not cohere into a single picture of the event. The reader cannot “see” the intended subject with his mind’s eye.

The same criticism could not be leveled against Sebald’s own description of the bombing of Hamburg in the summer of 1943. This section of “Air War and Literature”

has, as Julia Hell writes, a curiously “hybrid character.”<sup>64</sup> Rapid shifts of the apparent perspective, speculative musings on the effects of the bombings, numerical details, precise time and place markers, poetic comparisons, and of course strong images of all kinds combine to produce a comprehensive picture of the event which simultaneously calls attention to its own construction. The effect Sebald creates is simultaneously disorienting and engrossing. The description does not pause in one mode long enough for the reader to grow comfortable and forget about the framing perspective the author is creating, yet the images do combine to give the reader a sense of the “experience” of the event, even if it is an experience which no individual present during the event could have had.<sup>65</sup>

It is not merely visual images which Sebald employs here, though, but aural and even tactile images as well. The flames resonated “like mighty organs with all their stops pulled out at once” (*Ae* 27/ *Ag* 36), and the heat could be felt by the bomber pilots “through the sides of their planes” (*Ae* 27/ *Ag* 37). Nevertheless, the visual mode dominates the description, which is full of gruesome details such as that “Horribly disfigured corpses lay everywhere. Bluish little phosphorous flames still flickered around many of them; others had been roasted brown or purple and reduced to a third of their normal size. They lay doubled up in pools of their own melted fat, which had sometimes already congealed” (*Ae* 28/ *Ag* 37-8). Some critics have seen a parallel between Sebald’s descriptive technique, especially in the representation of history, and the photographic

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<sup>64</sup> Hell, “The Angel’s Enigmatic Eyes,” 369.

<sup>65</sup> “What is remarkable about Sebald’s description of the firebombing of Hamburg is the fact that no eyewitness could have possibly seen or experienced it in this way.” Presner, ““What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals,”” 354.

images he includes in his text.<sup>66</sup> Although Sebald's technique may, at times, be something akin to "the photography of history," the mental image this particular passage is meant to create is not the analogue of a black and white photographic image, like those interspersed throughout his texts.<sup>67</sup> Color dominates this passage, from the blue of the flames, to the brown and purple of the bodies. Furthermore, the images of flickering flames, roasted flesh, and congealed fat, drawn from the culinary field, help the reader to visualize the scene by drawing on common experiences. Brought into this new context, they take on horrifying dimensions.<sup>68</sup>

An equally disturbing mix of the familiar and the gruesome characterizes the final detail with which Sebald closes his description of the night of the bombing: "Other victims had been so badly charred and reduced to ashes by the heat, which had risen to a thousand degrees or more, that the remains of families consisting of several people could be carried away in a single laundry basket" (*Ae* 28/ *Ag* 38). This, indeed, conjures up a strong visual image that helps to convey the utterly destructive forces to which human bodies were subjected in the bombings: the image of someone carrying away, in a single, mundane laundry basket, an item with which we are all familiar, the ashes of an entire family (whether such a thing actually happened Sebald does not say; what is important, however, is that it gives us a sense of the horrible consequences of the bombing). One of the icons of domestic life, the laundry basket, becomes an ironic symbol of the annihilation of that domestic life. It is now used to cart off an entire family, the group of

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<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Alexandra Tischel, "Aus der Dunkelkammer der Geschichte: Zum Zusammenhang von Photographie und Erinnerung in W. G. Sebalds *Austerlitz*."

<sup>67</sup> Presner, "What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals," 344. Julia Hell also discusses the relationship between Sebald's representational technique and ideas about the "photography of history" inherited from Walter Benjamin. Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 370-2.

<sup>68</sup> "He ends his artificial and synoptic view by taking the everyday language of domesticity, particularly cooking with fire, and uses it to describe the horrible aftermath." *Ibid.*, 356.



people who previously filled that domestic space and gave it meaning. The symbol of family life has become its grave.

Sebald's description of the aerial bombardment of Hamburg, then, certainly seems to fulfill the requirements of our nekyiastic mode of historical representation. It makes the past present in evocative images while simultaneously calling attention to itself as a mediated, imaginative recreation of that past. Is this description, however, truly emplotted as a kind of nekyia or raising of the dead? Sebald, in fact, often goes out of his way, in "Air War and Literature," to denigrate literary works styled as classical journeys to the land of the dead. His primary examples of this are Hermann Kasack's *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom* and Hans Erich Nossack's *Nekyia*. Kasack uses the experience of the bombing as raw material for an "Expressionist fantasy" (*Ae* 49/ *Ag* 60), in which the bombing takes on quasi-mystical aspects. The bombed out cities become a "kingdom of the dead" (*Ae* 49/ *Ag* 60), but the purpose here is not to thematize an engagement with the past which is at one time vivid and self-consciously mediated, but to "mythologize a reality [Wirklichkeit] that in its raw form defies description" (*Ae* 48/ *Ag* 59). As such, Kasack falls prey to the same mystical, cosmological thinking that characterized the Nazi cult of the dead: "the secret language supposedly cultivated by the 'internal emigrants' was to a high degree identical with the code of the Fascist intellectual world" (*Ae* 49-50/ *Ag* 61).<sup>69</sup> By turning the ruined landscapes of Germany into a land of the dead, Kasack shows that he has not progressed far from the mystical reverence for the power of death that undergirded the ideology of Nazism.

Hans Erich Nossack's *Nekyia* is also "the account of a journey to the kingdom of the dead" (*Ae* 50/ *Ag* 61), and, like Kasack's book, this classical model is used in the

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<sup>69</sup> Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 380.

service of mythologizing the historical event, rather than thematizing a troubled relationship to the events of the past: “Nossack too succumbs to the temptation to make the real horrors of the time disappear through the artifice of abstraction and metaphysical fraudulence” (*Ae* 50/ *Ag* 61). What is truly disturbing for Sebald, in this tendency to mythologize the events of the air war, is that it embodies a sort of “looking away.” It does not merely add to the representation of the air war a philosophical framework which acts as a readymade interpretation of the events, but actually makes the events “disappear,” allows the reader not to see them at all. It is not necessary to consider the horrors of the time, their causes and after-effects, if they can be fit into a framework which explains them away as necessary or even of mystical significance. The construction of this sort of metaphysical scaffolding to invest the air war with a deeper meaning and thus to make it disappear in its terrible particularity has its roots, Sebald finds, deep in German culture, from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* onward, and is thus the sign of a “profound ideological inflexibility going far beyond the minds of individual authors” (*Ae* 51/ *Ag* 62).

It is, then, not the fact that Nossack and Kasack use *nekyia* as a model for their own works engaging with the air war that troubles Sebald, but the way in which they employ this model. These authors graft the wrong aspect of the classical journeys to the land of the dead onto the modern situation, the tendency to embody sweeping cosmological theories which invest the events of the epic narrative with larger, mystical implications. In the *Aeneid*, for example, the spirit of Anchises, Aeneas’ father, tells the hero of the journey of the soul, through the muck of the mortal realm, to the purification

of the afterlife, and back again.<sup>70</sup> The Pilgrim's journey through the afterlife in the *Divine Comedy* is also full of such comments about the fate of the soul. What these modern German authors do not emphasize, however, is exactly the aspect we have cited as central to Odysseus' encounter with the dead spirits in the *nekylia* in the *Odyssey*: the hero's role in bringing the dead back to life and visibility and the way in which it functions as an analogue of the poet's relationship to the past he represents. Nossack and Kasack employ the journey to the land of the dead as the structuring metaphor, in other words, for the events of the historical narrative they tell, and not for the framing narrative of the historical observer's engagement, in the present, with the events of the past.

Sebald, consequently, does not reject *nekylia* entirely as a model for the representation of the air war. In fact, he makes it clear that he sees his own recreations of this past as a kind of raising of the dead. In describing "the few points at which my own life touches the history of the air war" (*Ae* 78/ *Ag* 91), he tells us that:

I do not necessarily have to return to Germany and my place of origin to visualize [vergegenwärtigen] that period of destruction. It often comes back to my mind [wird... in Erinnerung gerufen] where I live at present. Many of the more than seventy airfields from which the war of annihilation was waged against Germany were in the county of Norfolk [...]. Grass has grown over the runways, and the dilapidated control towers, bunkers, and corrugated iron huts stand in an often eerie landscape [in der oft gespenstisch wirkenden Landschaft] where you sense the dead souls [die toten Seelen] of the men who never came back from their missions, and of those who perished in the vast fires. (*Ae* 77/ *Ag* 89-90)

Here, Sebald comes dangerously close to the conceit of the romanticist historian, who imagines himself actually channeling the experience of history's victims and speaking for them. Curiously it is not only the "dead souls" of those who actually were at the airfield, the pilots who perished in the raids, but those whose only connection to this

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<sup>70</sup> *Aeneid* 6.724-51.

airfield was the fact that those pilots dropped bombs, from a great height, on top of them, the German victims “who perished in the vast fires,” whose presence he feels here in Norwich.

Immediately after this, however, Sebald gives us a sense of the kind of coincidence that makes him feel a connection to this past. One of four crew members on a Luftwaffe plane that crashed in the area of his house, he says, “shared a birthday with me and was the same age as my father” (*Ae* 78/ *Ag* 90). This seems like a pretty flimsy coincidence on which to base a sense of shared experience. Nevertheless, Sebald signals that he is, in fact, affected by this connection not only by mentioning this detail as the last point “at which my own life touches the history of the air war” but also by including, alongside the text, a reproduction of a photograph of the crew of the plane with their ages and birthdays handwritten beneath it. This is, in fact, a technique Sebald uses time and again to deflate a sense of a spiritual connection to figures out of the past. In an episode in *The Emigrants*, for example, the narrator hops a fence to enter a Jewish cemetery, and thus, symbolically, allows his desire to empathize with the past of the Jewish victims of anti-semitism to guide him, perhaps, beyond strictly ethical bounds, into a zone where a German observer of the past is not supposed to go. Once in the graveyard, the narrator imaginatively recreates the life of one of those buried there merely from his assumption that a quill engraved on the tombstone must signify that the person buried there was a writer like himself.<sup>71</sup> This is just one example of Sebald emphasizing how apparently

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<sup>71</sup> “I was touched, in a way I knew I could never quite fathom, by the symbol of the writer’s quill on the stone of Friederike Halbleib, who departed this life on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1912. I imagined her pen in hand, all by herself, bent with bated breath over her work; and now, as I write these lines, it feels as if I had lost her, and as if I could not get over the loss despite the many years that have passed since her departure” (*Ee* 224-5/ *Eg* 336-7). The narrator also experiences a “shock of recognition” upon seeing the gravestone of someone who died on the same month and day as he himself was born (*Ee* 224/ *Eg* 335-6) .

meaningless coincidences can be the seed of a feeling of connection to the past, in order to suggest that, in fact, the narrator's or his own sympathies with figures out of the past may be largely fueled by projection and thus are highly suspect. In this way, he differentiates his own nekyiastic mode of "bringing remembered events back to life" from the facile identification with the past embodied by romanticist historiography.

Nevertheless, the discussion of the connection he feels to the "period of destruction" in the area of his home in Norwich does make it clear that it is exactly the kind of nekyiastic engagement with the past that we saw in *Austerlitz* that he is enacting in recreating the air war in "Air War and Literature." It is only through the mediation of an encounter with the ruined traces of the past, in the form of the dilapidated, abandoned air bases near his home, that Sebald can "make present [vergegenwärtigen]" the "period of destruction" of the air war. In these places with the evidence they still bear of their former purpose, he is able to call "into memory [in Erinnerung]" the events of this past, just as the narrator was able to "imagine" (while all the time claiming that he could not) the suffering of the victims at Breendonk in his encounter with the wheelbarrows left in the former concentration camp.

Sebald is thus able to resist the generic impulses he finds so suspect in the works of the German authors he cites as counterexamples for the proper representation of the air war. These authors give into the temptation toward melodrama or, worse, the kind of story of spiritual awakening and mystical conversion exemplified by Kasack's *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom* and Nossack's *Nekyia*. Hayden White has argued, in *Metahistory*, that all historical representations are emplotted along the lines of certain archetypal

narratives—they are romances, tragedies, comedies, satires, etc.<sup>72</sup> The choice of archetypal narratives affects the way we interpret historical events and their connections to one another, to the exclusion of other interpretative possibilities embodied by other types of narrative. If we see the fall of Rome, for example, as a tragedy, we will see certain historical details as relevant and certain connections between these details that we would not if we viewed the fall of Rome as, say, a satire. By maintaining a focus on the framing narrative of the historical observer's engagement with the past, emplotted as a Homeric *nekylia*, and thus emphasizing the construction of the historical representation and its potential fallibility, Sebald resists the totalizing potential narratives of historical events carry with them.

#### Photography as *Nekylia* in Sebald, Barthes, and Kracauer

It is possible to think of Odysseus' encounter with the dead in the *nekylia* in the *Odyssey* as a kind of photographic slideshow. The edge of the trench Odysseus digs in the earth, where he pours in the blood that the spirits come forth to drink, marks a sort of invisible screen between himself and the spirits. From this fixed perspective he peers into the world of the dead. He cannot go any further into the underworld, nor can the dead come any further into his world. Any attempt he makes to transgress this barrier, as when he tries to embrace his mother, is met with failure—the dead flit through his arms; they are nothing but shadow and light. These dead spirits, as we have said, are described as “images,” and each of them flares up for a moment at this screen, when they come to drink the blood, and then recedes back into the darkness.

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<sup>72</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 7-11.

These images, although they may be vivid and moving, are not really colorful. In fact, color seems to be the one element they are lacking. There is rich color in the world of the living in the *Odyssey*, but the no-man's-land where Odysseus summons the dead up from their haunts is a place "hidden in fog and cloud, nor does Helios, the radiant sun, ever break through the dark [...] but always a glum night is spread over wretched mortals" (11.13-19). Nor, as Odysseus describes it, does the realm occupied by the dead seem to have much, if any, color. It is a sort of grayscale, occupied by darkness, gloom, and shadow.<sup>73</sup> If these "images" of the dead, then, are like photographs, they are not in color, but instead in black-and-white.

Up to now, in discussing Sebald's nekyiastic mode of historical representation, I have focused primarily on the written text in his works. Sebald's books, however, are not only text. The text is always accompanied by black-and-white photographic images. The photographs, however, do not merely illustrate what is written in the text, nor is it a matter of the text captioning the photographs. Neither exactly has priority over the other. The photographs are embedded in the text without caption every few pages; the text is wrapped around the photographs connecting them to one another. Each complements the other.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> The most extensive study of this seems to be Florence Elizabeth Wallace, "Color in Homer and in Ancient Art." Color words are not extremely common in Homer, but even fewer than usual seem to be used to describe the land of the dead in Book 11. Teiresias' staff is described as "golden" (11.91), as is the ornate belt worn by Herakles (11.610), but this, of course, can refer to the material of the objects rather than their hue. Otherwise, however, the words used to describe the land of the dead emphasize more the lack of brightness ("dark," "shining") or are "black" or "white."

<sup>74</sup> Stefanie Harris argues that, in *The Emigrants*, Sebald "employs the two media in tandem precisely in order to address questions of representability more generally." Harris, "The Return of the Dead," 381. There is no truly comprehensive study of the photographs in Sebald's books, but both Alexandra Tischer, in "Aus der Dunkelkammer der Geschichte," and Carolin Duttlinger, in "Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*," explore the relationship between photography and traumatic memory, both public and private, in Sebald's texts. They make similar arguments that photographs function in Sebald's books as both a metaphorical analog for the functioning of memory and as a supplement or surrogate to memory.

Fetts. In der schon in den nächsten Tagen zum Sperrgebiet erklärten inneren Todeszone wurden, als Strafbrigaden und Lagerhäftlinge nach dem Abkühlen der Trümmer im August mit der Räumung beginnen konnten, Menschen gefunden, die, überwältigt von Monoxydgas, noch an Tischen oder gegen die Wand gelehnt saßen, anderwärts



klumpenweise Fleisch und Knochen oder ganze Körperberge gesotten von dem siedenden Wasser, das aus geborstenen Heizkesseln geschossen war. Wieder andere waren in der bis auf tausend Grad und mehr angestiegenen Glut so verkohlt und zu Asche geworden, daß man die Überreste mehrköpfiger Familien in einem einzigen Waschkorb davontragen konnte.

Der Exodus der Überlebenden aus Hamburg hatte noch in der Nacht des Angriffs eingesetzt. Es begann, so schreibt Nossack, »ein pausenloses Fahren auf allen Straßen der Umgegend . . . ohne zu wissen wohin.«<sup>30</sup> Bis in die

Figure 3. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, p. 38.

This is especially true in the passages we have called nekyiastic historical descriptions. The description of the bombing of Hamburg in “Air War and Literature,”



for example, is accompanied by a photograph by Erich Andres of charred corpses in the streets of Hamburg taken in July of 1943 (*Le* 28/ *Lg* 38, fig. 3). Not that the reader would necessarily have any idea that the photograph is by Erich Andres, of where and when it was taken, or even what it depicts. It is hard to make out what the dark objects are lying in the street next to a single shining coal pail. It is only after a moment's scrutiny that it becomes clear that these are, in fact, corpses. This, to be sure, might be construed as one of the rhetorical points of the image, that the bombings unleashed so much destructive power on the bodies of those in the city as to make them virtually unrecognizable as human remains. It is, however, a common feature of the photographic images Sebald includes in his books that they take a moment to decipher. What am I seeing here and how does this relate to the text I have been reading? Even after close scrutiny, one cannot always be sure.<sup>75</sup>

Another common feature of Sebald's photographs is that they call attention to their own construction. The photograph included with the description of the bombing of Hamburg has a crease clearly running down its center. It must have been reproduced from a book or a magazine. Sebald does nothing to disguise this, nor does he attempt to reproduce a cleaner version of the image, which might very well have been available him. He leaves a trace of the images' materiality. Here it is a trace of the photograph's

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<sup>75</sup> "To call Sebald's use of these images 'documentary' only serves to highlight their ambivalent character. Purely in terms of form they may well be tropes of realism (an *effet du réel*), but as *documents* they introduce a refractive element into the novel's ostensible 'reality.' For the images are all of ambiguous archival status; they document *a* reality, but we are simply not sure *what* reality." Adrian Daub, "Donner à Voir': The Logics of the Caption in W. G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* and Alexander Kluge's *Devil's Blind Spot*," 318.

selection and reproduction. Elsewhere it is a reminder of the original snapping of the photograph, say in a ghostly reflection of the photographer in a glass window.<sup>76</sup>

As it is part of Sebald's nekyiastic mode of writing about history to call attention to the framing narrative of the historical observer's encounter with the traces of the past and his reconstruction of the past using these traces, it is likewise a consistent feature of the photographic images that accompany these passages that they call attention to their own construction. In this sense they perform a similar "nekyiastic" function: they highlight the author's, the photographer's, or the compiler's role in bringing remembered events back to life. Often, in fact, the text asks us to ascribe this role, as well, to a character or the narrator. In the Paul Bereyter section of *The Emigrants*, the character Paul has left behind a scrapbook containing captioned images from his life, and in *Austerlitz*, Jacques Austerlitz, who considers himself an amateur photographer, conveniently leaves the narrator a treasure trove of old photographs.

It is not just, however, that the photographs that complement Sebald's nekyiastic historical descriptions function in a similar way to these descriptions. A sense that black-and-white photographs in general connect the reader to the dead past pervades Sebald's texts, the public statements he has made about photography, and, in fact, even the rhetorical signals encapsulated in the photographs he includes in his books. As I will argue below, Sebald often hints that he sees photography in general (and especially black-and-white photography) as a way of bringing the past back to life. Moreover, he draws on a critical tradition in photographic theory, specifically that of Roland Barthes

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<sup>76</sup> In a photograph of a shop-window included with Austerlitz' description of the exterior of the Antikos Bazaar in Terezín one can just make out the reflection of the photographer, who bears a striking resemblance to Sebald (*Ae* 197/ *Ag* 284). At this point, Austerlitz says that he could see his own "shadow-image" among the objects in the window, which he describes as survivors of a former era (*Ae* 197/ *Ag* 285).

and Siegfried Kracauer, which describes photography very much in the terms of an encounter between the living and the dead.

In an interview that took place in 1997, Sebald explicitly stated that he saw black-and-white photography as a sort of bridge between the living present and the dead past:

I believe that the black-and-white photograph, or rather the gray zones in the black-and-white photograph, stand for this territory that is located between death and life. In the archaic imagination it was usually the case that there was not only life and then death, as we assume today, but rather that in between there was this vast no-man's-land where people were permanently wandering around and where one did not know exactly how long one had to stay there, whether this was a purgatory in the Christian sense or just a kind of desert that one had to traverse until one reached the other side.<sup>77</sup>

The black-and-white photograph, then, with its gradations of gray, rests on the permeable border between the absolute white of the living present and the absolute black of the forgotten past (both blinding in their own way). If it is the goal of nekyiastic writing to bring the past back to life and present it in striking images to the reader, this is exactly what Sebald argues photographs can do as well. Just as Odysseus journeys to the no-man's-land on the border between this world and the next, so the black-and-white photograph allows us access to the no-man's-land where the still recoverable past lies. The "archaic imagination" Sebald cites at the root of the Christian idea of purgatory and which black-and-white photography calls upon to cast its particular spell is not, then, separate from Homer's literary depiction of the afterlife in the *nekyia*, but finds one of its fullest expressions there.

Throughout this short interview, Sebald consistently comes back to this idea of photography as a sort of connector between this world and the spirit world. Photographs "exert a pull on the viewer... from the real world into an unreal world; that is, a world of

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Christian Scholz published as "'But the Written Word Is Not a True Document': A Conversation with W. G. Sebald on Literature and Photography," 108.

which one doesn't exactly know what it is constituted but of which one senses that it is there." Photographs bind us to a "secondary form of existence, or one that is coordinated with ours, superior or subordinated to us. The people that disappear from life still prowl around somewhere in this life."<sup>78</sup> Photographs, as evocative descriptions of the past do for the reader, connect the "viewer" to this other world. This is a place occupied by the dead, "the people that disappear from life" as Sebald delicately puts it, but they have not yet found their rest (they "prowl around").

It is in similar terms that the character Austerlitz speaks of his own photographic experimentations in *Austerlitz*, experimentations that we are meant to assume resulted in most of the images that appear in the book.

In my photographic work I was always especially entranced [in den Bann gezogen], said Austerlitz, by the moment when the shadows of reality [die Schatten der Wirklichkeit], so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling [festhalten] to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long. (*Ae 77/ Ag 117*)

Here, it is not looking at a developed photograph that Austerlitz describes in the terms of an encounter with the dead, but the process of developing photographs. Granted, Austerlitz is developing pictures of "discrete things" (*Ae 77/ Ag 116*) and not portraits, but still they strike him as "shadows" of a former reality, like the shades of the underworld. Once again, Sebald is edging away from the claim for any sort of reality effect. The photographs are related to "reality" as shadows are to the objects that cast them, or as the shades of the underworld are to the people they once were. They are also akin to dreams (the memories that "emerge out of nothing... in the middle of the night"),

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<sup>78</sup> "But the Written Word Is Not a True Document," 105.

one of the other words used in the *Odyssey* to describe the dead spirits.<sup>79</sup> When Odysseus attempts to embrace the spirit of his mother, she “fluttered out of my hands like a shadow or a dream” (11.207-8). And it is, in fact, precisely this scene that the text evokes by having Austerlitz attempt to “cling” to the image on the photographic paper, which retreats into the darkness. This scene of Odysseus’ encounter with the spirit of his mother, in fact, is one of the touchstones of Sebald’s text. It is, as I will argue below, evoked much more strongly later in the book.<sup>80</sup>

Sebald is, of course, not the first to think of photography as a kind of interface between the living present and the dead past. In his interview on photography with Christian Scholz, Sebald cites Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, which he calls “the wonderful text by Barthes,” to explain what fascinates him about photography:

In *Le chambre claire* [...] there’s a photograph of a little boy who had stepped out from behind his school desk [and] into the walkway [...]. I can’t remember exactly how Barthes comments on the image, but he asks the question what might later have happened to this boy named Ernest [...]. One can imagine the life-trajectories that emanate from these photographs in a much clearer way than from out of a painting.

Sebald tells us that he is interested in the “life-trajectories” that emanate from such portraits, the life-stories they ask us to imagine of the individuals they depict. It is, however, equally what one might call the “death-trajectory” of the boy in the image that

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<sup>79</sup> The photographs that accompany this reminiscence of his first photographic experiments are perhaps evocative, as well, of exactly the kind of memories that are “emerging” for the character Austerlitz (*Ae* 76/*Ag* 116). There are four photographs set in a square-shaped pattern. The top two are natural images, a coastline and what seems to be sunlight seen through the leaves of a tree. The bottom two are man-made, a tile roof, with tiles of all different shades, and smokestacks billowing smoke. It is this last, in the bottom right corner, the last of the images if we are “reading” them from left to right, which is most evocative of the buried past which Austerlitz attempts to bring to life in recounting his life story. His parents both, as far as he can find out, died in concentration camps, and one of the most powerful emblems of the concentration camp is the smokestacks of the crematoria, pouring forth ash from the bodies of the victims of the Holocaust cremated there.

<sup>80</sup> In the Introduction, I discuss a similar passage in the “Paul Bereyter” section of the *Emigrants*, where the narrator tells us of Paul Bereyter’s photo album that, “looking at the pictures in it, it truly seemed to me, and still does, as if the dead were coming back, or as if we were on the point of joining them” (*Ee* 46/*Eg* 68-9).

Sebald is interested in. The story he imagines of the boy rapidly progresses, from this school room, to his death: “One can imagine that it’s perhaps the year 1903 or so; and that fourteen years later this now about twenty year old man sacrificed his life on the Somme or in Passchendaele, or at another horrible place.”<sup>81</sup> Sebald, importantly, gets the story wrong. The date of the picture is not 1903, but much later, 1931. The boy, Ernest, would have been old enough to fight in World War II, not World War I. This transposition may be revealing, but what is equally telling is how much Sebald makes this a story of death rather than life.<sup>82</sup> Photographic images, and especially portraits, Sebald hints, are for him portents of death, or as Barthes would say “the photograph tells me death in the future.”<sup>83</sup> In this sense, when we look at a photograph, we are, to a certain extent, like Odysseus communing with the dead.

Whereas Sebald imagines the little boy in the image dead, Barthes wonders whether he is still alive. The story Barthes imagines emanating from the image, in which the little boy may still be alive today, would make, he says, quite a novel (“What a novel!”).<sup>84</sup> Still, it is only, for Barthes, *possible* that Ernest is still alive, and even if he is, the photograph still tells us that he is going to die. It is always the death of the subject that he is calculating, Barthes tells us, when he looks at a portrait: Has this person died, or when will he have died?<sup>85</sup> Death is a *punctum* (a detail that “pricks” the spectator of a

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<sup>81</sup> “‘But the Written Word Is Not a True Document,’” 105.

<sup>82</sup> “Had he calculated some fourteen years (‘or so’) from the date of Kertész’ actual composition (as Barthes does), Ernest, ‘now about 20 years old,’ might—in late 1944, early 1945—have been, one conjectures, interned in a German POW camp—or perhaps a collaborator on the run (*quel roman!*). In reading Sebald, where references to the year 1944 abound, always through its connection to his own and his narrator’s year of birth, these speculations based on a child’s portrait taken in 1931 are hardly superfluous.” Avi Kempinski, “‘Quel Roman!’: Sebald, Barthes, and the Pursuit of the Mother-Image,” 458.

<sup>83</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

<sup>84</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 84.

<sup>85</sup> One might also mention in this context, Susan Sontag’s work on photography. Sontag, like Barthes and Kracauer, also notes a connection between photography and death: “Photography is the inventory of

photograph and implicates him in the emotional life of the image) available in almost any photograph: “Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.” It is not, however, just portraits or other images of people that “prick” us with this premonition of death: “At the limit, there is no need to represent a body in order for me to experience this vertigo of time defeated.” Even images of empty landscapes, barely touched by human life can, for Barthes, move the spectator with the implication of death. He finds it even in a photograph taken by August Salzmann in 1850 of the road to Bethlehem near Jerusalem, which shows “nothing but stony ground, olive trees.”<sup>86</sup>

For Barthes, the photograph evokes death because it gives us an image of an individual (or evokes an individual) voided of subjectivity. As Barthes tells us, “the Photograph [...] represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter.”<sup>87</sup> For Barthes, it is because what is captured by the photograph is in the process of conversion from potential subject to pure, inanimate object, devoid of subjectivity, that the photograph conveys the idea of death to us. We see the person in the picture and, because the photograph mechanically reproduces an image, a scattering of light that once really existed, we are called upon to recognize that person in a way that we are not in, say, a

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mortality [...]. Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people.” In this chapter, I do not discuss at length the photographic theories of Sontag or Walter Benjamin, which might both be relevant here. Instead, I will address them in the next chapter, when our discussion turns to how photographs may be seen as surreal and not realist artworks. Sontag, *On Photography*, 70.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 96-7.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 14.

painting, which represents the painter's idea of the person.<sup>88</sup> The person in the photograph, however, as an object devoid of subjectivity, like Homer's dead spirits before they drink the blood, cannot recognize us in return.

*Camera Lucida* can be read as the story of Barthes' attempt to bring the ghost of his mother contained in one particular image (the so-called "winter garden photograph") back to life. Similarly, Sebald's *Austerlitz* centers on Jacques Austerlitz' attempt to commune with the spirit of his mother through the photographic images she has left behind, as I will discuss below.<sup>89</sup> The connection to classical tropes of raising the dead is one that Barthes makes explicitly in *Camera Lucida*. He does not address epic specifically, but he does compare photography to the ancient Greek drama that became Athenian tragedy, and which started, according to Barthes, with religious practices associated with communing with ancestral spirits.<sup>90</sup>

Nevertheless, this relationship to the dead, which Barthes describes as analogous to the spectator's relationship to the de-subjectivized subject captured by the photograph, is the same one embodied by Odysseus' communion with the dead in the *nekyia*. Barthes makes this clear in his preliminary discussion of the terminology he invents to refer to the image captured by the photograph:

And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any *eidolon* emitted by the object, which I should like to call the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its

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<sup>88</sup> The essence or *noeme* of a photograph, according to Barthes, is "that-has-been." In other words, "Photography (that is its *noeme*) *authenticates* the existence of a certain being." Ibid., 77, 107.

<sup>89</sup> Avi Kempinski discusses this parallel of Barthes' and Austerlitz' quests for images of their mothers in "Quel Roman!": Sebald, Barthes, and the Pursuit of the Mother-Image."

<sup>90</sup> "[I]f Photography seems to me closer to the Theater, it is by way of [...] Death. We know the original relation of the theater to the cult of the dead: the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead [...]. Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead." Barthes, 31-2.



root, a relation to “spectacle” and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.<sup>91</sup>

*Eidolon* is, of course, the term Homer uses to describe the “images” of the dead Odysseus meets in the *nekya*, and *spectrum* is the Latin translation of this term. By using this term, then, Barthes really is hinting that each photograph contains “that terrible thing: the return of the dead.” Furthermore, Barthes tells us that the photographer is akin to that other mythical hero who journeyed to the land of the dead, Orpheus. As Orpheus is not allowed to look back at the image of his wife, whom he is leading out of the underworld, so the photographer cannot “see” or notice the *punctum* that will affect the spectator of his photograph.<sup>92</sup>

Perhaps, though, this allows us to imagine, in the photograph, a different sort of relationship to the dead past, one more akin to that of Odysseus who tarries among the dead, sees them, and brings them back to life for us with the blood he pours out on the ground. It is not the photographer who performs this role, or at least not in his function as photographer, but the one who presents us with the photograph as part of a representation of the past.

This question, how do the compilers and presenters of photographs represent history for us, is one of Siegfried Kracauer’s central concerns in his 1927 essay, *Photography*. Sebald does not specifically mention Kracauer in his interview on photography, as he does Barthes. Nevertheless, Kracauer’s investigations of photography and film are part of the heritage that both Sebald and Barthes draw upon.

Kracauer approaches photography from a slightly different angle from Barthes. *Camera Lucida* is largely the story of the author’s own fascination with photography, out

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 47.

of which grows a general theory of photography. Kracauer's "Photography" sets out specifically to investigate the photograph as a cultural artifact. Its concern is not just with the artistic photograph or the snapshot in a private album, but the pervasiveness of the photographic image in all its various forms, from private albums to fashion magazines and newspapers. Nevertheless, for Kracauer as for Barthes, the photographic image is always an encounter with death. The figures and objects it captures always have something ghostly about them.

This may at first seem paradoxical. Kracauer draws a distinction between two types of images, the "memory image" and the photograph, which is, according to him, largely supplanting it. It is the former, however, and not the latter, of which he tells us that death is always "part and parcel."<sup>93</sup> The memory image is something akin to the life-story of the individual, thought of in spatial and graphical terms. Only the memory image can have "meaning" [Bedeutung] and a "truth content" [Wahrheitsgehalt].<sup>94</sup> If it is a kind of mental picture, it is more akin to a painting than a photograph, which does not seek to capture the outer appearance of people and things with absolute verisimilitude, but the essence inherent to them. Kracauer tells the story of a painter who tells his client to go to a photographer if he wants his image to include all of his wrinkles: "Me, I paint history."<sup>95</sup> Indeed, it is into an individual's "history" [Geschichte], he tells us, that the memory image crystallizes in the end. The photograph does not show us this history, but instead, obscures it: "In a photograph, a person's history is buried as if under a layer of snow."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Kracauer, "Photography," 59.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 51.

For Kracauer, as Walter Benjamin tells us of the tales of the storyteller, the memory image draws its power from death—it is only when the individual’s life-story has an end that the meaning of his life can be riddled out.<sup>97</sup> Although the memory image draws its power from death, though, in giving us the story of an individual’s life with its attendant meaning, in a way it preserves that life. As Kracauer tells us, “memory images enlarge themselves into monograms of remembered *life*” [zu dem Monogramm des erinnerten Lebens].<sup>98</sup> Death may always be part of the memory image, but in the end, it is life that it serves.

With the photograph, it is the exact opposite. The photographic image always has something ghostly about it. As Kracauer tells us of the reaction of several children to the image of their grandmother as a child:

Grandmother was once a person, and to this person belonged the chignon and the corset as well as the high-Renaissance chair with its turned spindles, ballast that did not weigh her down but was just carried along as a matter of course. Now the image wanders ghost-like through the present, like the lady of the haunted castle. Spooky apparitions occur in places where a terrible deed has been committed. The photograph becomes a ghost because the costumed mannequin was once alive.<sup>99</sup>

The grandmother’s image is ghostly because it seems to capture the life of the individual as it really was, but instead ends up containing everything but that life. The photograph does not contain the plenitude of life which we find in the memory image and, ultimately, in the history that memory image becomes, but merely “the residuum that history has discharged.”<sup>100</sup> The photograph of the grandmother, with its authentic details, the chignon, the corset, the chair, the spindles, does not in fact preserve the life of the

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<sup>97</sup> “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.” Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 94.

<sup>98</sup> Kracauer, “Photography,” 55, emphasis mine.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

grandmother in her life-story, the meaning of her existence, but instead everything that was purely contingent about that life, “the sum of what can be subtracted from [...] her.”<sup>101</sup> The grandmother could easily be wearing different clothes, posed in a different way, in a room with different objects, and her story, or the essence of that story, would be the same. Like a ghost, the photograph is the life-like image of the individual without the life. The life and its meaning have been removed in the photograph. Everything else remains. Thus, as the memory image is a preservation of life, the photograph captures only death: “Seemingly ripped from the clutch of death, in reality it has succumbed to it.”<sup>102</sup>

It is not just individuals, however, who become ghostly in the photographic image, but whole periods of history and social configurations. Barthes’ discussion of photographs primarily focuses on the individual life-stories they capture. If the photograph carries the implication of death, it is, for Barthes, always the death of the individuals captured by or implicated in the image: the French school-boy, Ernest, a man on trial for murder, Barthes’ mother. For Kracauer, on the other hand, photographs are as much about history in a larger sense as about the individual life-story. The photograph shows us the contingency of the individual’s setting, clothing, property, even their physical appearance, but it also shows us the contingency of these things as expressions of their culture. The grandmother’s dress is not just the accessory of a woman who was once young, but the fashionable accessory of an earlier age. Photographs do not just show us the ghosts of individuals; they show us the ghosts of whole periods of history, of societies and all the individuals who were a part of them.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 59.

For Kracauer, in fact, there is a deeper connection between the art of photography and the writing of history. He compares photography to the historicism of historians like Leopold von Ranke, whose famous dictum, “as it actually was,” is the byword of historical realism. According to Kracauer, as the photograph presents us with a spatial continuum, so “historicism seeks to provide the temporal continuum.”<sup>103</sup> There is, for Kracauer, already something naïve about this notion of historicism: it is not only a quixotic endeavor, but it denudes history of exactly the sort of narrative coherence that gives it meaning. Thus, while Barthes emphasizes the recoverability of memory at least for the individual spectator, provided his own memory-images are tied to the image in the photograph, Kracauer emphasizes the potential of the narratives and meanings attached to the images to disappear into that darkness where they are no longer recoverable. In the end, historicism and photography sacrifice the same thing for their apparent faithfulness to reality, namely narrative coherence and the sense of meaning it provides. This does not mean, however, that photographs are entirely without value. Quite the contrary, Kracauer ascribes to them a very important function, albeit one that separates photography from the other arts. As he spells out more clearly, several years later, in *Theory of Film*, the photographer’s role is “to record and reveal nature.” The photographer “summons up his being [...] to dissolve it into the substances of the objects that close in on him.”<sup>104</sup> Thus, although the images photographs offer us may be ghostly, these ghosts cannot really be brought back to life in any meaningful sense. The most these ghosts can tell us, at least by themselves, is the “unexamined foundation of nature” at the base of the “social order” of which they were a part, the way in which this order

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>104</sup> Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 15-16.

“regulates itself according to economic laws of nature.”<sup>105</sup> They are documents of what Walter Benjamin might call “natural history” and not history proper. Photographs refer to history (this is another key difference between Kracauer’s and Barthes’ theories of photography), but they denude it of the life that only stories can preserve.

Sebald takes his cue from both Barthes and Kracauer. Like Barthes, he emphasizes that photographs can, at times, be tools in recovering the stories of the past. Like Kracauer, though, he often calls the recoverability of the past into question. He does this, however, by emphasizing a different aspect of the photographic medium from Barthes and Kracauer. Both Kracauer and Barthes are largely focused on the ontology of the photographic image: what it is, what it can capture, and what it can show by its very nature. They write very little about the rhetoric and reception of the image, the way that ontology can be mobilized to make and to illustrate points in an argument or a narrative (although the two, of course, are interrelated). The integration and discussion of photographs in Sebald’s texts call attention to precisely this aspect of the photographic medium. Sebald, as we have said, often points to the constructed-ness of the images he includes in his texts. In a few instances, however, he goes even further. In *The Emigrants*, for example, the narrator tracks down a newspaper photograph of a 1936 book-burning in Würzburg, Germany. The image, as the narrator tells us, is an obvious fake. Because photographs of the book-burning, which occurred at night, did not turn out, the photographer simply took a photograph of another gathering and added a dark cloud and a pall of smoke. Pictures can be not only misleading and give us an

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<sup>105</sup> Kracauer, “Photography,” 61-2.

exaggerated sense of connection to the past. They can even lie.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, in *Austerlitz*, Jacques Austerlitz discovers three images that he believes capture his mother. The first two, however, which he and other characters at first take for images of his mother, turn out not to be. The drama of Austerlitz' desire to believe in the photographs as true representations of the mother only to have his hopes dashed demonstrates the unreliability and the potential to mislead inherent to photographs when they become historical documents.

As Sebald hints in his interview with Christian Scholz and in several programmatic passages of his literary texts, the inclusion of photographs in his books may be seen as an attempt to enter the gray zone between the living present and the dead past, to bring this past back to life and allow it to speak. This, however, does not mean that Sebald embraces a naïve romanticist understanding that photography always allows us to understand the past "as it really was." Photographs, like historical narratives, are selected and framed by their presenters, often to produce specific rhetorical effects. Sebald highlights the framing narrative of his historical descriptions, the historical observer's act of raising the dead past and letting it speak, to draw the reader's attention to the way in which these descriptions are constructed interpretations of the past and thus potentially incomplete or misleading. Similarly, in the images he chooses, the way in which he includes them, and the text that frames them, Sebald calls attention to this process of construction and selection and the way in which it, too, may produce

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<sup>106</sup> "Strangely, there is something disquieting about this moment, with its seemingly straightforward portrayal of the faked document. Perhaps we wonder whether there have been other, unannounced forgeries sprinkled throughout the text that we have not detected. A moment's reflection and a quick flip through the pages reassures us that the other images are not like this fraud. However, the feeling of uncertainty, of mistrust, does not entirely dissipate." Florence Feiereisen and Daniel Pope, "True Fictions and Fictional Truths: The Enigmatic in Sebald's Use of Images in *The Emigrants*," 177.

incomplete or misleading impressions of past events. Photographs, like historical narratives, tell stories about the past. These stories also have framing narratives. In Sebald's books, these are the stories of the engagement with the historical past which the author or the characters of the book enact through and present in the photographs.

### Photography and *Nekyia* in *Austerlitz*

That Sebald sees this process of selecting, including, and presenting photographs as a process akin to bringing the dead past back to life is not something that we can infer merely from his interviews and texts, but from the photographs in his books and the way he integrates them into the text as well. Indicative of this are the three images mentioned above which supposedly depict Austerlitz' mother in the text, which are each presented as a kind of nekyiastic communion with the dead past—in fact, they can be read as an allusion specifically to Odysseus' encounter with his mother's spirit in the *nekya*. These photographic images are evocative but ultimately ambiguous documents of the past.





in ihrer Winzigkeit nicht gut erkennen –, aber dann habe sie natürlich gemerkt, daß es andere Leute sind, etwa der Impresario oder ein Zauberkünstler und seine Assistentin. Sie habe sich gefragt, sagte Věra, was für ein Schauspiel gegeben worden war seinerzeit vor dieser furchterregenden Kulisse und habe gedacht, wegen des Hochgebirges im Hintergrund und der wüsten Waldlandschaft, entweder der Wilhelm Tell oder die Sonnambula oder das letzte Stück von Ibsen. Der Schweizer Knabe mit dem Apfel auf seinem Haupt ist mir erschienen; ich erlebte den Schreckensmoment, in dem der Steg nachgibt unter dem Fuß der Schlafwandlerin und ahnte, daß sich hoch droben in den Felswänden schon die Lawine löste, die die armen Verirrten (wie waren sie nur in diese öde Gegend gekommen?) gleich mit sich fortreißen würde in die Tiefe. Es vergingen Minuten, sagte Austerlitz, in denen auch ich die zu Tal fahrende

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Figure 4. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (German), p. 265.

The first of these images falls out of a copy of Balzac's *Colonel Chabert* that his childhood nursemaid had inherited from his parents along with a picture of Austerlitz as a child. It shows a stage with an alpine backdrop. In the lower left hand corner are two

small figures, whom, at first, Vera takes for Austerlitz' parents (*Ae* 182/ *Ag* 265, fig. 4). This, however, is an illusion. The figures, Vera confirms, are not in fact his parents but someone else. The provenance of the image and how it ended up in the book remain a mystery. Nevertheless, there is something otherworldly about it. Austerlitz imagines an avalanche about to break out in the mountain scene above the two figures. Even then, at the time this photograph was taken, some unstoppable force was gathering momentum, about to sweep away these two stand-ins for Austerlitz' parents. It is, in other words, not hard to imagine what we are supposed to read into the image, a moment of peace before the historical avalanche of Nazism comes crashing down on Austerlitz' Jewish parents and all of their kin.

More to the point, perhaps, is what Vera tells Austerlitz about the image:

Minutes went by [...] before I heard Vera again, speaking of the mysterious quality peculiar to such images when they surface from oblivion [das solchen aus der Vergessenheit aufgetauchten Photographien zu eigen sei]. One has the impression, she said, of something stirring in them, as if one caught small sighs of despair, *gémissement de désespoir* was her expression, said Austerlitz, as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives. (*Ae* 182-3/ *Ag* 266)

The phrase “surface from oblivion” echoes Austerlitz' earlier statement about the similarity between the photographic images that appear on the developing photographic paper and the ghost-like memories that emerge in our dreams. Vera, however, goes a bit further than Austerlitz was willing to go. She ascribes a kind of subjectivity to the photograph. The past does indeed maintain a certain kind of life in these photographs, which have a “memory of their own,” although, like Homer's underworld spirits, they do not seem to be able to speak on their own, only to sigh out their despair.

Why does Sebald include this particular image? In the interview with Christian Scholz, which took place before the publication of *Austerlitz*, Sebald mentions this specific picture as one that he has been trying to work into one of his books.<sup>107</sup> There is something otherworldly about the scene, in the bleak, empty landscape of the backdrop. The twilight seems to be descending upon it. A band of deeper darkness transverses its very top—this may just as well be Homer’s land where the sun never shines. The figures in the foreground are not only “tiny” [in ihrer Winzigkeit], as Sebald says, a word which always carries the implication of the reduction of corporeality which is the process of dying and becoming a spirit in *Austerlitz* (*Ae* 181/ *Ag* 265),<sup>108</sup> they are also quite pale in contrast to the background behind them. They are posed enigmatically. The woman seems to be looking at the camera, but the man has his profile turned to it. They do not seem to be interacting with one another, and there is no visible expression on either of their faces. There is, in other words, something ghostly about them. They, like the backdrop behind them, seem to be pale imitations of life, rather than life itself. This, indeed, is perhaps something we are encouraged to notice by the way in which the image, once again, calls attention to its construction. The figures, although they are wearing winter coats with their hands jammed in their pockets, are not in a real winter landscape, but on a stage. The backdrop appears, at first, to be three-dimensional, but on closer inspection reveals itself to be a flat painting. This is another picture which arrests the

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<sup>107</sup> After describing the image, Sebald says: “This is one of the images I frequently think about and which haunts me all the time. I would like to do something with this photograph.” ““But the Written Word Is Not a True Document,”” 109.

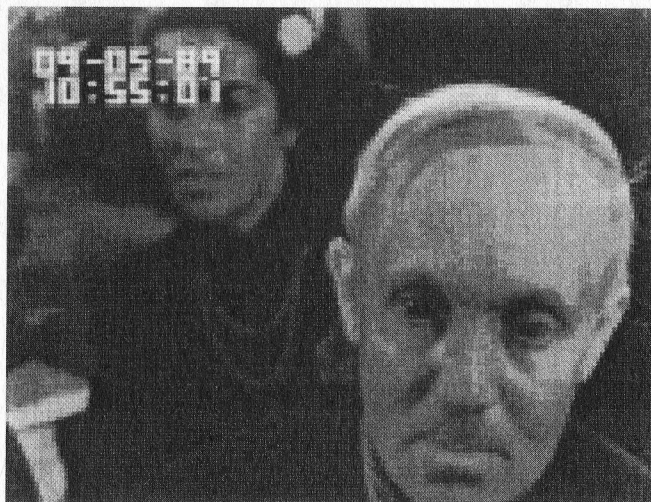
<sup>108</sup> This is another point where Sebald’s connection of the photographic image to the spirits of the dead runs parallel to that of Siegfried Kracauer. As I argue in my essay, ““Eine Art Eingang zur Unterwelt,”” *Austerlitz* often draws attention to the way its ghostly apparitions are reduced in size, “tiny” [winzig], “diminished” [verkürzt]. In “Photography,” Kracauer tells us, “The body of a deceased person appears smaller than the living figure. Likewise, an *old* photograph presents itself as the reduction of a contemporaneous one. The old photograph has been emptied of the life whose physical presence overlay its merely spatial configuration.” Kracauer, “Photography,” 54-5.

viewer's attention—like the image of the charred corpses in the streets of Hamburg in “Air War and Literature,” it takes a moment to decipher what, in fact, is going on here.<sup>109</sup> There is not just one story to read here; the image makes the reader stop and consider the framing narrative of the construction of this scene, as well.

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<sup>109</sup> “Because of their resemblance to Austerlitz’ parents, they come to act as their substitutes in various catastrophic scenarios imagined by the viewers. The stage becomes a realm for the projection of various accidents, catastrophes, and misfortunes, all of which are derived from the dramatic repertoire. The photograph’s theatricality and the anonymity of the sitters are thus crucial in enabling the viewers, especially Austerlitz, to find an expression for the traumatic and inherently unrepresentable fates of his parents Agáta and Maximilian. Significantly, however, this confrontation is possible only with the dramatic repertoire which, while enabling an imaginary, emotional engagement with the experience of trauma, also helps to displace this experience into a fictitious and anonymous photographic context.” Duttlinger, 163.

alten Herrn, dessen kurz geschorenes graues Haupt die rechte Hälfte des Bildes ausfüllt, während in der linken Hälfte, etwas zurückgesetzt und mehr gegen den oberen Rand, das Gesicht einer jüngeren Frau



erscheint, fast ununterschieden von dem schwarzen Schatten, der es umgibt, weshalb ich es auch zunächst gar nicht bemerkte. Sie trägt, sagte Austerlitz, eine in drei feinen Bogenlinien von ihrem dunklen, hochgeschlossenen Kleid kaum sich abhebende Kette um den Hals und eine weiße Blumenblüte seitlich in ihrem Haar. Gerade so wie ich nach meinen schwachen Erinnerungen und den wenigen

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Figure 5. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (German), p. 358.

The second mother-image Austerlitz finds is equally enigmatic (*Ae* 251/ *Ag* 358, fig. 5). It is not, properly speaking, a photograph, but its close cousin, the still frame from a film. Austerlitz discovers a damaged copy of a propaganda film made by the

Nazis at Theresienstadt, where his mother was interned. The image shows Theresienstadt as it was when it was made up for the Red Cross inspectors, with the infirm shipped off and the scenes of misery converted into a kind of movie set meant to reproduce the outward appearance of a quaint and comfortable little town. There is something about the medium of this document of historical bamboozlement, however, that upsets Austerlitz: it is too fast: “At first I could get none of these images into my head; they merely flickered before my eyes as the source of continual irritation or vexation.” What really irritates him, however, is that “I could not see Agáta [his mother] anywhere” (*Ae* 246/ *Ag* 352). In response to this he creates a copy of the tape which is slowed down to the point where it becomes a sort of photographic slide-show rather than a film, with each frame pausing four times as long as in the original.<sup>110</sup> This transforms the scenes in the tape immediately into a sort of otherworldly no-man’s-land.<sup>111</sup> The figures seem to float through the town and “dissolved at the edges” (*Ae* 247/ *Ag* 353). The voice on the tape, which, at full speed, recounted the lies of the Nazi regime, becomes a series of growls and groans. The “merry polka” music is transformed into a “funeral march,” and other pieces on the tape “moved in a kind of subterranean world, through the most nightmarish depths, said Austerlitz, to which no human voice has ever descended” (*Ae* 247-50/ *Ag* 356). The echo, here, of the “subterranean world” of the dead, to which no human “has descended,” and into which Odysseus does not descend, but calls the dead to him, is unmistakable.

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<sup>110</sup> “In a sense, he attempts to transform the medium of film into something resembling photography, slowing the moving frames into isolated still shots.” Kempinski, 465.

<sup>111</sup> “Indeed, the slow-motion copy invests the depicted people with a ghostly, supernatural character.” Duttlinger, 168.

More importantly, though, it is only in this version, when the tape has been converted into a slideshow of ghostly photographic images and sounds that emanate from the underworld, that Austerlitz' mother, or what he takes for his mother, appears. A small copy of the image is included in the book (in contrast to a much larger image of a damaged frame of the tape, with two male faces emerging from a cloud of black and white snow, which takes up two consecutive pages, *Ae* 248-9/ *Ag* 354-5).<sup>112</sup> In the foreground is the fairly distinct face of an elderly man, while in the background, behind the white numbers of the time indicator is a female form, in tones between dark gray and black, with a white flower in her hair: "at the left-hand side, set a little way back and close to the upper edge of the frame, the face of a young woman appears [das Gesicht einer jüngeren Frau erscheint], barely emerging from the black shadows [von dem schwarzen Schatten] around it, which is why I did not notice it at all at first" (*Ae* 251/ *Ag* 358).<sup>113</sup>

There is, once again, an echo here of Austerlitz' description of the "shadows of reality" that "emerge out of nothing" on the photographic paper in the developing bath and their similarity to the memories that appear to us in the middle of the night. And the picture included with the text encourages this reading. Compared to the gray-haired figure in the foreground, the figure of the woman Austerlitz takes for his mother does seem ghostly. The contours of her face and hair are hard to make out—she blends into

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<sup>112</sup> This larger image is also quite spectral, as Carolin Duttlinger points out: "The still reproduced in the text provides a striking example for this effect, as the blot which takes up more than half of the double-page illustration appears like a third, ghostly profile which is emerging next to the heads of two men and which fits in with the kinds of photographs of supernatural phenomena referred to by the protagonist." Duttlinger, 168.

<sup>113</sup> The book actually enacts this process of the figure "appearing." The photograph, situated in the middle of the page in the German edition, interrupts this sentence between the words "das Gesicht einer jüngeren Frau" and "erscheint." The photograph appears on the page just as the text tells us the mother-image is appearing.

the dark background, as if, as Austerlitz says, she has just emerged from the shadows or is receding back into them. Only the white flower in her hair is distinctly visible, but the contrast between this white flower and the indistinctness of the rest of the figure only adds to the sense of a sort of spectral presence.

This image, even more than the photograph of the two figures on the stage, embodies Sebald's conceptualization of the photograph (and its gray zones) as a sort of nekylastic communion with the dead spirits of the past. This image, however, once again, turns out not to be of Austerlitz' mother. Vera throws cold water on Austerlitz' hopes—she “spent some time studying the face of the woman in the concert audience which I had copied from the Theresienstadt film, before shaking her head and putting it aside” (*Ae* 253/ *Ag* 360). If the photograph is a sort of communion with the dead past, what we see and what we hear in this no-man's-land is not always what it seems. Images, such as these, can be misleading, and even more than in the previous image, the text plays out this drama of desired revelation and dashed hopes:

She looks, so I tell myself as I watch, just as I imagined the singer Agáta from my faint memories and the few other clues to her appearance that I now have, and I gaze and gaze again at that face, which seems to me both strange and familiar, said Austerlitz, I run the tape back repeatedly, looking at the time indicator in the top left-hand corner of the screen, where the figures covering part of her forehead show the minutes and seconds, from 10:53 to 10:57, while the hundredths of a second flash by so fast that you cannot read and capture [festhalten] them. (*Ae* 251/ *Ag* 358-9)

Once again, the idea that he cannot “capture” this moment in time recalls the photographs Austerlitz develops in his lab, which, like memories, he cannot “cling to” (“festhalten” in the German in both cases). He would like to hold onto this moment and to embrace the mother figure, but she slips away too fast. As in the discussion of Austerlitz' photographic experiments, there is a strong reminiscence here of Odysseus'



attempt to embrace his mother's spirit in the underworld, which simply flits out of his hands like a shadow or a dream. This mother-image, however, does not only escape his grasp in the literal sense that, on the film, it is over far too quickly; it does so as well in a more metaphorical sense. Austerlitz' quest throughout the book is two-fold: to revitalize his repressed memories of his parents, and to exhume their buried past, the history of what happened to them and their fellow Holocaust victims. The still frames in which this ghostly figure appears, however, fails on both accounts. The image remains "both strange and familiar." It refuses to mesh with Austerlitz' memory of his mother, or even with the memory he constructs out of what he has learned after the fact about her. It fails, as well, though, to be a historical document of his mother's life-story. Vera is unwilling to certify it as an authentic image of Agáta. The image, in which Austerlitz had made an enormous emotional investment, looking at it over and over, comparing it to his own memories and those of others, turns out to be merely a mirage. As for Odysseus in the underworld, there are limits to how far Austerlitz can go in communing with the dead past. This might serve as a warning: the past stubbornly refuses to allow us to reconstruct its truth and its meaning absolutely, whether we use historical narratives, photographs, or both.

The presentation of these first two mother-images seems to move us more in the direction of Kracauer's doubts about the photographic image's ability to raise the dead past. The final image, however, a photograph Austerlitz finds in a Prague theatrical archive, evokes more the limited success Barthes has in finding his mother's presence in the winter garden image. While the last image failed to be integrated into both Austerlitz' memory of his mother and her history, this one does not entirely resist either.

The picture does not seem “both strange and familiar” to Austerlitz, but “seemed to resemble my dim memory of my mother.” In contrast to the still of the Theresienstadt film, Vera confirms this image as the genuine article “without a shadow of a doubt [zweifelsfrei]” (*Ae* 253/ *Ag* 360-61, fig. 6).

zweifelsfrei, wie sie sagte, Agáta erkannte, so wie sie damals gewesen war. – Über all dem hatten Auster-



litz und ich den Weg von dem Gräberfeld hinter dem St. Clement's Spital bis zur Liverpool Street zurückgelegt. Als wir uns vor dem Bahnhof verabschiedeten, überreichte mir Austerlitz in einem Couvert, das er bei sich getragen hatte, die Photographie aus dem Prager Theaterarchiv, zum Andenken, wie er sagte, denn er stehe nun, so sagte er, im Begriff, nach Paris zu gehen, um nach dem Verbleib des Vaters zu forschen und um sich zurückzusetzen in die Zeit, in der er selbst dort gelebt hatte, einesteils befreit von seinem falschen englischen Leben, andererseits

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Figure 6. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (German), p. 361.

The picture, however, is almost nothing but shadow. Despite its verification in both Austerlitz' and Vera's memories, the image remains enigmatic. The face of a woman appears only in the right half of the photograph. The rest is darkness. The

woman's dark features, dark hair, and dark eyes blend into the shadows around her. Her entire right cheek is covered in shadow, as is her right temple. The edges of her face are indistinct and it is impossible to make out the expression on her face. The left corner of her mouth seems to be drawn down, but this may be simply an effect of the deep shadows over her upper lip. Nor can we tell, once again, like those memories in the middle of the night which Austerlitz cited as similar to developing photographs, whether this face is emerging out of the shadows or receding back into them.

This image, then, seems to play out more than any of the others the dialectic of shadow and light, revelation and effacement, that Sebald cited in his interview as part of the “gray zone” of all photographs. It strongly suggests that we should see Austerlitz' mother and the trace she has left behind as akin to the shadowy spirits of the underworld whom Sebald makes reference to throughout *Austerlitz* haunting the places of historical memory. And as Odysseus attempts to embrace the “image” of his mother, who flits through his fingers like a shadow, three times, this is the third and final image in which Austerlitz will attempt to “capture” the memory of his mother.

The shadowiness of the image, moreover, is directly tied to its enigmatic quality, how little there is to glean of the past in it. Austerlitz tells the narrator very little about the photograph—he found it in “the records for the years 1938 and 1939 in the Prague theatrical archives” and Vera confirmed that it was Agáta—and there is very little to tell (*Ae* 252/ *Ag* 360). We cannot “read” anything in the figure's expression. Is this a happier moment, before that avalanche of history in the first image comes roaring down upon her, or is there a foreboding of things to come already inscribed on the face? Either

interpretation seems possible. Ultimately, the photograph tells Austerlitz, and us along with him, very little.

On the other hand, the image is the most artistic of the three and indeed one of the best-composed images in Sebald's oeuvre. Ultimately, this is the one thing that cannot be taken away from the photographic image, no matter how ambiguous or misleading the story is it seems to convey: it can be hauntingly beautiful, and perhaps this is enough. It would be hard to accuse Sebald of a romantic faith in the redemptive power of beauty, but it may be possible to read at least some valorization of the aesthetic in the fact that Austerlitz' search for his mother comes to rest precisely here, with a hauntingly beautiful and artistic photographic image. Austerlitz, at least, seems to be satisfied by this image. He leaves the photograph in the narrator's custody ("as a memento," *Ae* 253/ *Ag* 361) and heads off to search for traces of his father. It seems he has found what he was looking for: a true and beautiful image of his mother that would jibe with his memories and the larger story of her life, regardless of how little the image actually tells us about the details of that life.

The three images, then, taken together embody a nekyiastic engagement with the past. They are each evocative images that, as Sebald says in the interview with Christian Scholz, "haunt" the viewer. Combined with the text that accompanies them, the story of Austerlitz' attempt to recover his past and the historical description of the operation of Theresienstadt which I discussed above, they provide us with a vivid picture of this past. At the same time, however, in their content, their presentation, and the text that accompanies them, they remind us of their limited ability to make the past present for us "as it really was." They call attention to the role of the character Austerlitz, the narrator

who is telling and presenting his story, and ultimately the author, Sebald, in constructing the historical narrative they present us with, and they point to the potential of these mediaries to mislead us with the concerns they project onto the past.

## Conclusion

In “Air War and Literature,” Sebald rejects literary representations of the aerial bombardment of the German cities that describe the event in terms of a journey to the land of the dead. Sebald, however, hints throughout the essay that he also sees his own attempt to represent the traumatic past of the air war through the lens of the classical motif of *nekylia*, or raising the dead. It is, it turns out, exactly the wrong element of the classical journey to the land of the dead that the authors he frowns upon emphasize. They turn the story of the air war into a quasi-mystical tale of sacrifice and rebirth. Sebald rejects this to focus on the story of the historical observer raising the dead past and bringing it back to life in the present through his representation. It is not, however, just the literary accounts of the air war that turn it into a story of sacrifice and rebirth with mystical undertones, but the photographic record of the bombardment, those photographic images that, in propaganda and postcards, filtered into the public consciousness in the post-war period.<sup>114</sup>

Why, though, does Sebald include the photograph he does with his own “synoptic and artificial” description of the bombing of Hamburg (fig. 3)? It is, as we have said, an image that takes a moment to decipher. The twisted, charred bodies lying in the streets of

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<sup>114</sup> The photographs that appeared in pamphlets and postcards “make it look as if the image of total destruction was not the horrifying end of a collective aberration, but something more like the first stage of a brave new world” (*Le 6/ Lg 14*).

Hamburg are so disfigured that they no longer resemble human forms. What is, in contrast, clear from the first glance is a metal coal pail in the foreground. If this photograph has a *punctum*, as Barthes would say, an element that allows it to pierce us and to enter into our emotional life, it is, paradoxically, this inanimate pail. There is a moving irony in this juxtaposition, the metal pail with the charred bodies. The coal pail is an artifact of man's taming of fire, at its most rudimentary level, harnessed to preserve and improve life. It is surrounded, on the other hand, by the striking and horrifying reminder of what this power, the power to create fire, can accomplish when bent towards the destruction rather than the preservation of life. It is, in the end, only this pail that has survived relatively intact. The story the photograph tells is that of the so-called "dialectic of enlightenment," that every advance civilization accomplishes through the use of instrumental reason is complemented by an advance in the ability to dominate and destroy life. Progress and barbarism go hand in hand. In the end, the only things that survive the destruction are the implements we use to harness the power of nature. Although their original purpose is to preserve and extend life, it is only they that survive in the end.

Without this story that the coal pail tells, the bodies remain just anonymous corpses, gruesome to be sure but without the ability to touch us on a deeper level, like the cold statistics of the esoteric historical accounts of the bombings that Sebald frowns upon.<sup>115</sup> The pail, however, turns their story into a tragedy, one that moves us in a very different way. At the same time, though, the way Sebald includes this image in the book is designed to make the act of telling this story as visible as possible. The photograph

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<sup>115</sup> "Those compilations as a rule published by more or less obscure firms [...] often seemed curiously untouched by the subject of their research, and served primarily to sanitize or eliminate a kind of knowledge incompatible with any sense of normality" (*Le* 11/ *Lg* 19-20).

does not, as we might expect, appear on the page glossy and perfect. It does not efface the photographer's choice of position, lens, and focus or the compiler's selection and positioning on the page. The image would have been available to Sebald, one assumes, as a photographic negative, but instead he chooses to reproduce it from a book with a visible crease down the middle. Nor, as we have said, is there a brief, explanatory caption to assuage the questions we might have about this image: where, when, and what it depicts. The photograph stops the reader for a moment and makes him consider why the author has chosen this specific image and positioned it where he has on the page.

This, however, is exactly what Sebald means by telling us that he favors representations that "bring remembered events back to life." In representing the traumatic events of the past, he wants stories that include images, images that "pierce" us through their details and the moving stories these details tell. This, to be sure, is a somewhat circular definition: stories include images; images tell stories. Sebald's works, however, never draw an artificial distinction between image and story, description and narration.

The *Odyssey* presents Odysseus' encounter with the dead spirits in the *nekylia* as a metaphor for the poetic representation of the past. The poet raises the dead past in images that touch us, but which we can never touch back. The past, however, does not appear spontaneously before us "as it really was." It is always mediated by what the poet does to bring these images before him, images that remain shadowy and dream-like, and thus are possibly false or at least misleading. Likewise, Sebald draws on Homeric *nekylia* to present us with historical narratives that include evocative and moving images, as well as evocative and moving photographic images, that call attention to the mediation of the



storyteller, photographer, compiler, and editor, and the potential distortions created by all this mediation. Sebald's works, in other words, call on *nekylia* both in describing how images work to represent the past and in the application of these images in his own historical representations.

Thinking about images and their relationship to texts, however, already plays a large part in classical Greek and Latin poetry. The poetic consideration of images and their role in the representation of the past is, in fact, encapsulated in another prominent classical epic motif, *ekphrasis*, the description of a work of visual art (for example a sculpture or a painting), a motif that appears often in the epics of Homer and Virgil. Sebald draws upon this classical motif as well to address the literary representation of the historical past, and specifically to highlight how, when faced with the “modernist events” of recent history, a realistic mode of representation in both the visual and the literary arts fails to live up to its promise to present the past “as it really was.” This is what I will explore in the next chapter of this dissertation.

## Chapter 2

### The Work of Art at the Entrance to the Underworld:

#### *Ekphrasis* in Virgil's *Aeneid* and the Works of Peter Weiss and W. G. Sebald

In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald's narrator describes a trip he makes to the panorama of the battle at Waterloo, made up of wax figures in the foreground and a painting covering the circular walls behind them. After describing what he sees ("lifesize horses, and cut down infantrymen, hussars and cheveaux-légers, eyes rolling in pain or already extinguished"), he sums up: "This, then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history [die Kunst der Repräsentation der Geschichte]. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was" (*Re* 124-5/ *Rg* 157-8). Sebald's works are punctuated with similar descriptions of works of art, from Rembrandt's "Anatomy Lesson" earlier in *The Rings of Saturn*, to the Isenheim Altar painted by Grünewald in *After Nature*, to frescoes by Pisanello in Verona in *Vertigo*, to the works of the semi-fictional artist, Aurach, in *The Emigrants*. These descriptions, however, are not merely art historical interludes. The example above demonstrates that we may see the implications of these episodes as broader than a mere reflection on the characteristics and the historical vicissitudes of the visual arts. The word Sebald uses in describing the Waterloo panorama, "representation," is pointedly unspecific, and the "perspective" from

which we see the battle is not only a perspective in space, “from above,” but a perspective in time as well, looking back, synoptically, on the totality of the event (“we [...] see everything at once”). The description of the Waterloo panorama, in other words, offers Sebald the opportunity to discuss not only the art of the visual representation of the past, in wax and paint, but its literary representation as well.

The description of a work of visual art is an established literary genre, called *ekphrasis*. Perhaps the most famous modern example is Keat’s poem, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” but, as the classical subject of Keat’s poem implies, *ekphrasis*’ true source is in antiquity, where it was an important part of classical poetics and rhetoric. *Ekphrasis* appears, in antiquity, as a motif in many poetic genres and forms, but its roots are in classical epic. The earliest example is the extensive description of the shield of Achilles in Book XVI of the *Iliad*, but *ekphrasis* abound in Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as well as many other classical epic poems. *Ekphrasis* offers these epic poets the opportunity to explore the opposition between two art forms: their own poetic art and the static, visual arts, including painting, sculpture, embroidery, metalwork, etc.

The comparison between these two modes of artistic expression was a common trope of classical poetics, expressed in two famous dicta: The sixth-century BCE Greek poet Simonides’ formula, “painting is silent poetry and poetry is painting with the gift of speech,” and Horace’s far more economical one, “as for painting, so for poetry,” *ut pictura poesis*.<sup>1</sup> *Ekphrasis*, however, also offers classical poets the opportunity to

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<sup>1</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 361. It is not an exaggeration to say that this contention, that, at least in certain respects, painting and poetry can be equated, is at the center of the aesthetic and literary history of the modern period, as well. Johann Winckelmann, the eighteenth-century philologist who is considered the father of German classicism, extolled it as a poetic and artistic principle. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in his famous essay, *Laokoon*, disagreed: the visual and the literary arts are different and they represent different things well. Lessing begins his essay with a quote from Winckelmann’s *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755). Winckelmann uses the famous classical

explore the opposition between two modes of writing—narrative, with its progressive time, and description, which effectively halts the flow of narrative. *Ekphrasis*, as we will see, represents a sort of fault line between these two poetic temporalities. Classical *ekphrasis* also has a metatextual element. Epic poets use it to comment both on the poetic art more generally and on their own poetry specifically. In other words, it often articulates a poetic program for the specific work which is the epic itself: what can the epic do and what effect is it meant to have?

*Ekphrasis*, however, was not always *ekphrasis* as we know it. The definition of *ekphrasis* adhered to in ancient rhetorical writings is simply writing in a descriptive mode, writing which enhances the vividness of poetic or rhetorical writing.<sup>2</sup> What modern literary critics generally mean in discussing *ekphrasis*, though, is much more specific than this: the description of a work of mimetic visual art. This is the definition I will adhere to as well, in discussing *ekphrasis* in this chapter. *Ekphrasis*, in other words, as literary critics have generally used the term for the past fifty years, is not just writing in a descriptive mode, which could just as easily be applied to a description of a place or a person as a thing;<sup>3</sup> nor descriptions of works of art in a broad sense—decorative works,

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statue group depicting Laocoon and his sons being devoured by serpents to argue that restraint in depicting suffering is a guiding principle of Greek art and poetry. Lessing disagrees—it is because of the inherent limits of sculpture to represent suffering, or at least to represent it in the same way as poetry, that the figure of Laocoön in the statue group seems remarkably restrained. Since then, this debate and the questions it raised about the purview of the two arts and their relation to another, has become one of the touchstones of literary and aesthetic theory, enshrined in numerous essays either explicitly or implicitly styled as new *Laokoons*.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Webb tells us that the definition of *ekphrasis* “taught to students in the Greek schools of the Roman Empire” was “A speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes.” Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, 1. Simon Goldhill, however, in his review of Webb’s book in the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (Oct. 2009), has argued that this definition may be of limited value in understanding the conception of *ekphrasis* applied by ancient poets. As Goldhill says, the rhetorical manuals of the third century C.E. “may turn out to be as poor a guide to reading the *Aeneid* as a freshman composition handbook is for reading Henry James.”

<sup>3</sup> Both Webb and Janice Hewlett Koelb cite Leo Spitzer’s 1955 essay, “The ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn,’ or content vs. metagrammar,” as the source, or at least the tipping point for this definition of *ekphrasis* as “the

such as purple-dyed scarves or gilded swords are usually excluded from the discussion.<sup>4</sup> The work of art in the description has to represent something.<sup>5</sup> This makes the tension between the frozen time of description and the flowing time of narration inherent to *ekphrasis* even more pronounced: classical *ekphraseis* often tell the story of someone looking at or creating a static work of art which itself tells a story.<sup>6</sup> It is a sort of nested phenomenon that shows that in each narration there is some description and in each description there is an inherent narration.<sup>7</sup> You cannot have one without the other. The *ekphrasis*, though, is also a story within a story. And if we remember that, in fact, the work of visual art ostensibly being described does not need to exist at all separate from the poem, and that the story it depicts is written up in poetic verse, we find that it is also a

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poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art.” Webb, 33-6. Koelb, *The Poetics of Description*, 1-2. Spitzer, 207.

<sup>4</sup> John Hollander has usefully given us the concept of “notional ekphrasis,” the representation of an imaginary work of art. All of my classical examples in this chapter will fall into this category—in classical poetry, these *ekphraseis* tend to be the ones that foreground the relationship between poetry and the plastic arts, both their similarities and their differences. The modern examples, however, will not fall into this category, since they are often descriptions of works of art that really do exist. I will argue, however, that these modern examples work according to similar principles as the classical “notional” *ekphraseis*. As Hollander says, “it is the tradition of notional ekphrasis which provides the paradigms and the precursor texts, the rhetorical models and the interpretive strategies, for the fully developed modern ekphrastic poem.” Nor does he restrict this influence of classical “notional” ekphrasis to modern verse: “as we shall see, there are many ekphrases in verse that are far less poetic than some in prose.” Hollander, “The Poetics of *Ekphrasis*,” 209.

<sup>5</sup> The definition James A. W. Heffernan offers is, perhaps, to the point: “*ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation.*” Heffernan focuses on the way in which *ekphrasis* puts the poetic and the visual arts in tension with one another (“Because it verbally represents visual art, ekphrasis stages a contest between rival modes of representation [...]”), but for our purposes what is more important is how classical *ekphrasis* has a tendency to become a reflection on just one of those arts: poetry. Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Murray Krieger has highlighted this intersection between the static time of the plastic arts and the flowing time of poetry in his discussion of *ekphrasis*: “The object of imitation, as spatial work, becomes the metaphor for the temporal work which seeks to capture it in that temporality. The spatial work freezes the temporal work even as the latter seeks to free it from space. *Ekphrasis* concerns me here, then, to the extent that I see it introduced in order to use a plastic object as a symbol of the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature’s turning world to ‘still’ it.” Krieger, “The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry: or *Laokoön* revisited,” 90.

<sup>7</sup> Lessing tells us that “bodies with their visual properties are the peculiar subjects of painting,” whereas “actions are the peculiar subjects of poetry,” but he goes on to admit: “All bodies, however, exist not only in space, but in time as well,” and: “Actions, on the other hand, cannot exist independently, but must always be joined to [bodies].” Thus the distinction between what poetry and painting are each capable of is less clear than it might first appear. Lessing, 91-2.

narrative poem within a narrative poem. Furthermore, it is a narrative poem (within a narrative poem) self-consciously styled as a work of art. It is this which allows the poet to turn the *ekphrasis* into an implicit statement on poetics and his own role as poet.<sup>8</sup> He is like the creator of the imagined work of art, and his production is like the poem that emerges from the narration of the story depicted on the work of art.

The description of the Waterloo panorama in *The Rings of Saturn*, as well as the descriptions of works of art in Sebald's works more generally, function in a similar way. They set a program for the literary as well as the artistic representation of history for an author who works in both text and image. I will begin, then, by examining two *ekphraseis* from Virgil's *Aeneid*, both of which may be read as implicit statements about Virgil's own poetic program in the *Aeneid*. Next, I will examine some examples of *ekphrasis* in the works of the twentieth-century German-Jewish author, Peter Weiss. Weiss is in many ways Sebald's literary mentor, one of his greatest influences, especially in the area of the representation of history. He is also, arguably, the author who revived *ekphrasis* as an important literary tool for German literature after World War II. I will argue that Weiss, like Virgil, uses *ekphrasis* as a way to interrogate his own poetic program. His *ekphraseis* examine the relationship between aesthetics and poetics, on one hand, and politics, on the other. They show how works of art, and by implication works of literature as well, represent the political circumstances out of which they arise; and they ask the question, can a work of art or a work of literature, in fact, be an act of

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<sup>8</sup> Page duBois, in *History, Rhetorical Description, and the Epic*, makes a stronger argument in this direction than I intend to make here. She claims that *ekphraseis*, observed by the hero of the epic poem, are about putting the story of the hero in a larger historical context, or rather explicating history in relation to the events narrated in the epic poem: "The *ekphrasis* is a narrative *poetic* discourse that purports often to be a model, or icon, literally, of past *and future* structures in the interest of explaining what they were, what they will be, by representing them *in relation to an englobing narrative discourse*, the progress of the hero." duBois, 4.

resistance to these political circumstances. Finally, I will turn to the works of W. G. Sebald. The *ekphraseis* in Sebald's works, I will argue, like those in Virgil and in Weiss, set a program for the poetic representation of history, but in a different way. They focus on works of art that demonstrate how realism fails in the face of the complicated events of the modern period, the so-called "modernist events," which, as Hayden White has argued, demand new modes of representation. They also enact the mode of representation Sebald recommends to replace realism. The observer of the work of art in the *ekphrasis* does not merely stand apart, observing the scene depicted from a cold, clinical distance. He finds himself implicated in the scene, and feels, in fact, that the historical moment depicted is coming back to life around him. Each of these episodes, then, is not just an *ekphrasis*, drawing on the classical model offered by Virgil and others, but a *nekyia* as well, the mode of historical representation which, as I argued in my last chapter, Sebald favors both in literary and in photographic representations of the past. These episodes use the work of art being described to "bring the dead past back to life." Sebald's works thus highlight a surprising proximity between these two classical motifs, *ekphrasis* and *nekyia*.

#### Ekphrasis in Virgil's *Aeneid*

The *ekphraseis* in Sebald's works and those of the earlier generation of post-Holocaust authors he draws upon do not necessarily allude to specific classical examples of *ekphrasis*. The tradition of classical *ekphrasis*, however, and especially the ways in which classical *ekphraseis* interrogate the representational strategies of the poems of

which they are a part, do serve as a model for these authors. Especially paradigmatic, I will argue, are two examples from Virgil's *Aeneid*: the murals on the temple of Juno in Carthage in Book I, and the reliefs crafted by the mythical artisan and inventor, Daedalus, for the temple of Apollo at Cumae in Book 6. There is no ancient author for whom *ekphrasis* is a more central part of his work than it is for Virgil.<sup>9</sup> The *Aeneid* has six *ekphraseis* of the sort I have described above, descriptions of works of mimetic visual art. In addition to the murals in Book I and the reliefs in Book VI there are four other *ekphraseis*: a cloak given by Aeneas as a prize for victory in a boat race in Book V; the shield of Aeneas' Italian enemy, Turnus, in Book VII; Aeneas' own shield, crafted by the gods, in Book VIII, depicting the course of Roman history to come after his own adventures; and a sword belt snatched from the body of Aeneas' Italian ally, Pallas, by Turnus on the battlefield in Book X, which plays a large part in the *Aeneid*'s bloody conclusion.<sup>10</sup> The presence of so much elaborate description might, at first, seem puzzling. Virgil himself has given us a definition of all that classical epic is meant to encompass in the first words of the *Aeneid*, *arma virumque cano*, "I sing of arms and the man." Epic, in other words, is about war (*arma*) and the adventures of the hero (*virum*). It is a genre of action—there is little time for the appreciation of pretty pictures. Indeed, Virgil often emphasizes this tension between the stilled time of the *ekphrasis* and the relentless forward momentum of the epic plot.<sup>11</sup> In both examples I will examine, here,

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<sup>9</sup> Michael C. J. Putnam's *Virgil's Epic Designs* makes a strong case for the centrality of *ekphrasis* to an understanding of the *Aeneid*, especially. "It will be my presumption that all of Virgil's notional ekphrases are in consequential ways metaphors for the larger text which they embellish and that, individually and as a group, they have much to teach the reader about the poem as a whole." Putnam, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Aeneas, upon seeing the belt on Turnus, whom he has just defeated in a duel, decides to slay him on the spot. This is how the *Aeneid* ends.

<sup>11</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell tells us, apropos of Lessing's hostile reaction to the *ekphrasis* of Aeneas' shield in *Aeneid* VIII, that "ekphrastic ornament is a kind of foreign body within epic that threatens to reverse the natural literary priorities of time over space, narrative over description, and turn the sublimities of epic over



Aeneas is chastised—in the first case by the narratorial voice, in the second by the priestess of Apollo—for lingering too long over the art works he encounters.

The *ekphraseis*, however, are not just descriptions of pretty pictures. According to Don Fowler, because *ekphraseis* stand apart from the larger narrative, effectively putting the story on hold, they possess the reader with a “strong need to interpret.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, to reintegrate them into the larger semantic structure of the poem, we need to see them as thematically, as opposed to narratologically, linked to the action of the narrative into which they have been set. They act as “interpretive signposts,” giving the reader clues as to how he is meant to read the rest of the poem.<sup>13</sup>

The *ekphraseis* in the *Aeneid* certainly encourage this approach. They strongly evoke the action of the poem’s larger narrative in the words they use, the stories they tell, and the themes they bring up.<sup>14</sup> More than this, however, there is a poetological element to the *ekphraseis* as well. They tell us how we are meant to read other parts of the poem, but they also tell us how we are meant to see the poem as a whole: specifically what intervention it is meant to make into literary as well as political history; and what it is

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to the flattering blandishments of epideictic rhetoric.” Mitchell sees *ekphrasis* as a highly ambivalent mediation between visual and verbal modes of representation. He isolates three affective “moments,”—“ekphrastic indifference,” “ekphrastic hope,” and “ekphrastic fear”—within *ekphrasis* that arise from the way in which the attempt to bridge this gap upsets traditional poetic and aesthetic assumptions about what art and literature can each represent. “Ekphrastic indifference” corresponds to the idea that, because of this gap between visual and verbal representation, *ekphrasis* remains a curiosity, unable to accomplish much of anything; “ekphrastic hope” to the idea that the gap really can be bridged and words can do what pictures can as well; and “ekphrastic fear” to the idea that this hope, if achieved, would scramble our understanding of what literature and the visual arts each have to offer. Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” 178.

<sup>12</sup> According to Fowler, there are three critical approaches to the problem of the relationship of *ekphraseis* to the narratives into which they are incorporated. One can see them as providing a “reality effect,” enhancing the vividness of the scene; one can try to integrate the description into the narration—Fowler’s example is Lessing’s defense of the shield of Achilles as not a description, per se, but the narration of the actions taken in the shield’s creation; finally, one can interpret them as thematically related to the action of the poem. Fowler, “Narrate and Describe,” 27.

<sup>13</sup> Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 69.

<sup>14</sup> This is the approach that has been taken by a number of critics in analyzing the description of the murals in Book I of the *Aeneid*. Both Steven Lowenstam, in “The Pictures on Juno’s Temple in the *Aeneid*,” and Diskin Clay, in “The Archeology of the Temple to Juno in Carthage,” for example, connect the scenes depicted in the murals to the action of the *Aeneid*’s second, “Iliadic” half.

capable of presenting to us, and what rests outside of its purview. The *ekphraseis* are, as Michael C. J. Putnam says, “synecdoches for that larger manifestation of artistic accomplishment which is the poem itself.”<sup>15</sup> Each of the *ekphraseis* in the *Aeneid*, but especially the two examples I will examine here, the murals in Book I and the reliefs in Book VI, addresses artistic and poetic creation in general as well as the specific poetic creation which is the *Aeneid* itself. They foreground acts of reading and writing which can be read as models for epic in general, but which, at times, apply quite pointedly to the *Aeneid* in particular. This does not make the *ekphraseis* in the *Aeneid* unique; it makes them archetypal of something that is present, although perhaps less clearly, in examples throughout ancient literature: classical *ekphraseis* very often contain implicit poetic, as well as aesthetic, programs.

I will now turn to my two examples from the *Aeneid*, first the murals on the temple of Juno in Carthage in Book I, then Daedalus’ reliefs in the temple at Cumae in Book 6. Both are about the representation of the past—the past of the viewer, Aeneas, in the case of the murals, and of the artist, Daedalus, in the reliefs. The questions they ask, however, are slightly different: the murals interrogate the ability of art and literature to affect history themselves, while the reliefs question their ability to represent the historical past. These two *ekphraseis* and their different approaches to the question of the relationship between history and representation, will serve as models for understanding the *ekphraseis* of Sebald and his immediate predecessors.

### The Murals at Carthage

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<sup>15</sup> Putnam, 3.

In Book I, Aeneas and his band of refugees from the Trojan War wash up on the shore of Carthage, which is then, according to the poem, just in the process of being built. Aeneas and his right hand man, Achates, decide to explore the newly founded city, and discover whether they will have a hostile or a friendly reception. There, they encounter a series of murals painted on the temple of Juno that depict the events of the Trojan War, events they have, only a couple of years earlier, experienced first hand. Although we are told that the murals depict the episodes of the war *ex ordine*, that is “in sequence” (1.456), the scenes are described out of chronological order. We begin with a broader perspective: first the Greeks are seen fleeing, then the Trojans being chased by Achilles. Next is a scene of Rhesus being slaughtered by Diomedes in his sleep, before his horses can taste the grass or water of Troy (a prophecy had declared that the Greeks could not win the war if this occurred). After this, we see Troilus, one of the sons of Priam, king of Troy, being dragged by his chariot after Achilles has killed him. The fourth scene shows the Trojan women supplicating the goddess, Minerva, who refuses to come to their aid. The fifth depicts Achilles dragging the body of Hector, the great hero of the Trojans, around the city and then selling it for gold. The final scene is of the latecomers who fought on the Trojan side, Memnon with his Ethiopians and Penthesilea with her amazons, and fighting among them Aeneas himself.

There are a number of ways in which we can approach this *ekphrasis*. On a strictly functional level, we can take the murals as Virgil’s attempt to establish the back story for his epic: this is what you need to know in order to understand the events of the *Aeneid*. It is essentially a “recap” of the Trojan War. As is common in classical *ekphraseis*, however, the description does not exist entirely separated from the larger

narrative. The poem clearly foregrounds Aeneas' reaction to what he sees depicted here. The descriptions of the paintings are interrupted, several times, by Aeneas' tears and sighs, and, part way through, he breaks off to tell Achates that *feret haec aliquam tibi fama salutem*, "this fame insures some sort of safety for you" (463). In other words, according to Aeneas, because the story of their trials and tribulations has reached the people of Carthage, they are guaranteed a decent reception there.

We might, thus, read this episode specifically in the light of how it reflects on the character of the hero, Aeneas. He *animam pictura pascit inani*, "feasts his mind on an empty picture" (464), a picture, in other words, that has little practical use for Aeneas on his great journey, and at the end of the episode we are told that he *stupet obtutuque haeret defixus in uno*, "is dumbfounded and transfixed by this one sight" (495). We are reminded that this is not just the pre-history of Virgil's epic. It is Aeneas' own past—he sees himself among the pictures, too—and he is still too obsessed with it.

On the other hand, we might see the murals, in a more positive light, as a step on Aeneas' progress toward becoming the hero needed to conquer the land that will become Rome. This is, after all, where *primum Aeneas sperare salutem/ ausus et adflictis melius confidere rebus*, "Aeneas first dared to hope for safety and to trust more in his troubled affairs" (451-2). It is here, in other words, that he first learns to have faith in his destiny. From this perspective, the murals represent not so much a reminder of his dysfunctional relationship to the past, but a sign from the gods that he should trust that they have prepared the way. The mural episode, according to this interpretation, reflects positively on his character: he is making progress toward accepting his fate, albeit slowly.

One of the things, however, that makes the *Aeneid* such an excellent model for understanding the appropriation of the classics in Sebald and other post-Holocaust authors is that nothing is as ideologically uncritical as it might first appear. Ideas such as progress are always highly fraught. If we look closely at the mural *ekphrasis*, we can see that it complicates both of these interpretations, by undermining a key assumption: that we can read the murals in the same way that the character, Aeneas, seems to. One of the questions the description encourages us to ask is whether Aeneas' reaction is the right one, whether he interprets the murals correctly.<sup>16</sup> This is Carthage, after all, which will be Rome's great enemy, and this is the temple of Juno, the one goddess who is dead set against the success of Aeneas' mission to reach Italy and found what will later become Rome. Are the murals really a guarantee of "safety"? Are they really sympathetic to the Trojans and their suffering? One might, rather, make the argument that they represent the aspiration of a new nation to be as great as the conquering Greeks; that they are, rather, identified with the winners of the Trojan War and not its losers.

This turns out to be a difficult problem to solve. Aeneas is obviously the "focalizer" of the mural *ekphrasis*—it is through his eyes that we see the murals and it is from his knowledge of what happened in the war that the gaps in the story are filled in.<sup>17</sup>

At times, the poetry also betrays a decidedly anti-Greek bias, as when we are told that the

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<sup>16</sup> Eleanor Leach, in *The Rhetoric of Space*, for example, sees Aeneas' interpretation of the murals as a definitive misreading: "Placed as they are to ornament Juno's temple, these pictures surely commemorate the victory of the goddess's favored Greeks over their enemy [...]. Aeneas, however, approaches the pictures with an interpretive bias already formed by sentiments of his own [...]." Leach, 317. Putnam is more diplomatic on this point: "Aeneas' critique of what he sees, his self-presentation as experiential witness through the narrator, need not preclude more disturbing readings of what Dido has crafted and of what Aeneas is made to contemplate." Putnam, 24.

<sup>17</sup> "Virgil does not give us a catalogue or a series of photographs of these mural paintings, but an impression of their effect on Aeneas; much of the unity of the themes [...] is a unity imposed by the observer (Aeneas) upon the series of the pictures. We are left with the feeling that Aeneas is recollecting it afterwards; that the pictures are coming to us through the mind of the beholder, coloured and interpreted by his own emotions." R. D. Williams, "The Pictures on Dido's Temple," 150.

Greek hero, Achilles, is *saevum ambobus* “cruel to both sides” (458), Greeks and Trojans. However, the more we pare the description down to what we can actually say is meant to be in the murals themselves, the more we find that there is surprisingly little that would incline us either way. The murals depict Trojan suffering as well as Greek victory. Thus, what the murals tell us about the appropriateness of Aeneas’ reaction and, thereby, the qualities of his character is essentially ambiguous.<sup>18</sup>

The murals, however, are not just a recap of the Trojan War and Aeneas’ own back story. All of these stories, after all, have been told before. They are all part of the Greek epic cycle, the sequence of poems that told about the war and its consequences, including Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Indeed, it is at times hard to escape the impression that these poems and their relation to his own work are really what Virgil is talking about here—as for Sebald and other post-Holocaust authors, it is as much literature and the literary representation of the past, as art and the visual representation of the past that Virgil is concerned with. Like the epic cycle, which was the work of several poets, the murals are the work of several artisans: *artificumque manus inter se operumque laborem/miratur*, “he wondered at the combined handiwork of the creators and the work that had gone into their creation” (455-6). In addition, the poem tells us that the stories of the Trojan War, the stories the murals depict, are *vulgata per orbem*, “spread [literally, made common] throughout the world” (457). This sounds suspiciously like a description of the

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<sup>18</sup> As Alessandro Barchiesi points out, it may be the wrong impulse to assume that we are meant to see the murals as having a single, unified political perspective—either pro-Greek or pro-Trojan: “There is an inherent danger in creating too sharp a division between literary texts—problematic, nuanced—and figurative messages—unambiguous and controllable. No art historian would be able to accept this dichotomy. The figurative messages are complex acts, rich with different charges: the plans of ancient sanctuaries are difficult to nail down to monolithic meanings (in our case “we are celebrating the victory of the Greeks” and “we will do the same”). It is not so easy to detach the suffering of the Trojans (which so strikes Aeneas) from the overall effect of the programme.” Barchiesi, “Representations of Suffering and Interpretation in the *Aeneid*,” 338.

work of the epic cycle, which, in Virgil's time, had made the stories of the war common property throughout the ancient world.<sup>19</sup> Michael Putnam has argued that Virgil is, in fact, setting a new poetic program by rewriting the story of the epic cycle with Aeneas at its center.<sup>20</sup> The description of Aeneas' presence in the murals is quite pointed: *se quoque principibus permixtum agnouit Achiuis*, "he recognized himself among the foremost of the Greeks" (488). The poem stresses, in other words, that Aeneas stands among the Greek heroes of the epic cycle. He is their equal and their rightful successor. This is, after all, what the *Aeneid* really amounts to: a re-appropriation and continuation of the epic cycle with Aeneas' story and the story of Rome at its center.<sup>21</sup>

Regardless of how the poem situates itself with regards to the epic cycle, though, the description of the murals is clearly as much about poetry as it is about pictures.<sup>22</sup> It blurs the line between the two. The murals are both imaginary pictures and rhetorical stand-ins for the poems of the epic cycle. They thus serve as a model for how to use the

<sup>19</sup> Barchiesi, "Representations of Suffering and Interpretation," 334.

<sup>20</sup> Putnam argues that the mural sets Aeneas up as the successor to Achilles, the hero of the *Iliad*: "It is crucial that at this moment in the paintings' 'narrative,' [...] Aeneas is presented for the only time in the ekphrasis, which is to say that at the moment Achilles disappears, Aeneas briskly but strikingly takes center stage." "The subtext of the murals is the metamorphosis of Aeneas, from victim in shared defeat and lamenter upon viewing its stabilization in art [...] into the once and future hero which the paintings postulate [...]" Putnam, 37, 43. Barchiesi connects this more explicitly to the epic cycle which told of the Greek heroes' adventures: "The work composed by so many artists has created a history and a chronology which are rendered familiar—and trite—by fame; a necessary condition for the new history, but also a fame which must be substituted by a new fame for Aeneas." Barchiesi, "Representations of Suffering and Interpretation," 334.

<sup>21</sup> Another argument that we are meant to see the murals as representing the Greek epic cycle is that the murals and the other large *ekphrasis*, the shield crafted for him by Vulcan in Book VIII, both seen by Aeneas, are meant to form a pair. Whereas the murals situate Virgil's epic with regards to the Greek epic cycle, the shield, which tells the story of Roman history after Aeneas' adventures, situates it with regards to the tradition of Latin annalistic epic poetry, typified by Virgil's predecessors, Ennius and Naevius. As Barchiesi tells us of the shield, "it is also relevant that the diction is often Ennian, and that the subject-matter has exactly the same temporal span as Ennius' *Annals* [...] and that the structure of the description is chronological, or in other words annalistic [...]." Barchiesi, "Virgilian Narrative: Ekphrasis," 274.

<sup>22</sup> One of the things that might clue us in to the fact that the mural *ekphrasis* is as much about poetry as pictures is the inclusion of a metaphorical act of writing. As the poem says of the depiction of Troilus, dragged by his chariot after being killed by Achilles, *versa pulvis inscribitur hasta*, "the dust is inscribed by the reversed spear" (478). The literal meaning of the verb, *inscribo*, is "to write [on something]." "No longer a weapon or goad, the spear becomes a writing implement, a sign that all war and all pictures of war are being turned into language by this poem." Heffernan, 27.

description of pictures to talk about literary representation and literary history. The aesthetic and the poetic philosophy the murals represent, however, seem to be self-contradictory. The poem calls the murals *innanis*, “empty, futile.” We might extend this implicit critique to the poems they stand in for and for poetry in general—just as the pretty pictures of the past serve no purpose, so the poetry they represent might be considered of little use itself. But in what sense are the murals “empty”? The *ekphrasis*, in fact, has given us several arguments in favor of the murals’ effectiveness. There is the point, first of all, that they inspire Aeneas with the bravery to continue his mission—they are thus effective on the level of the narrative of the poem. But, as Aeneas tells us, they also represent *lacrimae rerum*, “the tears of things.” They express the universality of suffering, thus connecting us each to our common man. Can we consider this an entirely futile gesture? Is poetry and by extension the *Aeneid* itself, “empty”, even if it evokes such wrenching pathos? The mural *ekphrasis* seems to be ambivalent about the social and political efficacy of art and poetry, an ambivalence that we can trace through the rest of the poem as well.

There is certainly a whiff of resentment for the arts in the *Aeneid*. When, in the underworld, Anchises, Aeneas’ father, describes to Aeneas what the “Roman arts” are to be, quite pointedly poetry and painting are not among them:

excudent alii spirantia mollius aera  
(credo equidem), uiuos ducent de marmore uultus,  
orabunt causas melius, caelique meatus  
describent radio et surgentia sidera dicent:  
tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento  
(hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem,  
parcere subiectis et debellare superbos. (6.847-53)

I believe that others will more tenderly cast breathing figures in bronze,  
draw living faces from marble, argue more eloquently, draw the paths of



the heavens with a rod and foretell the rising stars: you, Roman, remember to rule peoples with strength—these will be your arts—to impose the habit of peace, to spare the conquered, to war down the proud.

For Romans, the proper arts are politics and war. Anchises' list of Roman "arts" says nothing about poetry, and it specifically discourages the visual arts and sciences.

On the other hand, the *Aeneid* as a whole often, as one might expect, shows a great tenderness toward the visual as well as the poetic arts, and even seems to mount a tacit defense of the effectiveness of these seemingly empty, frivolous pursuits. Aeneas, the epic's hero, even becomes a kind of poet, himself, in Books II and III, narrating the fall of Troy and his own adventures, and thus moving his Carthaginian audience to greater sympathy and hospitality. It seems unlikely that we are meant to take this tale, which takes up two whole books, as useless as well.

In the *Aeneid*, the idea of emptiness or uselessness is never as simple as it seems. In fact, the *Aeneid* might be called a history of "empty," "useless" things and acts—a history of futility. *Vanus* and *innanis*, both meaning "empty" and "futile," are two adjectives that recur with almost obsessive regularity throughout the poem. *Nequiquam*, an adverb that means "in vain," also appears throughout the *Aeneid*.<sup>23</sup> Time and again, the poem shows us those who are being shoved aside in the name of fate and progress stretching out their hands or performing some other gesture "in vain."<sup>24</sup> At the same

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<sup>23</sup> "Empty—*inani*—is the key-word here. Consider again how many times Virgil creates his most touching scenes by dwelling on how something substantial becomes empty and insubstantial: the phantom of Creusa, old fallen Troy, the apparition of Venus in book 1, the shade of Dido in the Underworld, the lost pledge to Evander, the outraged life of Turnus. *Inanis* is the very word that describes the tears Aeneas sheds upon leaving Carthage and Dido: 'His mind was unmoved; the tears he wept were empty.' That is, of no avail." Adam Parry, "Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*," 80.

<sup>24</sup> One example of this appears in another of the *Aeneid*'s *ekphraseis*, the cloak Aeneas gives to Cloanthus as a prize for winning a boat race. The cloak depicts scenes from the story of Ganymede, son of Tros, a king of Troy before the Trojan War, who was snatched by the eagle of Jupiter, to be his cupbearer on Olympus. The *ekphrasis*, however, does not focus on this conclusion, but on the helplessness of those who tried to prevent Ganymede from being abducted: *longaevi palmas nequiquam ad sidera tendunt/ custodes*,

time, though, the poem both demonstrates that what seems to be futile is not always as ineffective as it seems, and enacts this re-activation of the seemingly futile as a sort of return of the historical repressed. The poem shows how the conquered and forgotten, those who seem to have fought in vain, represent a more subtle but important force in history. Dido, the queen of Carthage, may die at her own hands because of Aeneas' cruel behavior, but the curse she utters with her dying breath haunts him and his offspring: her own descendants become the eternal enemies of Rome (4.607-29). It also, however, provides these victims of history a voice in the words of the poem, the great Roman national epic, itself, through which they may affect that history again. Through Virgil's poetry, we, the readers, sympathize with the losers of history. As Aeneas says of the murals, *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*, "there are tears here for our affairs and mortal cares touch the mind" (462). Although whether this changes anything, admittedly, depends largely on the reader.

The description of the murals on the temple of Juno at Carthage, thus, asks a question that demands a dialectical answer: how can the pictures and the poetry they stand in for be both "empty" and historically effective? How can they be both ideologically on the side of the historical "winners" (in this case, the Greeks) and, as Aeneas reads them, a site of resistance against that dominant ideology? This is a question with obvious resonance for post-Holocaust authors like Sebald and Peter Weiss. One of the questions of literary theory "after Auschwitz," after all, is why the supposed nobility of German culture and literature did nothing to prevent the barbarism of the Holocaust—a dynamic captured succinctly in Walter Benjamin's famous formulation: "There is no

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*saeuitque canum latratus in auras*, "the aged guardians stretched their hands to the stars in vain, and the baying of the dogs raged against the sky" (5.256-7).

document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”<sup>25</sup> If this pointed first *ekphrasis* in the poem is meant to establish a poetic program for the *Aeneid*, perhaps it calls on the poem itself to be the answer to these questions: a work of art that is both ideological and resistant to that ideology, that is both futile and, at the same time, establishes futility as a surprisingly effective program of resistance.<sup>26</sup>

### Daedalus’ Reliefs at Cumae

If the murals in the temple of Juno in Carthage are about what art and poetry can and cannot do, the reliefs sculpted by the mythical artisan and inventor Daedalus, which Aeneas encounters in Book VI on the gates of the temple of Apollo at Cumae, are about what they can and cannot represent. Aeneas and his crew have just arrived on mainland Italy, but there is still one thing that he must do before he can complete his transition from defeated Trojan to proto-Roman conqueror of his own swath of Italy. He must journey to the land of the dead, led by the priestess of this temple, the Sibyl, to learn his fate and the fates of his descendants, the great men of Rome.

The reliefs are thus situated at the very entrance to the underworld. They depict scenes from the artist’s own life story, as Michael Putnam tells us, “the only occasion in

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<sup>25</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392.

<sup>26</sup> The history of *Aeneid* criticism over the last half-century is essentially the history of a debate about the ideological content of the epic. The *Aeneid* was written under the patronage of the newly established emperor, Augustus, as a sort of Roman national poem. Starting with the so-called “Harvard school” of Virgil scholars, however, including W. R. Johnson and Adam Perry, in the 1960s, critics began to question whether the *Aeneid*, which seems to explicitly support the dominant ideology of Augustus’ principate—the idea that Augustus’ reign will establish a new golden age and is thus a sort of teleological endpoint of Roman history—might, in fact, be read as undermining that ideology in significant ways.

ancient literature where an artist is described as constructing his literal [...] biography.”<sup>27</sup>

This is the entire description:

Daedalus, ut fama est, fugiens Minoia regna  
praepetibus pennis ausus se credere caelo  
insuetum per iter gelidas enavit ad Arctos,  
Chalcidicaque leuis tandem super astitit arce.  
redditus his primum terris tibi, Phoebе, sacrauit  
remigium alarum posuitque immania templa.  
in foribus letum Androgeo; tum pendere poenas  
Cecropidae iussi (miserum!) septena quotannis  
corpora natorum; stat ductis sortibus urna.  
contra elata mari respondet Cnosia tellus:  
hic crudelis amor tauri suppostaque furto  
Pasiphae mixtumque genus prolesque biformis  
Minotaurus inest, Veneris monimenta nefandae,  
hic labor ille domus et inextricabilis error;  
magnum reginae sed enim miseratus amorem  
Daedalus ipse dolos tecti ambagesque resoluit,  
caeca regens filo uestigia. tu quoque magnam  
partem opere in tanto, sineret dolor, Icare, haberes.  
bis conatus erat casus effingere in auro,  
bis patriae cecidere manus. quin protinus omnia  
perlegerent oculis, ni iam praemissus Achates  
adforet atque una Phoebi Triuiaequae sacerdos,  
Deiphobe Glauci, fatur quae talia regi:  
“non hoc ista sibi tempus spectacula poscit [...]” (6.14-37)

Daedalus, as the story goes, fleeing the kingdom of Minos, dared, by means of speeding wings, to entrust himself to the air, and swam away, by an unheard of path, towards the icy north, finally landing on the Chalcidian cliffs. As soon as he had returned to these lands, he dedicated the oars of his wings and built a temple for you, Phoebus Apollo. In the entry way was the death of Androgeos; then the Athenians ordered (how sad!) to pay the penalty of the bodies of seven sons and seven daughters a year; the urn stands there, from which the lots were chosen. The land of Crete rising from the sea appears on the opposite side; here the cruel love of the bull, and Pasiphae laid underneath him by trickery, and the mixed species, double-natured Minotaur is there, reminder of unspeakable love, here that work of the house and the inextricable wandering; but, Daedalus, since he pitied the great love of the princess, himself solved the tricks and windings of the place, guiding blind footsteps with a thread. You, too, would have had a great part in so great a work, Icarus, had pain allowed. Twice he tried to fashion the fall in gold, twice the hands of the father fell.

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<sup>27</sup> Putnam, 75.

Indeed, they would have read through everything with their eyes without stopping, had not Achates, who had been sent forth, appeared together with the priestess of Phoebus and Diana, Deiphobe, daughter of Glaucus, who spoke thus to the king: “This is not the time for such spectacles [...].”

Here, Aeneas’ reaction to the work of art is not emphasized. When the Sibyl arrives, she chastises him for being too absorbed by the reliefs—now is not the time for art appreciation; there is work to do—but the sighs and groans of the mural episode are absent. We do not even know if Aeneas understands what he sees. Unlike in the *ekphrasis* of the murals, the description is surprisingly coy about who and what we are seeing. It is Daedalus himself who has abetted the union of the Cretan Queen, Pasiphae, with the bull, by constructing a metal cow for her to climb inside. He also built the labyrinth, elliptically referred to here as “the work of the house,” which housed the Minotaur, to whom the sons of the Athenians were sacrificed. The *regina*, “princess,” whose deep love he pitied, is Ariadne. Daedalus provided her with the thread that allows Theseus to slay the minotaur and escape the labyrinth. None of this, however, is mentioned explicitly in the description.

The reliefs’ subject seems to have little to do with the story in which they appear. Unlike the murals in Book I, which fill Aeneas with the confidence to be bold with the Queen of Carthage, they do not affect the narrative directly. They are just there, effectively putting the story of Aeneas’ epic adventures on hold for twenty odd lines. As such, the demand to interpret them, which Don Fowler tells us is an essential part of every *ekphrasis*, is even stronger.<sup>28</sup> And the murals have, correspondingly, become a sort of critical Rorschach test. Critics have attempted to draw all sorts of connections between the scenes depicted in the reliefs and the rest of the poem, to turn them into

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<sup>28</sup> Fowler, 27.

“interpretive signposts” for the main narrative. Most of these interpretations, however, look fairly far afield, beyond the immediate context of the *ekphrasis*, for their significance.<sup>29</sup>

There is clearly at least a thematic parallel between the episodes in Daedalus’ life narrated in the *ekphrasis* and the events of this pivotal book of the *Aeneid*.<sup>30</sup> The labyrinth, referred to as *labor ille domus et inextricabilis error*, “that work [struggle] of the house and inextricable wandering,” is strongly reminiscent of the maze-like underworld, into which Aeneas must descend, and of which the Sibyl tells him *sed reuocare gradum superasque euadere ad auras, / hoc opus, hic labor est*, “but to recall your steps and escape to the air above, this is the task, this the struggle,” using the same word, *labor*, used to describe the labyrinth (129). Just as in the labyrinth, getting out, she tells him, is harder than getting in—that is the real work.<sup>31</sup>

When we look closer, we begin to see other parallels as well between the *ekphrasis* and Aeneas’ journey to the land of the dead. This parallel points to a potential proximity between two motifs, *ekphrasis* and *nekyia*, that Sebald’s works will build upon. *Ekphrasis* has the potential to thematize the act of artistic as well as poetic representation

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<sup>29</sup> Putnam, for example, connects the “cruel,” “unspeakable” love of Pasiphaë for the bull to Dido’s “cruel” love of an “unspeakable man,” Aeneas, in Book 4. Putnam, 86. Viktor Pöschl tells us: “The heartbreaking love of Daedalus for Icarus reflects Aeneas’ longing to meet Anchises.” Pöschl, *The Art of Virgil*, 150. William Fitzgerald finds Daedalus’ attempt to leave the site of a “disastrous and forbidden love” echoed in Aeneas’ “escape” from Carthage, and the labyrinth echoed in the display of military maneuvers put on by Aeneas’ son, Ascanius, in Book 5. Fitzgerald, “Aeneas, Daedalus, and the Labyrinth,” 52, 59.

<sup>30</sup> As Fitzgerald says, “the labyrinth represented on the frieze may be a figure connected with the kind of initiation that Aeneas is about to undergo in the underworld.” Fitzgerald, 53. Similarly, Putnam tells us, “The literal labyrinth of Daedalus’ manufacture [...] becomes now symbolic, but equally present, in the hero’s effortful life as he faces the prospect of descending, alive, into the world of the dead and returning whence he came.” Putnam, 87.

<sup>31</sup> Putnam finds another connection, as well, between the journey to the underworld Aeneas is about to embark upon, and the description of the labyrinth depicted in the sculptures: “As preparation for this undertaking, Aeneas must attend to the *horrendas ambages*, the fearful enigmas of the seeress’ utterances, which correspond to the palpable but no less devious windings (*ambages*) of the Minotaur’s dwelling.” Putnam, 88.

as a visit to the dead. The story of Aeneas' visit to the dead, like the description of the reliefs, begins with a sacrifice—seven steers, just like the seven Athenian youths sacrificed yearly to the Minotaur (38-9). As Daedalus, in his role as participant in the action of the story represented in the reliefs, pities the “deep love” of the *regina*, in this case “princess,” so Aeneas will express pity for the love of another *regina*, the Carthaginian Queen, Dido, whose shade he meets in the underworld (450-76). The most intriguing element of the *ekphrasis*, however, and perhaps the most commented upon, is something that Aeneas does not and could not see, because it is not included among the scenes depicted in the reliefs: the death of Daedalus' son, Icarus, who, as the famous story goes, flew too close to the sun with his wax wings, when he and his father were making their escape from Crete, and plunged into the ocean. This story, properly speaking, does not belong to the narrative at all—no one sees it and no one gives any hint of being affected by it. Nevertheless, the poem takes us out of the scene, for a moment, to apostrophize Icarus in moving terms. His father attempted to represent his fall, Virgil tells us, but instead his hands fell twice, unable to complete this task. The falling of the father's hands poignantly echoes the literal fall of the son.

The theme of lost sons is one that occurs throughout the *ekphrasis*, from the death of Androgeos, Minos' son, to the sons of Athens sacrificed in recompense. It also occurs throughout the *Aeneid*, with, for example, the death of Laocoön's sons before his eyes in Book II (199-233), and of Pallas, Evander's son, in Book X (476-509). Perhaps the most moving example, however, comes at the end of Book VI, when the spirit of Anchises shows Aeneas the soul who will return to the world above to become Marcellus,

Augustus' nephew and adopted heir, destined to die at an early age. There, as the poetic narrator does for Icarus, Anchises pauses to apostrophize this great lost hope of Rome:

heu, miserande puer, si qua fata aspera rumpas,  
tu Marcellus eris. manibus date lilia plenis,  
purpureos spargam flores animamque nepotis  
his saltem accumulem donis, et fungar inani  
munere. (6.882-6)

Alas, unlucky boy, if only you could break through your bitter fate. You will be Marcellus. Give handfuls of lilies and let me spread purple flowers, and at least let me pile up these gifts for the spirit of my heir in the performance of an empty service.

The apostrophe to Icarus has been interpreted as a pointed contrast between pictures and poetry. Daedalus' pictures cannot represent the fall of Icarus, while Virgil's poetry can.<sup>32</sup> The *ekphrasis* thus represents a rhetorical blow in favor of poetry against the visual arts.<sup>33</sup> If we look to the parallel, however, between this apostrophe of Icarus and the elegiac evocation of Marcellus, likewise ending in an apostrophe to Rome's most famous lost son—a parallel we are encouraged to recognize by the other thematic parallels between the scenes of the reliefs and the episodes of Aeneas' journey to the underworld in the rest of Book VI—we begin to see things in a very different light. The apostrophe to Icarus is about the inability of Daedalus' art to represent the loss of his son. Anchises' evocation of Marcellus similarly points to the insufficiency of the poetic art to accurately convey the meaning of this loss. He begins with an example of the rhetorical trope of *aporia*, speaking about something by claiming to be unable to speak about it: *o*

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<sup>32</sup> “[T]he pathos of this double failure in the sculptor’s art is something represented here by language alone. So while the Carthaginian paintings wring rivers of tears from Aeneas, the sculptures of Daedalus are eclipsed by the superior poignancy of words.” Heffernan, 29.

<sup>33</sup> Lessing might agree with this assessment. In discussing the famous Laocoön sculptures, he tells us that the visual arts are limited in their ability to depict pain or grief. Too much pain destroys the beauty of the representation: “The master was striving to attain the greatest beauty under the given conditions of bodily pain. Pain, in its disfiguring extreme, was not compatible with beauty, and must therefore be softened. Screams must be reduced to sighs, not because screams would betray weakness, but because they would deform the countenance to a repulsive degree.” Lessing, 13.



*gnate, ingentem luctum ne quaere tuorum*, “Oh, son, do not ask about this huge grief of your people” (868). In other words, Anchises tells Aeneas, the grief is too great; I could not possibly speak of it. Of course, he does go on for another eighteen lines about Marcellus’ greatness and what his loss will mean for Rome, but his speech ends with a pointed evocation of the futility of this memorialization. It is, after all, not literal flowers, “lilies and purple flowers,” that he spreads, in vain, as he says, for Marcellus, but the flowers of his words. In this case, we might see the apostrophe to Icarus as not only about the visual arts, but about the poetic arts as well. Both are impotent in the face of overwhelming grief—in this way Virgil anticipates questions that will face authors like Sebald dealing, on a much larger scale, with the loss created by the Holocaust. Daedalus is not just the master craftsman. As Putnam tells us, “this treatment by one artist of the spiritual biography of another serves as paradigm of the Virgilian career.”<sup>34</sup> Daedalus stands in for the master poet, Virgil, as well. There are limits to what both pictures and poetry can represent. Neither of them can truly capture the poignancy of loss. Or rather, perhaps this *ekphrasis* does point to a difference between poetry and the visual arts: poetry can evoke loss aporetically, by claiming to be unable to do so. It can represent within an argument for the inadequacy or the impossibility of representation. It is, in other words, by explicitly foregoing the luxury of any claim to verisimilitude, that poetry finds itself capable of effectively evoking the experience of loss. This is not a gesture as readily available to the visual arts.

### *Ekphrasis* in the Works of Peter Weiss

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<sup>34</sup> Putnam, 82.

Both of these Virgilian models—*ekphrasis* as a programmatic statement about what literature can do and as a statement about what and how it can represent—are equally apt when applied to post-Holocaust literature. In fact they may help explain the resurgence of *ekphrasis* in this literature. I have previously argued that authors dealing with the Holocaust have found classical Greek and Roman models of the presence of the dead in the lives of the living uniquely useful in meeting the demands of post-war memory culture. This relationship between the living and the dead is embodied in the epic motif of *nekyia*, which authors like Sebald use to frame their representations of the traumatic past. *Ekphrasis*, however, has been equally important for authors grappling with the issue of how to write literature “after Auschwitz,” first of all, because it was through pictures that many writers and artists had their first encounter with the Holocaust,<sup>35</sup> but also because *ekphrasis* helps them to answer two important questions: first, what is the political valence and efficacy of literature and arts that found themselves impotent in the face of the barbarism of fascism—or worse complicit in that barbarism? Second, how is it possible to represent, in literature as well as the other arts, this singularly complex “modernist event,” which involves suffering, on the one side, and cruelty, on the other, beyond imagination? *Ekphrasis*, which, as I have argued, has the

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<sup>35</sup> In his semi-autobiographical novel, *Fluchtpunkt*, Peter Weiss describes the first time he saw images of the concentration camps on the screen in a movie theater: “Wir saßen in der Geborgenheit eines dunklen Saals und sahen, was bisher unvorstellbar gewesen war, wir sahen es in seinen Ausmaßen, die so ungeheuerlich waren, daß wir sie zu unsern Lebzeiten nie bewältigen würden. Es war ein Schluchzen zu hören, und eine Stimme rief, vergeßt dies nie. Es war ein klägliches, sinnloser Ruf, denn es gab keine Worte mehr, es gab nichts mehr zu sagen, es gab keine Erklärungen, keine Mahnungen mehr, alle Werte waren vernichtet worden [...]. Wo war der Styx, wo war das Inferno, wo war Orpheus in seiner Unterwelt, von Flötenrillern umrieselt, wo waren die großen Visionen der Kunst, die Bildwerke, die Skulpturen, die Tempel, die Gesänge und Epen. Es waren alles zerstäubt, und nie mehr konnte daran gedacht werden, nach neuen Gleichnissen, nach Haltepunkten zu suchen, vor diesen endgültigen Bildern.” Weiss, *Fluchtpunkt*, 246.

potential to interrogate the limits and the capabilities of the literary as well as the visual arts, is thus also specially attuned to the demands of post-Holocaust authorship.

The author, Peter Weiss, was a German Jew who survived the war in exile in Sweden. His prose works are filled with passionate discussions of paintings, sculptures, films, and other visual material. This, of course, makes a certain amount of sense: Weiss began his creative career as a painter. In 1965, he gave a speech in acceptance of the *Lessingpreis*, which he styled his own *Laokoon*: “Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Sprache.” In that speech he explains his transition from the visual to the literary arts thus:

The picture lies deeper than the word. If he considers the particularities of the picture, they dissolve. He has to believe unconditionally in the value of a picture. The more enthralled he is by a picture, the less he cares about the circumstances of the picture, the more convincing becomes the achieved effect. Words always contain questions. Words bring pictures into question. Words surround the individual elements of pictures and dissect them. Pictures wallow in pain. Words want to know about the origin of pain.<sup>36</sup>

This may seem to be a statement of preference for words over pictures—words can do things that pictures cannot. In fact it is really a statement of the interdependency of the two. Words need pictures, or at least images, to break apart and dissect, in order to read the “causes of the pain.” Pictures need words to perform this surgical function for them. This, in other words, is not a rejection of painting, but a defense of *ekphrasis*, writing about pictures, as a mode of literary expression.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “Das Bild liegt tiefer als die Worte. Wenn er nachdenkt über die Einzelheiten des Bildes, verlieren sie sich schon. Er muß bedingungslos an den Wert eines Bildes glauben. Je besessener er vom Bild ist, je weniger er sich um die Anlässe des Bildes kümmert, desto überzeugender wird die erreichte Wirkung. Worte enthalten immer Fragen. Worte bezweifeln die Bilder. Worte umkreisen die Bestandteile von Bildern und zerlegen sie. Bilder begnügen sich mit dem Schmerz. Worte wollen vom Ursprung des Schmerzes wissen.” Weiss, “Laokoon,” 182.

<sup>37</sup> In “From Laokoon to Ge,” Julia Hell points out that the speech is more ambivalent about the distinction between images and words than it seems: “‘Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Sprache’ thus argues for

The context of this statement is Weiss' own experience as an exile, estranged from the German language which had been twisted and turned against him and his kind.<sup>38</sup> Weiss escaped the fate of so many of his fellow Jews, but their fate haunts him. In many of his literary works he expresses the agony of a survivor, unsure whether he can stand with the victims, or whether, in the end, he must be grouped with those who stood by and let it happen.<sup>39</sup> In the Laocoön sculpture, he draws a distinction between the three figures: Laocoön and his youngest son are unable to express themselves in words—they can only strike a pose as an enduring image of suffering. They represent the static, visual arts. The oldest son, however, is still able to cry out in pain, to call for help. His is the power—the power of words, of literary expression—to demand action. Weiss sees himself as this oldest son,<sup>40</sup> and the German language, the language which was twisted against him and his kind, he finds, is the only means he has to “bear witness before those who might come to help.”<sup>41</sup> If this speech is a defense of ekphrastic writing, it is thus a defense of it as uniquely apt to represent the trauma, the “pain” of both the survivor and the victim of the Holocaust.

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language against image, yet at the same time it produces a set of images that will remain both defining and definitive.” Robert Buch sees the distinction as one primarily driven by Weiss' opposition to the spellbinding power of pathos: “The opposition to the image is an opposition to being spellbound by the spectacle of pathos. Instead, the speech opts for undoing this spell by probing its circumstances and conditions.” Hell, 26. Buch, “The Resistance to Pathos and the Pathos of Resistance,” 246.

<sup>38</sup> “Thus, what Laokoon tells its German audience is a story of liberation from a trauma that they, or their fathers inflicted on the speaker. Like *Fluchtpunkt*, it asserts the reappropriation of German by the one who was expelled from that language.” Hell, “From Laokoon to Ge,” 26.

<sup>39</sup> “Zu wem gehörte ich jetzt, als Lebender, als Überlebender, gehörte ich wirklich zu jenen, die mich anstarrten mit ihren übergroßen Augen, und die ich längst verraten hatte, gehörte ich nicht eher zu den Mördern und Henkern.” Weiss, *Fluchtpunkt*, 246.

<sup>40</sup> “Er war Laokoons ältester Sohn.” Weiss, “Laokoon,” 183.

<sup>41</sup> “In diesem Bildwerk ist der Zwiespalt ausgedrückt zwischen dem Verstummen, Statischen, und dem, das sich der Außenwelt zuwendet und durch Bewegung deren Aufmerksamkeit herbeiruft. Laokoon und sein jüngster Sohn setzen keinen Beschauer mehr voraus. Sie bilden nur noch ein Monument über ihren eigenen Untergang. Nie mehr geben sie einen Laut von sich. Der ältere Sohn aber gehört noch einer belebten Welt an, er bricht sich aus dem Statuarischen heraus, um denen, die ihm vielleicht zur Hilfe kommen, Bericht zu erstatten.” Weiss, “Laokoon,” 180-1.

Weiss is not the only post-Holocaust author to turn to *ekphrasis* to interrogate the scope and role of his own work: Claude Simon, Paul Celan, and the much maligned Alfred Andersch, all employ *ekphrasis* to address the role of art and literature “after Auschwitz.”<sup>42</sup> Weiss, however, is alone in the centrality of *ekphrasis* to his work. His magnum opus, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, which follows the story of several members of a resistance group before and during World War II, is centered around discussions of works of art, from the Pergamon Frieze in Berlin, with which the novel opens, to Géricault’s “Raft of the Medusa,” to Picasso’s “Guernica.” The descriptions and the discussions of these works of art not only take up large chunks of the novel and are referred to throughout the rest; they guide the characters’ thoughts and actions even when they are not staring up at pictures on museum walls.

The epic quality of *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* has been noticed by many critics.<sup>43</sup> One of Weiss’ touchstones is Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, but the novel also returns repeatedly to the mythical story of Herakles, whose adventures are epic in scale, even if there is no epic that deals with them specifically.<sup>44</sup> The *Ästhetik* turns the story of

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<sup>42</sup> Sebald himself, in *Austerlitz*, describes Simon’s *ekphrasis* of the paintings of the character Novelli, who endured torture and internment at the hands of the Nazis, in *Le Jardin des Plantes* (*Ae* 27/ *Ag* 43-4). Eric Klingerman summarizes the role of *ekphrasis* in Celan’s poetry: “Beginning in 1947 with his introduction to a book of sketches by the surrealist artist Edgar Jené, Celan returned to the method of poetic ekphrasis, translating several paintings by Géricault, Rembrandt, and Van Gogh, as well as images from Chagall, into poems. He also collaborated with his wife, Gisèle Lestrangé-Celan, a graphic artist, by transforming her lithographs into poems, and she in turn designed etchings based on his poetry.” Klingerman, *Sites of the Uncanny: Paul Celan, Specularity and the Visual Arts*, 18. The smuggling of a wooden sculpture modeled on Ernst Barlach’s “Lesender Klosterschüler” out of Nazi Germany is one of the central narratives of Andersch’s *Sansibar oder der letzte Grund*.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Bürger, for example, tells us: “Nun glauben wir Literaturwissenschaftler, spätestens seit Hegel zu wissen, daß das Epos seinen historischen Ort in der von Hegel sogenannten heroischen Periode der Geschichte der Menschheit hat und mithin quersteht zur Moderne. Trotzdem, meine ich, wird man bei einem ernsthaften Bemühen, die *Ästhetik des Widerstands* zu verstehen, sehr sorgfältig die Frage zu erörtern haben, ob es nicht um den Versuch einer Erneuerung des Epos handelt [...]” Bürger, “Über die Wirklichkeit der Kunst: Zur Ästhetik in der »Ästhetik des Widerstands«, 292-3.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Birkmeyer, *Bilder des Schreckens: Dantes Spuren in die Mythosrezeption in Peter Weiss’ Roman “Die Ästhetik des Widerstands”*; Scherpe, “Die *Ästhetik des Widerstands* als *Divina*

the resistance to the Nazis before and during the war, with its doomed heroes, into the stuff of epic. The *ekphraseis* in the novel, however, are similarly epic in quality. They, like our two examples from Virgil's *Aeneid*, interrogate the capabilities and the social and political role of literature, and specifically of the epic piece of literature which is the *Ästhetik* itself. Weiss' *ekphraseis*, however, have more in common with the first of our Virgilian models, the murals at Carthage, than the second. Weiss' *ekphraseis*, like Virgil's, are concerned with both the political position and efficacy of art and literature and the representational capacities of the various media that intersect in them. They foreground, however, the former rather than the latter. It is always through the lens of what art and literature can do that Weiss asks what and how they can represent.

Weiss' characters read these works of art in a particularly Marxist way. They see them as encapsulating the political circumstances, the particular variant of the class struggle, out of which they arise. They ask which side the work of art is on, and whether they can recruit it, in their own time and their own urgent struggle, to their own side. I will focus on one example, here, the description of the Pergamon frieze, although my analysis of Weiss' ekphrastic technique and its interrogation of the efficacy of art and literature could easily be extended to the other long *ekphraseis* in the novel, the paintings, "The Raft of the Medusa," by Géricault, and "Guernica," by Picasso.<sup>45</sup> Weiss is at pains throughout the novel to draw a parallel between the examples of the visual arts repeatedly discussed and the written arts. In the discussion of "Guernica," for example, the narrator tells us, "These were the first hints of recognizable elements in the painting, yet they

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*Commedia*: Peter Weiss' künstlerische Vergegenständlichung der Geschichte"; Hofmann, "Peter Weiss' Dante-Rezeption und die poetische Erinnerung der Shoah."

<sup>45</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of "The Raft of the Medusa," see especially Bürger, "Über die Wirklichkeit der Kunst."

could be read differently, every detail was ambiguous, like the building blocks of poetry.”<sup>46</sup> Poetry and painting, in other words, are not so very far apart.

The novel begins, without introduction, with the description of the Pergamon frieze. It is a sort of overture to the work. It sets the tone and establishes several of the themes of the story to come. The subject of the frieze, though, is self-consciously classical, the Gigantomachy, or war between the giants and the gods, of which Ovid also writes, several centuries after the construction of the frieze, in the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>47</sup> This is, in other words, for a modern author, already the stuff of epic. Our reception of the story depicted on the frieze is already filtered through Ovid’s epic recounting of it. For Ovid, the story of the Gigantomachy is about human nature: Why are we so bloody-minded? Because we grew out of the blood of the battle-hungry Giants. For Weiss’ characters, the story is really about a very different kind of struggle. Three friends, the narrator, Coppi, and Heilmann, stand in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin before the fragments of the frieze that was constructed on the altar at Pergamon (in modern-day Turkey) in the second century B. C. E. The year is 1937. The description begins, so to speak, *in medias res*:

All around us the bodies rose out of the stone, crowded into groups, intertwined, or shattered into fragments, hinting at their shapes with a torso, a propped up arm, a burst hip, a scabbed shard, always in warlike gestures, dodging, rebounding, attacking, shielding themselves, stretched high or crooked, some of them snuffed out, but with a freestanding, forward-pressing foot, a twisted back, the contour of a calf harnessed into a single common motion. A gigantic wrestling, emerging from a gray wall, recalling a perfection, sinking back into formlessness.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, 413. All translations from Neugroschel, “The Aesthetics of Resistance: Vol. 1,” unless otherwise stated. It is worth noting that the words, “building blocks,” “Bausteine,” recalls the description of the Pergamon frieze which I discuss below. Weiss draws a parallel not only between the visual and the written arts, but between the various examples of the visual arts he describes throughout the *Ästhetik*.

<sup>47</sup> *Metamorphoses*, 1.151-62.

<sup>48</sup> Weiss, *Ästhetik*, 9.

The effect is bewildering. We do not know where we are or what we are supposed to be seeing. The confusion of the description of the supernatural battle captured in the frieze echoes the confusion of an actual battle, the so-called “fog of war.” The text represents war (in this case the war between the giants and the gods, although, as we will see, this stands in metaphorically for a more human form of conflict, as well) through the work of art but in a way the work of art does not. The jumble of words does not exactly correspond to the composed order of the frieze itself. The text thus, at the very beginning, asserts its own autonomy, its own power to represent beyond the visual representation.

Gradually, though, this fog clears. The description becomes more lucid, and we start to get our bearings. As this happens, however, we encounter a striking parallel with Weiss’ discussion of the Laocoön Group (another classical sculpture, we might remember, depicting a scene from epic) in his speech, “Laokoon.”<sup>49</sup> As Laocoön’s eldest son strives to reach out of the sculpture towards the outside world, to call for help, so the giants, locked in a similarly doomed struggle, strive to escape the rock face from which they are hewn: “These only just created, already dying faces, these tremendous and dismembering hands, these wide-sweeping pinions drowning in the blunt rock, this stony gaze, these lips torn open for a shriek [...], this endless straining to twist upward out of grainy boulders.”<sup>50</sup> We might, then, take this as a redux of the Laocoön speech: literature may rely on images, but it can, in fact, do more to help us understand and perhaps prevent suffering.

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<sup>49</sup> The story of Laocoön is told by Aeneas to Dido and her entourage at Carthage at *Aeneid* 2.201-233.

<sup>50</sup> Weiss, *Ästhetik*, 9-10.



However, the true significance of the frieze for Weiss' novel only becomes apparent when we begin to enter into the conversation of the three friends who serve as the focalizers of this *ekphrasis*. The battle the frieze represents, it turns out, is not just the mythical one, but, as the character Heilmann explains, a more historical battle as well:

other struggles that had passed across the kingdom of Pergamum were concealed under this depiction. The regents in the dynasty of the Attalids had ordered their master sculptors to translate the swift transience, paid for with thousands of lives, to a level of timeless permanence, thereby putting up a monument to their own grandeur and immortality. The subjugation of the Gallic tribes invading from the north had turned into a triumph of aristocratic purity over wild and base forces [...]. Historic events appeared in mythical disguise [...].<sup>51</sup>

This is a particularly Marxist reading. It turns the events depicted on the frieze into a historical allegory.<sup>52</sup> The actual war, however, has been internalized, as well, within the society of the city-state of Pergamon. The work of constructing the frieze may be directed by master-builders, but it is slaves—and precisely those slaves won in this war against the Gallic tribes—who do the back-breaking labor of hewing and hauling the stone. The gods in the frieze represent the aristocracy, who, as Coppi says, “donned the masks of the gods” (12). The giants, however, represent the working class, including the enslaved Gauls, who, as Heilmann points out, serve as the models for the muscular bodies on the frieze.<sup>53</sup> The frieze, in other words, represents, as Coppi says, the class struggle as well as the battle against external enemies: “The portrayal of the gods in

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>52</sup> This is akin to the Marxist hermeneutics articulated by Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*: “Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings alien to it [...]. It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and necessity.” Jameson, 19-20.

<sup>53</sup> Weiss, *Ästhetik*, 18.

flight and of the annihilation of urgent danger expressed [...] the struggle between the classes, and this was recognized not only in our present-day viewing but perhaps also back then in secret glimpses by serfs.”<sup>54</sup>

Where do we situate this work of art, then, politically? Is it a monument to oppression and subjugation, to the greater glory of the ruling class? Or does it, on the other hand, betray some sympathy for the defeated and oppressed? The three friends turn to one figure to resolve this issue: Herakles, the only mortal, as the story goes, to fight on the side of the gods, but they do not find him. This “advocate of action,” as Coppi calls him, survives on the time-worn frieze only in one claw of his famous lion’s-skin cloak.<sup>55</sup> The rest has been effaced by time.

The interpretation the three young men give the frieze, though, has even one more level. The frieze is not just about the historically dated class struggle of a civilization millennia old. It is about class struggle and resistance more generally, and it is precisely this absence of Herakles that allows them to appropriate it more aggressively for their own looming resistance to a vastly superior force:

Coppi called it an omen that Heracles, who was our equal, was missing, and that we now had to create our own image of this advocate of action [...]. We heard the thuds of clubs, the shrilling whistles, the moans, the splashing of blood. We looked back at a prehistoric past, and for an instant the prospect of the future likewise filled up with a massacre impenetrable to the thought of liberation. Heracles would have to help them, the subjugated, and not those who had enough armor [or tanks] and weapons.<sup>56</sup>

As the three friends look at the frieze, they have a foreboding of the horrible events of the war and the Holocaust to come, and they realize they will have to fight. The

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 14, 17.

description is, thus, a call to arms, but it also a call to art. The frieze is ultimately ambiguous. Like Virgil's murals, it is the work of "many hands." We cannot construct a singular, partisan political statement out of it. It is neither on the side of the ruling class nor on the side of the slaves and workers. The three future resistance partisans in Weiss' text, however, in their discussion of the Pergamon frieze, call for a form of art whose own Herakles aligns himself with the less powerful, with the oppressed, the defeated, the enslaved, the murdered. They call for a form of art that is unambiguously on the side of the resistance. This plea, which comes at the beginning of Weiss' magnum opus, is a program for his own epic telling of the story of the resistance. As Sebald himself has said in his essay on Weiss: "His *Ästhetik des Widerstands* [...] is a magnum opus which sees itself [...] as an expression of the *will* to be on the side of the victims at the end of time."<sup>57</sup> This, however, is a goal and not an assumed reality of the work. For Weiss, the position of art, as of literature, is, like the Pergamon frieze, ultimately ambiguous. Whatever the artist or writer's intentions, the reception and political efficacy of a work of art are, largely, out of his hands.

### *Ekphrasis* and Historical Representation in Sebald

In his essay on Peter Weiss, "The Remorse of the Heart," Sebald examines one of the central *ekphraseis* in Weiss' *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*: not the Pergamon frieze, but the description, which begins the second of the novel's three volumes, of Géricault's

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<sup>57</sup> "The Remorse of the Heart: On Memory and Cruelty in the Work of Peter Weiss," English 190/ German 147.

1818 painting, “The Raft of the Medusa,” depicting the raft carrying the few who managed to escape the shipwreck of the French colonial frigate, the Medusa, in 1816:

Noteworthy [...] are those passages of the *Ästhetik des Widerstands* in which Weiss, with much stronger commitment than in the political sections of his work, describes the history of the painter Théodore Géricault who, as the author interprets it, immersed himself “in the study of dead skin... in the morgue,” because “he wanted to intervene in the system of suppression and destruction.” The political theme that Weiss brings to the fore here, as he does throughout the *Ästhetik des Widerstands*, is admittedly contradicted by the motivation which ultimately determines the effect made by a work of art: the fact that physicality is most strongly sculpted and its “nature” most perceptible on the indistinct borderline with transcendency.

This focus on the borderline between physicality and “transcendancy” expresses, Sebald goes on to say, “an affinity with the dead.”<sup>58</sup> The reference, here, is to a passage in the *Ästhetik* in which the narrator calls attention to a small, indistinct patch in Géricault’s otherwise almost photo-realistic painting:

As far as I could tell, this slight blurriness, this shimmering of the outline, was nowhere else to be found. The blurriness must have been added intentionally, as an almost unnoticeable sign for the overstepping of the bounds of the perceptible. Here, where the transcendent appeared, the physical [das Körperliche] was at the same time most strongly sculpted. The black colonial soldier, Charles, was the strongest of the castaways, but he belonged, according to the report, to those who, shortly after being rescued by the Argus, would die in St. Louis.<sup>59</sup>

Sebald re-reads Weiss’ interpretation of the painting to make a very different point. He admits that Weiss uses the painting to express a “political theme”—according to Weiss’ narrator, Géricault saw the shipwreck and the desperately incompetent way it

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<sup>58</sup> Sebald, “The Remorse of the Heart,” English 179/ German 136.

<sup>59</sup> “Soweit ich erkennen konnte, war sonst nirgends dieses leicht Verwischte, dieses Zittern der Kontur zu finden, das Verschwimmende mußte bewußt angelegt worden sein, als kaum merkliches Zeichen für ein Überschreiten der Grenze des Wahrnehmbaren. Hier, wo das Transzendieren einsetzte, war das Körperliche gleichzeitig am stärksten skulptiert, der schwarze Kolonialsoldat Charles war der kräftigste der Schiffbrüchigen, er aber gehörte, laut Bericht, zu denen, die bald nach der Rettung durch die Argus in Saint Louis sterben würden [...]” Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, 480. Translation mine.

was handled by the crew as symptomatic of the excesses of a would-be colonial empire.<sup>60</sup> In fact, though, what interests Sebald himself is the way Weiss highlights the non-realistic elements of Géricault's representational technique, and the way in which this betrays a sympathy, in both the painter, Géricault, and the author, Weiss, for the dead and dying. Sebald has already told us, earlier in the essay, that all of Weiss' work is "designed as a visit to the dead."<sup>61</sup> Here, he tells us that Weiss finds something remarkable expressed in the one indistinct patch of Géricault's painting: the only trace of the transcendent, unrepresentable experience of the suffering unto death endured by the victims of the Medusa catastrophe was the physical remainder of death, the body at rest. Sebald thus hints, in his re-reading of Weiss' description, that the *ekphraseis* in his own work will be different, that they will focus on something else. For Weiss, what is of primary interest in the work of art is the political statement it makes. For Sebald, it is the representational strategy of the work and the relationship it embodies to the dead.

The *ekphraseis* in *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, as I have argued, are part of a strategy to appropriate the motifs and the structure of classical epic, in order to lend that work a sense of totality and to stake a claim to a prominent role in post-war memory culture—this is the epic of the resistance. The *ekphraseis* themselves are epic, in scope, function, and sometimes even their subject. It would be a mistake to see all the works of W. G. Sebald as modern day epics. *Austerlitz* may be a sort of post-Holocaust rewriting of the *Odyssey*, as I have argued in my previous chapter, but it is not so easy to map this pattern onto Sebald's other literary works. Sebald's *ekphraseis* are epic, albeit in a

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<sup>60</sup> "Der Leser [Géricault] aber, der sich im November Achtzehnhundert Siebzehn in das eben erschienene Buch über den Schiffbruch der Medusa vertiefte, sah, wie sich hier die Epoche entfaltete, in der er lebte, aus Engstirnigkeit, Selbstsucht und Habgier sah er ein Imperium mit provinziellen Zügen emporwachsen, die Profiteure sah er, ud deren Opfer." Ibid., 455.

<sup>61</sup> Sebald, "The Remorse of the Heart," English 172/ German 129.

slightly different way from those in Weiss' *Ästhetik*. They are like the classical examples of *ekphrasis* we have discussed in that they set a program for the literary work of which they are a part. If Weiss' *ekphraseis*, however, are more like the first of our examples from Virgil's *Aeneid*, the murals at Carthage, Sebald's are more like the second, Daedalus' reliefs at Cumae. Like Daedalus' reliefs, their connection to the rest of the text is not on the level of plot—the narrator sees the works of art, but they do not seem to affect the actions he takes subsequently in any significant way. The *ekphraseis* therefore, demand interpretation, and the interpretation they draw us towards is one that reflects on the representational strategies of Sebald's works. Their interest is less in the political efficacy of literature as well as art, but in the way literature and art represent the past and the limits of this representation. This is not to say that all of the *ekphraseis* are the same and that they make the exact same points, but that they do each seem to be a window onto a single theory of the representation of history. They describe either works of art that reject realism in favor of other modes of representation and thereby succeed in bringing the past they represent back to life or works of art that do not reject realism and thereby fail to give the viewer a vivid sense of the past. These *ekphraseis*, at least those of the “successful” works of art, also have a tendency to become examples of the mode of representation which, as we have seen in my previous chapter, Sebald favors: historical representation as *nekyia*, the raising of the dead. Through these works of art, the narrator brings the dead past they represent back to life in his own description.

The Failure of Realist Representation: The Waterloo Panorama and Napoleonic Painting

At the beginning of this chapter, I briefly discussed the *ekphrasis* of the Waterloo panorama in *The Rings of Saturn*. This is how the narrator describes his visit to the panorama:

It is like being at the centre of events. On a sort of landscaped proscenium, immediately below the wooden rail amidst tree-stumps and undergrowth in the blood-stained sand, lie lifesize horses, and cut-down infantrymen, hussars and chevaux-légers, eyes rolling in pain or already extinguished. Their faces are moulded from wax but the boots, the leather belts, the weapons, the cuirasses, and the splendidly coloured uniforms, probably stuffed with eelgrass, rags and the like, are to all appearances authentic. Across this horrific three-dimensional scene, on which the cold dust of time has settled, one's gaze is drawn to the horizon, to the enormous mural, one hundred and ten yards by twelve, painted in 1912 by the French marine artist Louis Dumontin on the inner wall of the circus-like structure. This then, I thought, as I looked around me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was. (*Re* 124-5/ *Rg* 157-8)

This is the description of a failure to adequately represent the historical past. As the narrator tells us, the representation of history demands a “falsification of perspective” (*Re* 125/ *Rg* 158). This may remind us of the “synoptic and artificial view” Sebald extols in “Air War and Literature” (*Le* 26/ *Lg* 35). For Sebald, if perhaps not for Hayden White who originated the term, the battle of Waterloo is a “modernist event” that demands a new mode of representation. The panorama, though, does not quite get this right: “we still do not know how it was”; “No clear picture emerged” (*Re* 125, 126/ *Rg* 158, 159). The narrator fails to understand the battle from what he sees in the panorama, and he fails, as well, to create a mental image that can fully capture the vicissitudes of the battle. As if to drive this point home, the only images included with the text at this point are a drawing of the monument seen from the fields of Waterloo and the reproduction of an oval-shaped section of the panorama painting (fig. 7). The oval shape is meant to mimic

in two dimensions the roundedness of the panorama. This roundedness makes a claim for the panorama's completeness as a representation of the event. Importantly, however, from what we see in this image reproduced in the book, it is almost impossible to make out what is happening. The panorama attempts to be a complete representation of the event, but, in reality, it supplies us with no understanding of what actually happened.

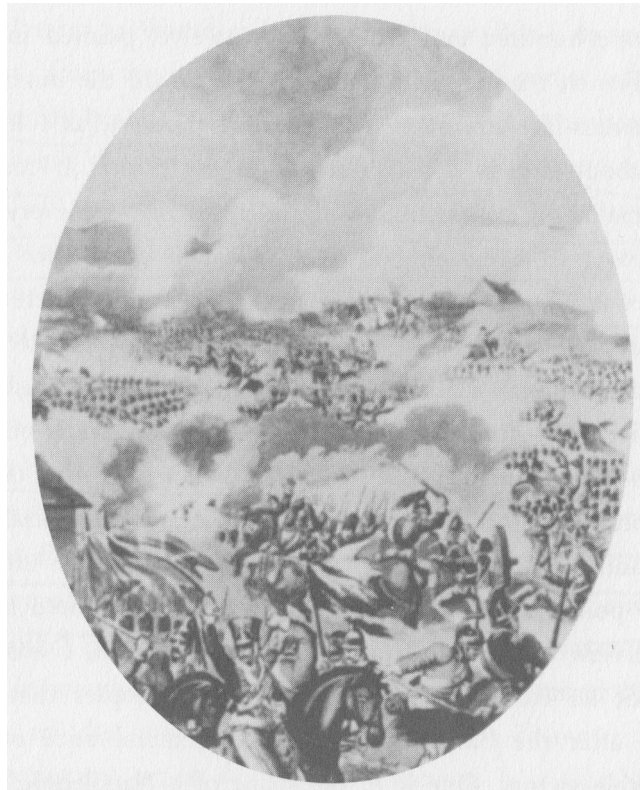


Figure 7. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (English), p. 126.

What truly disturbs the narrator, though, is the relationship the monument establishes to the dead: “What ever became of the corpses and mortal remains? Are they buried under the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that our ultimate vantage point? Does one really have the much-vaunted historical overview from such a position?” (*Re* 125/ *Rg* 158). In the previous chapter, I argued that Sebald’s works may be read as an attempt to “bring remembered events back to life,” according to



the formula articulated by the narrator in *Austerlitz* (*Ae* 13/ *Ag* 23). The panorama, however, has precisely the opposite relationship to the dead past. It is a sort of capstone on the tomb of the war dead, keeping them buried. It constructs a unified, monumental vision of history out of the dead past, instead of bringing it back to life so that the suffering of its victims may be understood and learned from.<sup>62</sup>

We might see this as a critique of a single monument or of the monumentalization of history in general. The narrator characterizes the monument at Waterloo as “the definition of Belgian ugliness,” and he complains about the “souvenir shops” nearby (*Re* 123-4/ *Rg* 156). There is a clue, however, that the implications of the description of the panorama are broader than this, in the word “survivors,” “die Überlebenden”: “We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was” (*Re* 125/ *Rg* 158). In what sense, after all, is the narrator, or the author with whom he shares so many biographical details, born over a hundred years after Waterloo, a “survivor” of the battle? We might consider, on the contrary, that the most immediate reference for the word, for him as well as for us, his audience, is the Holocaust. The word, “survivor,” in English and, perhaps to a lesser extent, in German, has become

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<sup>62</sup> This is how Richard T. Gray interprets the episode: “We substitute for the real-life, concrete experiences of the battlefield, for an immersion in the immediate ‘scene of horror,’ the distancing, taming, and comforting—but ultimately falsifying—overview generated by an imaginary vantage point far above the real events themselves. Neither the ‘levity’ of the balloonist, with its all-encompassing perspective, nor the ‘gravity’ of the pedestrian, who for lack of perspective is incapable of finding a way out of the labyrinthine landscape, presents an ideal situation. History, it would seem, must also be written at the dialectical interface of these two forces. Only a strategy that fuses center and periphery is capable of arriving at a balanced historical understanding.” While I agree with Gray that “the dialectical interface of these two forces” is crucial, for Sebald, in the representation of history, I would argue that the narrator’s main complaint about the representational strategy of the panorama is that it attempts to subsume the events of the battle into a single, unified perspective. Sebald, as we have seen, has no problem with an “artificial,” i. e. in some sense “falsified,” view of the event. As we can see, however, in his description of the bombing raid on Hamburg in “Air War and Literature,” which I discussed in my last chapter, this view cannot be singular or static. That description moves from one “artificial” perspective to another in rapid succession. Gray, “From Grids to Vanishing Points: W. G. Sebald’s Critique of Visual-Representational Orders in *Die Ringe des Saturn*, 521.

almost synonymous with the idea of “Holocaust survivor.” And it is worth noting that the Holocaust, in the *Rings of Saturn* as in so many of Sebald’s works, is the unspoken context of many of the text’s historical interludes.<sup>63</sup> There are, of course, other events of which we might consider the narrator as well as the author a “survivor” (including the aerial bombardment of the German cities Sebald discusses in “Air War and Literature”), but it is hard to imagine we are meant to apply the word exclusively to an event more than a century and a half old. The description of the Waterloo panorama, then, is not just about the representation of a Napoleonic battle, but also about the representation of history more generally, and it hints at a potential application of the lessons learned here in the representation of far more recent catastrophic events.

What is it, however, specifically about the representational strategy employed by the panorama that Sebald finds so abhorrent? To answer this, we might look to a similar ekphrastic passage in *Austerlitz*—even if, at first glance, the episode might not seem to be an *ekphrasis* at all—the description of the history lessons of Austerlitz’ mentor, André Hillary. The failure of the Waterloo panorama stems, as Hillary says there of representations of another Napoleonic battle, the Battle of Austerlitz, from an attempt “to reproduce the reality [die Wirklichkeit wiederzugeben]” of the event (*Ae* 72/ *Ag* 109). It is, in other words, because the panorama attempts to represent the battle in a realist manner, signaling its own verisimilitude, that the narrator leaves not knowing “how it

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<sup>63</sup> In the final chapter of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald returns to the motif of silk-cultivation which has appeared throughout the book. In this final instance, however, it appears in a shocking connection: It turns out that the Nazis decided that the German nation would take up silk cultivation before the war. Sebald’s text ominously parallels the industry with which they went about organizing this project and that with which they would later organize the concentration camps (*Re* 291-4/ *Rg* 361-4). As Mark M. Anderson says of Sebald’s works more generally: “It would be more accurate to say that Sebald’s fictions present us, in Richard Eder’s phrase, with a ‘Holocaust-in-absence’: it is everywhere and nowhere, at once metonymy and allegory of the darkneses in all of modern European history.” Anderson, “The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald,” 105.

was.”<sup>64</sup> Hillary, in his discussion of the Battle of Austerlitz, goes on to list a number of mental “pictures [Bilder]” that students of the battle, including his own students, carry with them in lieu of an understanding of the event: “The fallen drummer boy, the infantryman shown in the act of stabbing another, the horse’s eye starting from its socket, the invulnerable Emperor surrounded by his generals, a moment frozen still amidst the turmoil of battle” (*Ae* 72/ *Ag* 109). Each of these images is drawn from famous paintings of Napoleonic battles, and, in fact, we might make a claim for each of them in one particular painting of the Battle of Austerlitz by Francois Gérard, painted in 1810.<sup>65</sup> Even where Sebald’s texts explicitly seem to discuss verbal modes of historical representation, or historical representation more generally, we see, they have a tendency to become implicit *ekphraseis*. Hillary’s attempt to represent the Battle of Austerlitz, however, which degenerates into these stock images, like the narrator’s experience with the Waterloo panorama in *The Rings of Saturn*, ends in frustration: “the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered” (*Ae* 73/ *Ag* 109). If it can only capture the same thing that Napoleonic painting has been able to capture, it has not done enough.

### The Rejection of Realism: Rembrandt’s “The Anatomy Lesson”

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<sup>64</sup> Anne Fuchs, in her discussion of naval battle paintings in *The Rings of Saturn* says something similar: “For Sebald and his narrator such historical paintings are false, not because of the artist’s betrayal of artistic truth in the service of ideology, but because of a naive belief in the principle of mimesis.” Fuchs, “W. G. Sebald’s Painters: The Function of Fine Art in His Prose Works,” 174.

<sup>65</sup> The only thing that is missing in the painting by Gérard is the fallen drummer, although one of the young men stretched out on the ground in the foreground may certainly have been a drummer (some of the detritus littering the battleground at their feet is indistinct and may include a drum). Perhaps this detail is added from another famous painting, that of the Battle of Waterloo by the British artist, Robert Alexander Hillingford, which prominently features a fallen drummer boy in the foreground.

The description of the Waterloo panorama criticizes that monumental work's attempt to represent the battle. The discussion of Hillary's history lesson seems to be an implicit critique of Napoleonic painting. Both of these examples are about the failure of representation. This might seem to imply that, for Sebald, as the narrator of *Vertigo* says of the work of the mural artist Hengge, painting is essentially a "questionable [...] endeavor" (*Ve* 210/ *Vg* 229). There are, however, examples of visual art in Sebald's works that serve as positive models of the representation of history as well.

Perhaps the most programmatic of the *ekphraseis* in Sebald's oeuvre occurs earlier in *The Rings of Saturn*, in its opening chapter. The painting the *ekphrasis* describes, Rembrandt's "Anatomy Lesson," depicts the public dissection of the body of a convicted thief, executed for his crimes, Aris Kindt.<sup>66</sup> René Descartes, the narrator tells us, was said to have been present at this anatomy lesson, and it is the painting's "Cartesian rigidity [den starren cartesischen Blick]" (*Re* 17/ *Rg* 25), that is, its strict adherence to the facts of the event and the contours of reality, for which it has often been praised—the narrator speaks of its "much-admired verisimilitude [vielgerühmte Wirklichkeitsnähe]" (*Re* 16/ *Rg* 24).

It is not, however, its verisimilitude that he himself finds striking, but, in fact, the opposite. Rembrandt's painting, he says, demonstrates how the scientific regime of vision adhered to by Descartes and the various doctors in attendance at the dissection is in fact, not as clear-sighted as it seems: "And yet is debatable whether anyone ever really saw that body, since the art of anatomy, then in its infancy, was not least a way of making the reprobate body invisible" (*Re* 13/ *Rg* 21). He notices that none of the doctors

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<sup>66</sup> There has been surprisingly little critical discussion of the role of fine art in Sebald's works, in contrast to the role of photography. By far the two most comprehensive studies of fine art in Sebald's literary works are Anne Fuchs, "W. G. Sebald's Painters," and Richard T. Gray, "From Grids to Vanishing Points."

gathered around the body are looking at it, but “just past it to focus on the open anatomical atlas in which the appalling physical facts are reduced to a diagram, a schematic plan of the human being” (*Re 13/ Rg 21*).<sup>67</sup> In fact, the supposed scientific rigor of the anatomy lesson covers up a less civilized side to the event: “The spectacle [Schauspiel] [...] also represented [...] the archaic ritual of dismembering a corpse, of harrowing the flesh of the delinquent even beyond death, a procedure then still part of the ordained punishment” (*Re 12/ Rg 20-21*). This cultish, ritual side to the dissection, in fact, is highlighted by some of the perhaps less verisimilar details Rembrandt includes: the surgeons in their best attire, with the leading surgeon, Dr. Tulp, even wearing his hat; the fact that after the dissection there was to be a sort of “symbolic banquet” (*Re 13/ Rg 21*); that the anatomy lesson has begun, not according to tradition, with the removal of the inner organs, but with the dissection of “the offending hand” of the convicted thief (*Re 16/ Rg 24*).

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<sup>67</sup> Anne Fuchs emphasizes the biopolitical aspect of this gaze on the anatomical atlas instead of the body, and thereby draws a connection to what has been taken as the apotheosis of the biopolitical ideal in the concentration camps of the twentieth century: “Although the passage [...] does not explicitly refer to the Holocaust, it is clear that Sebald, like Adorno and Horkheimer before him, makes a connection between European rationalism and the emergence of a biopolitics that made Auschwitz possible.” Fuchs, “W. G. Sebald’s Painters,” 173. This connection is also discussed by J. J. Long. Long, *Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, 135.

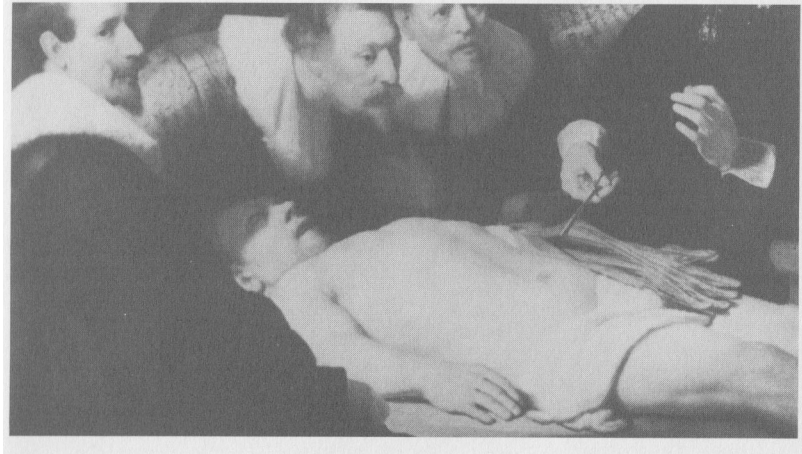


Figure 8. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (English), p. 16.

The true center of the painting, however, for the narrator, what makes it more than a finely executed reproduction of a historical scene, is exactly what the attendees of the dissection cannot see, but the artist, Rembrandt, can: the dead body, summarily executed, savagely dismembered before a paying public.<sup>68</sup> The book includes both a two-page reproduction of the full painting and a close-up of this corpse embedded in the text on the following page (fig. 8). What betrays Rembrandt's sympathy with the victim and his horror at those carrying out this dismemberment is precisely his anti-realist execution of this section of the painting:

[...] the much admired verisimilitude of Rembrandt's picture proves on closer examination to be more apparent than real. Contrary to normal practice, the anatomist shown here has not begun his dissection by opening the abdomen and removing the intestines, which are most prone to putrefaction, but has started (and this too may imply a punitive dimension to the act) by dissecting the offending hand. Now, this hand is most peculiar. It is not only grotesquely out of proportion compared with the hand closer to us, but it is also anatomically the way round: the exposed tendons, which ought to be those of the left palm, given the position of the thumb, are in fact those of the back of the right hand. In

<sup>68</sup> "Sebald's narrator portrays the artist Rembrandt as a voice in the wilderness, as someone who subtly and clandestinely protests against this rationalist ideology that privileges the machine-like schema of reason over the vitality of the human body and of material nature [...]." Richard T. Gray, "From Grids to Vanishing Points: W. G. Sebald's Critique of Visual-Representational Orders in *Die Ringe des Saturn*," 511.

other words, what we are faced with is a transposition taken from the anatomical atlas, evidently without further reflection, that turns this otherwise true-to-life painting [nach dem Leben gemalte Bild] (if one may so express it) into a crass misrepresentation at the exact centre point of its meaning, where the incisions are made. It seems inconceivable that we are faced here with an unfortunate blunder. Rather, I believe that there was deliberate intent behind this flaw in the composition. That unshapely hand signifies the violence that has been done to Aris Kindt. It is with him, the victim, and not the Guild that gave Rembrandt his commission, that the painter identifies [setzt der Maler sich gleich]. His gaze alone is free of Cartesian rigidity. He alone sees that greenish annihilated body and he alone sees the shadow in the half-open mouth and over the dead man's eyes. (Re 16-17/ Rg 25)

What Sebald says of Weiss, that he has “the will to be on the side of the victims at the end of time,” is true here of Rembrandt as well.<sup>69</sup> This, it is worth noting, is an important part of each of the works of art for which he expresses admiration in his works: they side with the victims of history. Unlike the Waterloo panorama, built on the corpses of the war dead, Rembrandt's painting points to the suffering and indignity endured by the executed criminal in the name of science. The painting makes this wrong once more visible. It is precisely because it foregoes the effected verisimilitude of the panorama that Rembrandt's painting is able to accomplish this, in its own way to give the dead victim of history and the forgotten, or never noticed, horror of this moment a voice: the anti-realist element of the painting “signifies the violence that has been done to Aris Kindt,” and it is with him, the narrator says, that the painter “identifies.”<sup>70</sup>

Rembrandt's painting, thus, sides with the dead. It finds a spirit still lingering in the “shadow in the half-open mouth and over the dead man's eyes.” This shadow is none

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<sup>69</sup> In fact, Sebald also mentions this painting in his essay on Weiss: “Rembrandt's picture of the dissection of a hanged body in the interests of higher ideals is an unsettling comment on the particular kind of knowledge to which we owe progress.” Sebald, “The Remorse of the Heart,” English 178/ German 135.

<sup>70</sup> “As interpreted by Sebald's narrator, Rembrandt's critique of abstract rational order proceeds via strategic ruptures with the rules governing proper representation in the visual arts, and one of the laws he transgresses is that of proportionality, dictated by an adhere to the principles of graphic perspective.” Gray, “From Grids to Vanishing Points,” 512-3.

other than the human soul, as the narrator makes clear by paralleling it with “the white mist that rises from within a body opened presently after death, and which during our lifetime [...] clouds our brain when asleep and dreaming,” according to the author Thomas Browne, who he claims may also have been in attendance at the anatomy lesson that day (*Re* 17/ *Rg* 25). As in his re-reading of Géricault’s painting, “The Raft of the Medusa,” through Peter Weiss’ *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, it is the “borderline” between physicality and “transcendancy” that fascinates Sebald. This borderline is where the painting, according to the *ekphrasis*, has its center point, and it is through this borderline that, with a remarkable degree of sympathy, the painting gains access to the untold and ignored story of the death and dismemberment of the thief, Aris Kindt.

This is not, however, merely a program for the visual arts. Sebald draws a parallel between Rembrandt’s experience of the anatomy lesson and his artistic response to it, and that of Thomas Browne, in his book, *Urn Burial*, a “part-archeological and part-metaphysical treatise” (*Re* 11/ *Rg* 19). There, Browne meditates on the undignified fate of our remains after death: “to be gnawed out of our graves is a tragical abomination. But [...] who is to know the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?” (quoted at *Re* 11/ *Rg* 19). It is not, then, only visual representation, but also textual representation that Sebald asks us to consider, here. The sympathy for the dead which necessitates an anti-realist program of representation, he implies, might equally be called for in the textual representation of the past.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> This recalls the program for the historical materialist that Walter Benjamin sets out in his theses “On the Concept of History”: “The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.” Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 391.



## Anti-Realist Historical Representation: Grünewald and Aurach

Not all of the works of art described in Sebald's oeuvre are historical scenes. There are, for example, a number of descriptions of medieval and early modern religious paintings, three by Matthias Grünewald in Sebald's book length poem, *After Nature*, and one each by Giotto and Pisanello in *Vertigo*.<sup>72</sup> Human history, however, enters into the works of art, according to these *ekphraseis*, in more subtle ways. It would be anachronistic, not to mention inaccurate, to describe these paintings as "realistic." It is, however, like in "The Anatomy Lesson," precisely where they most forcefully reject verisimilitude that we find history creeping in.

The only place, for example, where human life and human history are to be found in Grünewald's masterpiece, the Isenheim Altar, according to the *ekphrasis* of it in *After Nature*, is on the panel depicting the trials of St. Anthony, with its fantastical nightmare beasts:

Now life as such, as it unfolds, dreadfully,  
everywhere and at all times,  
is not to be seen on the altar panels  
whose figures have passed beyond  
the miseries of existence, unless it be  
in that unreal and demented thronging  
which Grünewald has developed around  
St. Anthony of the temptation [...]. (*Ne 25/ Ng 27*)

It would be wrong to stress too much the similarities between the *ekphraseis* in *After Nature* and those in the rest of Sebald's oeuvre. *After Nature* was Sebald's first published literary work, and, unlike his later prose works, it contains no pictures. As such, it is difficult to relate its own representational program, in that it is comprised only

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<sup>72</sup> I will not address the paintings in *Vertigo* directly, here, but there is a good discussion of them in Fuchs, "W. G. Sebald's Painters," 177-8.

of verse, to that of Sebald's other works, which are made up of prose and pictures. Nevertheless, this description of the St. Anthony panel on the Isenheim altar does function in a similar way. Elsewhere on the altar, according to the poem, the concern is with eternal things and the teachings of Christianity. Here, though, precisely where we find a collection of grotesque creatures whose shapes, unlike those of Christ and the saints on the other altars, we cannot recognize as similar to those we see in ourselves and in each other, is where we find, as well, the realities of human, historical existence.

There is, however, a deeper similarity to Rembrandt's "The Anatomy Lesson," here, as well. This panel includes a small depiction of a body which would otherwise have been made invisible to society, sequestered from the healthy: among the monsters surrounding St. Anthony is "Low down in the bottom left corner/ [...] the body, covered with/ syphilitic chancres, of an inmate of the Isenheim hospital" (*Ne* 25/ *Ng* 27). It is this body, and not that of St. Anthony himself, that has the "panic-stricken/ kink in the neck to be seen/ in all of Grünewald's subjects,/ exposing the throat and often turning the face towards a blinding light," which, Sebald tells, us "is the extreme response of our bodies/ to the absence of balance in nature" (*Ne* 27/ *Ng* 28). Although this figure is, so to speak, drawn from life, there is something unreal about him—his neck is bent back impossibly far, his belly horribly distended, and, like the monsters around him, his legs, otherwise human, seem to end in webbed feet.

This grotesque figure alone, though, is the place where sympathy for very real, historical human suffering enters into the painting—this is where, as Aeneas says of the murals in Carthage, we find the *lacrimae rerum*, where "mortal cares touch the mind." Once again, sympathy for the dead and the dying, an attempt to understand history from

their perspective as well, enters into the work of art precisely where it abandons any pretensions to verisimilitude.

It is in similar terms that the painter Max Aurach (in the English edition, Max Ferber) discusses a trip he made to view Grünewald's Isenheim Altar in *The Emigrants*:

The extreme vision [Weltsicht] of that strange man, which was lodged in every detail, distorted every limb, and infected the colours like an illness, was one I had always felt in tune with and now I found my feeling confirmed by the direct encounter. The monstrosity of that suffering, which, emanating from the figures depicted, spread to cover the whole of Nature, only to flood back from the lifeless landscape [aus den erloschenen Landschaften] to the humans marked by death [menschlichen Todesfiguren], rose and ebbed within me like a tide. Looking at those gashed bodies, and as the witnesses of the execution, doubled up by grief like snapped reeds, I gradually understood that, beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced—consciousness—and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about this. What is certain, though, is that mental suffering is effectively without end [...]. One plunges from one abyss [Abgrund] into the next. (*Ee* 170-1/ *Eg* 253-4)

Once again, it is the anti-realist elements of Grünewald's work that strikes Aurach—the bodies like snapped reeds, the “lifeless landscape,” which reveal the extremity and strangeness of Grünewald's vision. This is where he finds the work considering the more horrifying limits of the human condition, the suffering unto death which defies our ability to understand or even to experience, let alone to represent. It is, however, as I have said in my discussion of the Waterloo panorama in *The Rings of Saturn*, the traumatic history of the twentieth century which is at the center of Sebald's concern with the representation of history. Aurach is the child of Jewish victims of the Holocaust, and it is not hard to read the meditation on the difference between physical and mental suffering that ensues from his examination of Grünewald's work as a meditation on the suffering endured by the victims of the Holocaust. In his *ekphrasis* of

the Isenheim altar, he describes witnesses at an execution (in this case the crucifixion of Christ) and “humans marked by death [menschlichen Todesfiguren],” both of which are part of the repertoire of images that have entered into the public memory of the Holocaust.<sup>73</sup>

Aurach, however, is not just an observer of art, but an artist in his own right. And it is not difficult to find echoes of both this description of Grünewald’s work and the prevailing images of the Holocaust in the description of his own work:

And indeed, when I watched Aurach working on one of his portrait studies over a number of weeks, I often thought that his prime concern was to increase the dust. [...] and that process [...] really amounted to nothing but a steady production of dust, which never ceased except at night. Time and again, at the end of a working day, I marvelled to see that Aurach, with the few lines and shadows that had escaped annihilation [den wenigen der Vernichtung entgangenen Linien und Schatten], had created a portrait of great vividness [großer Unmittelbarkeit]. And all the more did I marvel when, the following morning, the moment the model had sat down and he had taken a look at him or her, he would erase [auslöschte] the portrait yet again, and once more set about excavating [herauszugraben] the features of his model [...] from a surface already badly damaged by the continual destruction [Zerstörungen]. The facial features and eyes, said Aurach, remained ultimately unknowable for him. He might reject as many as forty variants, or smudge them back into the paper and overdraw new attempts upon them; and if he then decided that the portrait was done, not so much because he was convinced that it was finished as through sheer exhaustion, an onlooker might well feel that it had evolved from a long lineage of grey, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper [als sei es hervorgegangen aus einer langen Ahnenreihe grauer, eingeäscherter, in dem zerschundenen Papier nach wie vor herumgeisternder Gesichter]. (*Ee* 161-22/ *Eg* 239-40)

There is a slippage, throughout this section of *The Emigrants*, which centers around the story of Max Aurach, between the industrial smokestacks of the necropolis-like city of Manchester, where Aurach lives and works, and the smokestacks of

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<sup>73</sup> The execution of prisoners in the camp before witnesses is, for example, the subject of one of the eleven sections of Peter Weiss’ play, *Die Ermittlung*, “Gesang der Schwarzen Wand.” Weiss, *Die Ermittlung*, 130-143.

Auschwitz, churning out their human dust and ash.<sup>74</sup> As Aurach says later, for example, of his life in Manchester, he realizes “that I am here, as they used to say, to serve under the chimney” (In English in both editions, *Ee* 192/ *Eg* 287), words that strike an ominous chord at a point in the story where we have just learned of the fate of his parents.<sup>75</sup> Here, the description of Aurach’s method of work, which adds to the dust and soot of his adopted home, also has striking echoes of the disposal of the bodies of the victims of the Holocaust in the furnaces of Auschwitz. The remarkably “verisimilar [unmittelbar]” outlines of the faces are “annihilated [vernichtet]” and “wiped out”—and the word Sebald uses, here, “auslöschte,” recalls the word Aurach will use to describe the landscapes in Grünewald’s works: “erlöschte.” All of this, he goes on to tell us, is part of a process of destruction, “Zerstörungen,” whose ultimate result and aim is the increasing of dust and soot. The words and the details of the description, in other words, contain a strong echo of the terrible destruction wrought by the Nazis in the concentration camps.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> The narrator remarks on this necropolis-like quality of the city of Manchester when he narrates his first visit to the city, earlier in this section of *The Emigrants*: “One might have supposed that the city had long since been deserted, and was left now as a necropolis [Totenhaus] or mausoleum” (*Ee* 151/ *Eg* 223).

<sup>75</sup> These words, according to Ernestine Schlant, “can be understood as a reference to the industrialized aspect of the Holocaust [...]” Schlant, *The Language of Silence: West German Literature and the Holocaust*, 230.

<sup>76</sup> There are echoes of this in the other descriptions of Aurach’s work in this section of *The Emigrants*, as well. One of his paintings is called an “exercise in destruction [Zerstörungsstudie]” (*Ee* 180/ *Eg* 269), and of his “faceless portrait ‘Man with a Butterfly Net’” the narrator tells us that Aurach “destroyed it and burnt it several times” (*Ee* 174/ *Eg* 260).



Figure 9. Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten*, p. 240.

This method of work, however, is not for naught. The result is one of Aurach's haunting portraits. In the German edition, inserted at this point is a reproduction of a coal drawing, "Head of Catherine Lampert VI," by Max Auerbach, the model for Aurach in Sebald's story (fig. 9). This drawing is presumably not included in the English edition for the same reason that the name of the character was changed—the similarity to the model for this story, Auerbach, was considered too close.

What results, as we can see both in the image and in the narrator's description, from the successive overlaying of verisimilar depictions of the face is a decidedly non-realist work of art, one, however, that expresses more than a single drawing of the model's face could. It is no longer a representation of a single face, but of a "long

lineage of grey, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper.” Given the explicit context of Aurach’s own ancestral line, “rendered unto ash” in the furnaces of Auschwitz, and given the echoes in the description of Aurach’s method of work of the work of those furnaces, it is not hard to see, in this, a hint that what he is representing is his own annihilated heritage. Aurach’s drawing, according to the *ekphrasis*, rescues from oblivion a ghostly, ancestral heritage that was meant to be destroyed in the smokestacks of Auschwitz.<sup>77</sup> It accomplishes this precisely by mimicking the means of its destruction. One might say, in fact, that it represents this destruction in the method of production whose trace is left on the damaged canvas. Aurach’s drawing, thus, by rejecting realism, becomes a representation of the Holocaust that sides with the victims and attempts to bring them back to life in the present. This, however, might also be taken as a description of Sebald’s own literary program, especially in *The Emigrants*, which has been said to represent a “Holocaust-in-absence.”<sup>78</sup> Each of the main characters in the four sections of the book is affected by the Holocaust, but nowhere is this addressed directly, only hinted at. Sebald’s method of work, in *The Emigrants*, like that of Aurach, is one of representation through erasure.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Anne Fuchs, although she does not make the connection to the Holocaust, tells us that “Aurach’s/Auerbach’s procedural painting technique thus understands art as a form of displaced and highly painful memory work.” Fuchs, “W. G. Sebald’s Painters,” 180.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Eder, “Excavating a Life.”

<sup>79</sup> Stefanie Harris points out that the narrator’s description of his method of writing echoes his description of Aurach’s obsessive process of erasing and overlaying one drawing on top of another: “These scruples concerned not only the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to, no matter what approach I tried, but also the entire questionable business of writing. I had covered hundreds of pages with my scribble, in pencil and ballpoint. By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions. Even what I ultimately salvaged as a ‘final’ version seemed to me a thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched” (*Ee* 230-1/ *Eg* 344-5). Harris, “The Return of the Dead,” 388.

Nevertheless, he ends up with a vivid portrait of the existential homelessness that has been the result for so many of this ultimate historical trauma.<sup>80</sup>

#### Ambivalent Focalization: A Photograph of Three Weavers in the Lodz Ghetto

So far, I have not examined in depth the role of the focalizer, the character through whose eyes we see the work of art described in Sebald's work, although, as we saw in the case of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the relationship between the focalizer and the work of art plays an important part in the interpretation of an *ekphrasis*. I would like to return, then, briefly to the *ekphrasis* of Rembrandt's "The Anatomy Lesson," which, as I have said, is the most programmatic in Sebald's oeuvre. The focalizer of this *ekphrasis* is primarily the narrator, the person whose walking tour through Suffolk makes up the main action (if it can be called that) of the book. When we look closely, however, at the description, we notice an odd shift:

If we stand today before the large canvas of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* in the Mauritshuis we are standing precisely where those who were present at the dissection in the Waagebouw stood, and we believe that we see what they saw then: the greenish, prone body of Aris Kindt, his neck broken and his chest risen terribly in rigor mortis. (*Re* 13/ *Rg* 21)

Why the shift to the first-person plural? Who is this "we"? Obviously, it is meant to include us, the readers of this story. The gesture the *ekphrasis* makes, then, is one of immediacy—we are meant to imagine ourselves in the narrator's place, viewing the

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<sup>80</sup> The parallel between Sebald and Aurach has been explored by Carol Jacobs, in "What Does it Mean to Count? W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*": "So what is it that Sebald is after? And do we not find an image of him in Max Aurach, the artist, prominently placed as the volume's last entry, in which narrator and author seem so drawn to one another." "The past, the person, replaced by the process of its reproduction [...]. This is, of course, also the way Max Sebald works, or at least his narrator, and never more than when he writes a portrait of Max Aurach." Jacobs, 909, 911.



painting, which is reproduced on the next page. Yet it is not just in the Mauritshuis with the painting that we find ourselves when we do so, but in the medical theater as well. The painting positions the viewer in such a way that he feels he is part of this scene, and the text likewise asks us to imagine ourselves in the scene, among the paying public with Thomas Browne and René Descartes.<sup>81</sup> We “stand” where they stood and “believe we see” what they saw. This gesture, in both the painting and the description of it in Sebald’s text, increases the vividness of the scene. We feel it come to life around us, because we are asked to imagine that we ourselves are there. It also, however, increases its emotional impact. It makes us, as part of the “paying public,” complicit in what we see. Rembrandt’s painting confronts us with what those actually present at the same time both did and did not see, the “harrowed” corpse of the convicted criminal, and it asks us to take sides: either with Rembrandt and Thomas Browne, who have sympathy for the executed and dismembered victim of this ritual, or with Descartes and the doctors who do not even seem to see the body at all. This is how Sebald’s *ekphraseis* close the gap between the two types of programs we said *ekphrasis* may embody. They tell us what and how art and literature may represent, but in so doing they make a claim for what they can do: they can force us to realize our own complicity in similar power dynamics and thus to choose sides between perpetrator and victim.

The final *ekphrasis* I would like to examine is one that functions in much the same way. It concludes the Aurach section at the very end of *The Emigrants*. This

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<sup>81</sup> Weiss’ narrator cites a similar effect in his description of Géricault’s “Raft of the Medusa”: “Der Beschauer, so hatte es der Maler gewollt, sollte, wenn auch keiner der Gescheiterten ihm einen Blick zuwandte, sich in unmittelbarer Nähe des Floßes wähnen, es sollte ihm scheinen, als hinge er, mit verkrampftem Griff, an einem der vorspringenden Bretter, zu matt schon, um die Rettung noch erleben zu können. Was sich anbahnte hoch über ihm, betraf ihn nicht mehr. Ihr, die ihr vor diesem Bild steht, so sagte der Maler, seid die Verlorenen, denen, die ihr verlassen habt, gehört die Hoffnung.” Weiss, *Ästhetik*, 478-9.

*ekphrasis*, however, is not a description of a painting or a sculpture, but of a color photograph, which is nowhere included in the book. Photography, of course, as a mode of representation, is ontologically different from painting, but, as we will see, Sebald minimizes this distinction in the description, or rather uses it to enhance the same effect of immediacy we found in the description of “The Anatomy Lesson.” The narrator sees this photograph as part of an exhibition of photographs on the flats of an imaginary stage he envisions in a kind of dream or hallucination he has in his hotel room in Manchester. The photograph, however, and the set of photographs of which it is a part are very real: they are the pictures taken by the Nazi-employed accountant, Walter Genewein, of the Jewish ghetto established in the Polish city of Lodz in 1940. Lodz is an industrial city once referred to as “Polish Manchester,” the narrator reminds us, so there is some congruence between them and his dream image of Manchester (*Ee* 235-6/ *Eg* 352). The photographs tie in nicely, as well, with one of the central themes of the book: the return of the dead.<sup>82</sup> As the narrator says, apropos of the recovery of the remains of the Bernese alpine guide, Johannes Naegali, at the conclusion of the first section of the book: “And so they are ever returning to us [kehren sie wieder], the dead. At times they come back from the ice more than seven decades later and are found at the edge of the moraine, a few polished bones and a pair of hobnailed boots” (*Ee* 23/ *Eg* 36-7).<sup>83</sup> Genewein’s photographs of the dead victims of the Holocaust (the ghetto was liquidated in 1944) have also returned years later—they were found “in 1987 in a small suitcase, carefully

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<sup>82</sup> Stefanie Harris argues that this is a key concept for *The Emigrants*, and especially represents an important way of thinking about the photographs in the text: “The narrator [insists] on this motif—the return of the dead and our relationship to the dead, which can be read simultaneously as the relationship to the past [...]” Harris, “The Return of the Dead,” 382.

<sup>83</sup> The narrator uses the same phrase to describe his reaction to a photo album that belonged to the school teacher, Paul Bereyter, in the section that tells his story: “looking at the pictures in it, it truly seemed to me, and still does, as if the dead were coming back [als kehrten die Toten zurück], or as if we were on the point of joining them” (*Ee* 46/ *Eg* 68-9).

sorted and inscribed, in an antique dealer's shop in Vienna" (*Ee* 236/ *Eg* 352), and the narrator has seen them in the real world in an exhibition in Frankfurt the year before (*Ee* 235/ *Eg* 352).

The narrator describes this set of photographs as a cross-section of ghetto life: they show the mayor, German administrators and soldiers, strangely empty streets, the postal system, hairdressers, etc. One subject, however, according to the text, fascinated the photographer, Genewein, particularly:

More important to him than anything else, apparently, was to show "our industry," the ghetto works that were essential to the wartime economy. In these production sites [...] everywhere there were faces, countless faces, who looked up from their work (and were permitted to do so) purposely and solely for the fraction of a second that it took to take the photograph. Work is our only course, they said [*Arbeit ist unser einziger Weg, hat es geheißen*]. (*Ee* 236-7/ *Eg* 354)

Although Sebald does not tell us this, "work is our only course," "Unser einziger Weg ist Arbeit," was the title of the exhibition of these photographs at the Judisches Museum in Frankfurt, a phrase meant to describe the choiceless choice of Jews forced to labor for the Nazis.

Finally, we come to the extended description of one photograph in particular from the exhibition:

Behind the perpendicular frame of a loom sit three young women, perhaps aged twenty. The irregular geometrical patterns of the carpet they are knotting, and even its colours, remind me of the settee in our living room at home [*zu Hause*]. Who the young women are I do not know. The light falls on them from the window in the background, so I cannot make out their eyes clearly, but I sense that all three of them are looking across at me, since I am standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera. The young woman in the middle is blonde and has the air of a bride about her. The weaver to her left has inclined her head a little to one side, whilst the woman on the right is looking at me with so steady and relentless a gaze that I cannot meet it for long [*daß ich es nicht lange auszuhalten vermag*]. I wonder what the three women's

names were—Roza, Luisa and Lea, or Nona, Decuma and Morta, the daughters of night, with spindle, scissors and thread. (*Ee* 237/ *Eg* 354-5)<sup>84</sup>

At first glance, we might take this set of photographs as the ultimate in realist representation. Their purpose, after all, was documentary. They were meant as documents, in fact, not for the purpose of indicting the Nazis who forced these young women to labor here, to endure the deprivations of the ghetto, and, most likely, to end their lives in the camps, but instead for the instruction and self-congratulation of the Nazis in the efficient organization of the ghetto. The photographer, Genewein, in other words, is no Rembrandt. And, as the narrator says about the anatomy lesson, the goal of this documentation may, in fact, have been to render the bodies of these workers invisible. What was important to Genewein and his intended audience was not who they were but what they were, a marvel of organization and economy (achieved at the expense of any concern for their lives or well-being).<sup>85</sup>

What the narrator emphasizes, however, in the case of the photograph of the three weavers, are the less verisimilar elements of the picture, the parts that are unclear or seem unreal, like the blurred portion of the “Raft of the Medusa” that so captures Sebald’s imagination in his essay on Weiss. And indeed, it is worth noting that photography, with its ability to isolate snippets of our world that are rarely considered outside a larger

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<sup>84</sup> A reproduction of this image can be found in the catalog of the exhibit, “*Unser einziger Weg ist Arbeit*,” 119.

<sup>85</sup> That the photographic gaze may be considered inherently authoritative and even violent and the way this complicates our understanding, especially, of Nazi photographs, has been addressed by Marianne Hirsch: “I have argued that [...] the gaze is external to human subjects situating them authoritatively in ideology, constituting them in their subjectivity [...]” Hirsch argues against this as a paradigm for understanding all photography, but maintains that this must be a part of our understanding of Nazi photographs: “The images of executions and burials are ruled by what we might term a murderous National Socialist gaze that violates the viewing relations under which we normally operate.” Hirsch, “Surviving Images,” 23, 26.

context, has often been enlisted on the side of surrealism.<sup>86</sup> Photographs capture reality, but they do not always, as Roland Barthes says in his essay on “The Reality Effect,” “connote the real.”<sup>87</sup> In fact, just the opposite, in looking at a photograph, we sometimes get the vertiginous sense that what we see is not how we experience reality at all.

The photograph of the three weavers is, once again, a sort of study in erasure. The narrator focuses on the shadow covering their eyes. There is something strange and indistinct as well, though, about the “irregular geometrical pattern” of the half-finished carpet, and, although the narrator does not mention this, in the actual photograph, this carpet and the vertical lines of the loom it is on partially obscure the figures behind them. What strikes the narrator most of all, however, is one detail—what Barthes might call the “punctum” of the photograph—that inspires a personal recollection.<sup>88</sup> The unfinished carpet reminds him of the pattern on the sofa “at home [zu Hause].” The description is ambiguous—does he mean the sofa he has now, in adult life, or is this “zu Hause,” in fact, his childhood home in Germany? Is the implication, then, that he himself has perhaps enjoyed the fruits of Jewish forced labor without even knowing it? The text goes

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<sup>86</sup> Walter Benjamin, for examples, writes in his “Little History of Photography”: “The peeling away of the object’s shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense for the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness—by means of its reproduction [...]. It is in these achievements that Surrealist photography sets the scene for a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings. It gives free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail.” Susan Sontag also makes the link between photography and surrealism: “Surrealism is the art of generalizing the grotesque and then discovering nuances (and charms) in *that*. No activity is better equipped to exercise the Surrealist way of looking than photography, and eventually we look at all photographs surrealistically[...]. Photographs furnish instant history, instant sociology, instant participation. But there is something remarkably anodyne about these new forms of packaging reality. The Surrealist strategy, which promised a new and exciting vantage point for the radical criticism of modern culture, has devolved into an easy irony that democratizes all evidence, that equates its scatter of evidence with history.” Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” 519. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 74-5.

<sup>87</sup> “This is what we might call the *referential illusion*. The truth of this illusion is this: eliminated from the realist speech-act as a signified of denotation, the ‘real’ returns to it as a signified of connotation; for just when these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do—without saying so—is *signify* it [...].” Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” 148.

<sup>88</sup> “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me.” Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.

on to emphasize his sense of complicity in the scene captured in the photograph: he sees himself “standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera.” As in Rembrandt’s “The Anatomy Lesson,” he is part of the scene. In fact, he finds himself identified with the Nazi accountant, Genewein. The gaze of the woman on the right, which, earlier in the description, he admitted he could not see clearly, is now “steady and relentless [unverwandt und unerbittlich],” and there is a hint of accusation in this. The three women, the victims, look at him not as a fellow-sufferer, but as one of the perpetrators of their suffering, and he cannot stand their gaze for long.

He considers, as well, what has been fully wiped out by the Nazis: the names of these women and who they really were apart from workers in a ghetto textile mill. He tries out three typical Eastern European Jewish names: Roza, Luisa, and Lea. As he ponders this, however, he finds that the lack of reference of the photograph, the fact that, in itself, it does not tell us who or what it captures, allows it to turn, in his imagination, into a classical tableau. Are these figures Roza, Luisa, and Lea, young Polish Jewish women, or “Nona, Decuma and Morta, the daughters of night, with spindle, scissors and thread,” the Fates who, according to ancient mythology and religion, measured out the thread of individual lives, cut them, and wove them together? The *ekphrasis*, thus, becomes more classical in subject than we might at first have imagined. It is hard, though, to see this as anything but ominous—the fate of these three young women determines the narrator’s fate, as it determines ours, especially if we do not learn the lessons of their suffering and death.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> This is how Stefanie Harris interprets the metamorphosis of the three weavers into the Fates: “They present a loss that cannot be transcended and thus put to rest, will not stay buried, but will remain a haunting that gazes relentlessly into the future, that returns again and again, that can not be cleaned up or

Important for us here, however, is how this past becomes present for the narrator in this *ekphrasis*. The *ekphrasis*, in other words, is also a *nekyia*.<sup>90</sup> The past comes back to life around the narrator as he finds himself in the scene, albeit in the uncomfortable position of the photographer, Genewein. This position, however, although it may be uncomfortable, is not unproductive. It asks him, and us the reader alongside of him, to decide whether we want to reject this role, to choose which side we want to stand on, with the victims or with the photographer and the Nazi regime of which he is a part, just as we were asked to choose whether we were with Rembrandt or Descartes in “The Anatomy Lesson.”<sup>91</sup> It also, however, points out that this choice may not be as simple as it seems. We may find ourselves complicit despite our best intentions. The most we can have, as Sebald says of Peter Weiss, is “the will to be on the side of the victims at the end of time.”

## Conclusion

I said earlier that Sebald’s *ekphrasis* function in a similar way to the description of Daedalus’ reliefs in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*. The parallel, however, goes deeper than this. The description of the reliefs, I have argued, is a précis of Aeneas’ journey to

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swept away. A past that must be passed on or else be consigned to oblivion, but that is threatened in the very act of its communication.” Harris, “The Return of the Dead,” 390.

<sup>90</sup> In Chapter 1, I discussed how Sebald’s approach to photography in general is inherently *nekyiastic*, that he approaches photography in general, and the photographs in his works, as a kind of raising of the dead.

<sup>91</sup> This is how Marianne Hirsch describes the dilemma perpetrator images present us with: “The Nazi gaze is so all-encompassing that even for those in the postmemorial generation, available screens seem to falter, and any potential resistance of the look is severely impaired. The retrospective irony that Sontag identifies with photography has ceased being ironic as we feel ourselves in the position of both killer and victim, inextricably entwined in a circle from which, even for those of us analyzing the images in the postmemorial generation, it is difficult to find an escape through ironic insight. Too late to help, utterly impotent, we nevertheless search for ways to take responsibility for what we are seeing [...], to experience, from a distance, even as we try to redefine, if not repair, these ruptures. This is the difficult work of postmemory.” Hirsch, “Surviving Images,” 26.

the underworld. The story the reliefs tell of Daedalus' own life runs roughly parallel to the story of Aeneas' descent which immediately follows it, with the former culminating in the apostrophe to Icarus, and the latter in the apostrophe to Marcellus. The grief at the loss of both of these famous sons, the poem emphasizes, cannot be fully expressed. The parallel, however, works both ways. The story of Aeneas' journey to the underworld is, as I will discuss in the next chapter, a representation of the past; the *ekphrasis* itself functions as a visit to the dead, where the figures out of the past come back to life around the viewer, in this case the hero, Aeneas.

One of the threads running through the *ekphrasis* in Sebald's work is the question of the relationship to the dead, and especially the dead victims of institutional violence—that is, the violence that states inflict on each other in war as well as that they inflict on those individuals and groups they deem worthy of execution and extermination. The Waterloo panorama in *The Rings of Saturn* establishes a single historical perspective, constructed, so to speak, on the graves of the war dead. It does not seek to do justice to them and bring their story back to life in the present, but to impose a single, authoritative view on the scene of their suffering and death. Rembrandt's "The Anatomy Lesson," on the other hand, forces us to see the indignity done to the body of the dead man, Aris Kindt. Whereas the Waterloo panorama establishes a perspective that does not really see the dead at all, "The Anatomy Lesson" combats a regime of vision that seeks to make the dead body, and the suffering and indignity endured by the individual to whom it belonged, invisible. In *The Emigrants*, the works of the artist, Max Aurach, focus in on the destruction of Jewish heritage in the Holocaust and attempt to bring the bearers of that heritage back to life. They transform a series of "wiped out" portraits "rendered unto



ash” into “a long lineage of grey, ancestral faces.” Later, the narrator finds the three weavers photographed in the Lodz ghetto, who presumably died in the concentration camps, coming back to life before him and, in fact, transforming into the arbiters of his own destiny. The works of art Sebald describes, then, are also in a way each a précis of a visit to the dead. They reside, eternally, at the entrance to the underworld of history which the books of which they are a part are meant to illuminate. In fact, these works of art themselves, at times, even aid in the illumination of this history.

Whether the work of art, and the work of literature as well—and this is a parallel Sebald’s works draw too—can ever really do justice to the dead victims of history is an open question in Sebald’s works. The works of art and literature Sebald enlists on his side, though, are those that attempt to do so. It is precisely in the representation of the suffering and indignity endured by the dead victims of historical violence that they find their greatest challenge. The infinite suffering of mental anguish, as Max Aurach puts it, defies representation, or at least demands representation by other means than the simple, verisimilar re-staging of historical scenes. This, though, is a concern inscribed in the *ekphraseis* in Virgil’s *Aeneid* as well, even if it is the suffering of those left alive, Daedalus’ grief for his son, the grief of the Roman people and Augustus’ royal family for Marcellus, that unsettles the representation of the traumatic past in his case. In both cases it is suffering that necessitates a new form of representation—Virgil, like Sebald, represents the loss of these sons “in absence,” by claiming to be unable to represent it. The suffering of the dead and dying victims, as well as the survivors, of institutional violence is one element of the representation of the past, but it is the one, for Virgil as well as for Sebald, that most defies representation and demands to be represented in non-

realist ways. Only then can the past be made present and the suffering endured by the victims and the survivors brought to light.

Sebald's response to this difficulty, as I have said, is to put forward a new model of the representation of the past, one based on classical *nekylia*, bringing the dead past back to life. This attempt to bring the dead past back to life in the present, however, demands more than a new theory of the representation of the past, but what he calls a unique "historical metaphysic," as well. It demands, in other words, that we fundamentally reorder our conception of historical time. In the next chapter, I will examine the unique historical metaphysic Sebald articulates in his works through a different classical *topos*: *katabasis*, the journey into the underworld.

### Chapter 3

“The Undiscovered Country”:

*Katabasis* in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Siegfried Kracauer’s *History*,  
and the Works of W. G. Sebald

When the narrator of *Austerlitz* tells us about Jacques Austerlitz’ unique method of historical representation, “bringing remembered events back to life,” he describes it as “a kind of metaphysic of history [eine Art Metaphysik der Geschichte]” (*Ae* 13/ *Ag* 22-3, translation modified). This is, to say the least, a puzzling formulation. What he means by this, or indeed how such a thing as a “metaphysic of history” is even possible, is not immediately clear.<sup>1</sup> History, in the sense that one might imagine a modern academic architectural historian such as Austerlitz would understand it, is materialistic and diachronic. The subjects of metaphysics are, by definition, neither.<sup>2</sup> A “metaphysic of history” would therefore seem to be a contradiction in terms.

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<sup>1</sup> We might hear in this an echo of Walter Benjamin’s assertion, in his Theses “On the Concept of History,” that his own brand of historical thinking, “historical materialism,” relies upon “theology.” Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 389. The influence of Benjamin’s historical philosophy on Sebald has been much discussed, and I will not address it directly here. See, for example, Jan Ceuppens, “Realia: Konstellationen bei Benjamin, Barthes, Lacan—und Sebald.”

<sup>2</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines “metaphysics” as follows: “The branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things or reality, including questions about being, substance, time and space, causation, change, and identity (which are presupposed in the special sciences but do not belong to any one of them); theoretical philosophy as the ultimate science of being and knowing.” Metaphysics, in other words, deals with things that are not material and do not change over time. Sebald gives us a clue as to what he means by “metaphysics” in an interview with Joseph Cuomo in 2001: “[...] metaphysics is something that’s always interested me, in the sense that one wants to speculate about those areas that are beyond one’s ken, as it were [...]. So metaphysics, I think, is a legitimate concern. Writers like Kafka, for instance, are interested in metaphysics. If you read a story like ‘The Investigations of a Dog,’ it has a

Austerlitz' theory of the representation of history, which I have argued in Chapter 1 is also Sebald's own, valorizes representational techniques that present moments of the past "as if they were present," and thus bring the dead past back to life in the present, while maintaining an awareness of the mediated and thus potentially misleading nature of the representation.<sup>3</sup> That the nekyiastic mode of historical representation Sebald and his character embrace is tied to a unique and indeed metaphysical understanding of history itself, however, only becomes clear when we begin to understand Austerlitz' unique conception of historical time. Austerlitz hints throughout *Austerlitz* that his own understanding of historical time deviates radically from that which undergirds most modern historiography.<sup>4</sup> He makes this most explicit, though, in an episode where he and the narrator visit the astronomical observatory in Greenwich, England, what one might call the capital of standardized, progressive time.<sup>5</sup> In their conversation there, Austerlitz brings into question the idea that time can be thought of as a river flowing in an orderly way ever-forward from one moment to the next:

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subject whose epistemological horizon is very low. He doesn't realize anything above the height of one foot. He makes incantations so that the bread comes down from the dinner table. How it comes down he doesn't know. But he knows that if he performs certain rites, then certain events will follow. And then he goes, this dog, through the most extravagant speculations about reality, which we know is quite different. As he, the dog, has this limited capacity of understanding, so do we. And so it's quite legitimate to ask—and of course it can become a parlor game, as it did in Bloomsbury—these philosophers said, 'Are we sure that we're really sitting here at this table?'" "A Conversation with W. G. Sebald," 115-6.

<sup>3</sup> This, according to Janice Hewlett Koelb, is how ancient rhetorical and poetic thinkers describe "vividness," *enargeia* in Greek: vivid descriptions that conjure up scenes "as if present," i. e. as if we were present at them or they were present to us. Koelb, *The Poetics of Description*, 30.

<sup>4</sup> For example, after discovering a photograph that he thinks might be of his parents and one of himself as a child, Austerlitz muses: "It does not seem to me [...] that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like, and the longer I think about it the more it seems to me that we who are still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead, that only occasionally, in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, do we appear in their field of vision" (*Ae* 185/ *Ag* 269).

<sup>5</sup> The narrator tells us that he and Austerlitz encountered in the Observatory, "ingenious observational instruments and measuring devices, quadrants and sextants, chronometers and regulators, displayed in the glass cases." These are instruments, in other words, not just for the precise measurement of heaven, but of time as well. (*Ae* 98/ *Ag* 148)

If Newton [...] really thought that time was a river [ein Strom] like the Thames, then where is its source and into what sea does it finally flow? Every river, as we know, must have banks on both sides, so where, seen in those terms, where are the banks of time? What would be this river's qualities, qualities perhaps corresponding to those of water, which is fluid, rather heavy, and translucent? (*Ae* 100/ *Ag* 150)

We cannot, in other words, think of time as a continuum along which events progress from past, to present, to future, in the same way and at essentially the same rate everywhere.<sup>6</sup> This way of thinking conjures up, immediately, the idea of some origin of history and some teleological endpoint, some "source" and some "sea" into which time flows. It disregards, as well, cultures and individuals whose histories and life-stories cannot aptly be described by the term "progress."<sup>7</sup> Progress, Sebald reminds us, is not merely a temporal term but a geographical term as well. Its inherent logic implies that the more "advanced" modes of living it valorizes will spread throughout the world, an idea that rests uncomfortably close to the program of imperial expansion followed by the colonial powers of the West.<sup>8</sup>

Austerlitz goes on to explain that his own conception of time, in contrast, is one in which moments of time are not thought of as successive, but, potentially at least, as simultaneously present:

The dead are outside time, the dying and all the sick at home or in hospitals, and they are not the only ones, for a certain degree of personal misfortune is enough to cut us off from the past and the future. [...] I have always resisted the power of time [...] in the hope, as I now think, said

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, in the Theses "On the Concept of History," discusses this as the assumption that history moves through what he calls "homogeneous," "empty" time. He connects it to a naive and politically reactionary conception of "progress." Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 397.

<sup>7</sup> Austerlitz asks, "is not human life in many parts of the earth governed to this day less by time than by the weather [...]?" And he goes on to tell us that, "Even in a metropolis ruled by time like London [...] it is still possible to be outside time [...]" (*Ae* 100-1/ *Ag* 151).

<sup>8</sup> Todd Presner has convincingly drawn a connection between progress and colonial expansion in Hegel's *Philosophy of History*. In "Hegel's Philosophy of World History via Sebald's Imaginary of Ruins," he argues that the engagement with history in Sebald's works opposes the model of progress Hegel formulates.

Austerlitz, that time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously, in which case none of what history tells us would be true, past events have not occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment when we think of them, although that, of course, opens up the bleak prospect of everlasting misery and neverending anguish. (*Ae* 101/ *Ag* 151-2)

The connection, here, to Austerlitz' nekyiastic mode of historical representation is clear: "the dead," after all, are foremost among those who occupy this no-man's-land of simultaneous history, they and those who are already somewhat dead themselves, the dying and the traumatized. They are all at least partially dead in the sense that the potentially meaningful part of their existence is in the dead past, the past that is in danger of being forgotten. This connection, between what Austerlitz calls a "nonconcurrent [ungleichzeitig]" conception of time and the conception of historical representation as raising the dead past and bringing it back to life, makes sense: the idea that the historical observer can bring the dead moments of the past before the mind's eye of his audience "as if they were present" implies the notion of a zone in which they are always already potentially present—otherwise they would have to be conjured from nothing. The distribution of past events, thought of spatially and not temporally—"behind" the active present, as Austerlitz says—is a back-formation of Sebald and Austerlitz' theory of historical representation. In classical epic, *nekyia* means drawing the dead up from the land of the dead and making them present. It implies, then, a land of the dead in which the dead spirits reside when they are not being forced into the service of the epic hero. If Sebald views Austerlitz' and his own mode of historical representation as a kind of *nekyia*, then this zone where the dead past is always potentially available for representation is a kind of land of the dead.

There is another classical epic motif, distinct from *nekyia* but closely connected to it, which deals more directly with this land of the dead: *katabasis*, the journey into the underworld. In fact, it is in the terms of this other motif that Austerlitz describes his altered sense of historical time: the zone where different moments are arrayed spatially is not only the home of “the dead,” it is also, potentially, “the bleak prospect of everlasting misery and neverending anguish” (*Ae* 101). This “prospect” describes exactly what is seen by Dante’s Pilgrim, by Virgil and Ovid’s Orpheus, and by Virgil’s Aeneas in their journeys to the land of the dead.<sup>9</sup> This, however, is not the only allusion to the classical epic journey to the land of the dead in Sebald’s oeuvre. Time and again, his main characters (Jacques Austerlitz in *Austerlitz*, the narrator elsewhere) find themselves in places described implicitly and, at times, explicitly as a kind of underworld. These episodes are ones in which the characters experience the unique sense of time which is the prerequisite for the mode of historical representation encapsulated in the idea of “bringing remembered events back to life.” They find the moments of the past, present, and future spread out around them, occupying distinct spatial positions. It is not only the character’s own perspective, however, on these different moments that these episodes emphasize. Rather, each of the different moments evoked there “comes to life” and provides a perspective from which to view each of the other moments, including the character’s present. These different perspectives ironize and disrupt an ideological understanding of history as constant forward progress, proceeding from more “barbaric” to more “civilized” forms of society and ways of life.

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<sup>9</sup> In classical epic, the zone of eternal punishment in the underworld is Tartarus. Aeneas sees it and hears the screams emanating from it in the distance (6.548-627); in Dante this realm becomes the whole of the Inferno.

In classical epic texts, the location of the underworld is fixed, and the journey to and return from the underworld is only enacted once. Classical authors use the underworld as a way to examine history and historical representation: figures from the past, present, and even those yet to be born in the future are there, each occupying their unique spatial position. For Sebald, however, any place marked by history (what James Young calls a “site of memory”) and any moment in which the historical past becomes present in the mind of the historical observer can provide an opportunity for *katabasis*.<sup>10</sup> For classical authors, such as Virgil, the underworld is a spatial representation of history. For Sebald, history itself is an underworld.

In the last chapter I ended my analysis of the *Aeneid*, so to speak, at the gates of the underworld. I will pick up my analysis of the *Aeneid* there, with an examination of Aeneas’ journey to the land of the dead in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, which I will argue is an archetypal example, within the classical tradition, of *katabasis* as a form of engagement with the past. The thematic significance of Aeneas’ *katabasis*, however, is not unitary. In fact, one might say that there are three underworlds in the *katabasis* in the *Aeneid*: a mythological underworld, modeled on Odysseus’ *nekylia* in the *Odyssey*, in which Aeneas encounters figures out of his own past and his mythological predecessors; a philosophical underworld, modeled primarily on the “myth of Er” in Plato’s *Republic*, in which the spirit of Aeneas’ father, Anchises, tells him about the circular nature of time and the reincarnation of the soul; and a historical underworld, in which Aeneas encounters those

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<sup>10</sup> Young tells us that these “sites of memory,” need not necessarily be physical monuments or memorials. They can simply be markers of the past thought of in spatial terms. In discussing written “memorial books” kept to remember European Jewish communities destroyed in the Holocaust, he tells us: “The scribes hoped that, when read, the Yizkor Bikher would turn the site of reading into memorial space. In need of cathartic ceremony, in response to what has been called ‘the missing gravestone syndrome,’ survivors thus created interior spaces, imagined grave sites, as the first sites for memory.” Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, 7.



souls who are waiting to be reborn as the future, from his perspective, heroes of Roman history. These three underworlds are not clearly distinguished from one another, but overlap. History, metaphysics, and the poetics of the past thus bump up against each other in ways that are not always harmonious. The various figures, emblematic of distinct moments of history, whom Aeneas encounters distributed spatially around the underworld provide different perspectives on each other. As in Sebald's underworlds of history, these perspectives disrupt and ironize a progressive, teleological model of history culminating in the new golden age of Augustus' reign and the world-wide expansion of Roman imperial power.

Next, I will examine the historical philosophy of the German critic, Siegfried Kracauer, focusing on his book, *History: The Last Things before the Last*, written in English and published posthumously in 1969. Kracauer's philosophy of history anticipates Sebald's in several ways. It opposes an ideological notion of progress, and it substitutes for traditional modes of historical engagement one remarkably similar to that which we find in the *katabasis* episodes in Sebald's works. His study of historical thought centers around two allegorical figures who represent his ideal historian: Orpheus, Aeneas' famous predecessor in the journey to the underworld, who descends to the land of the dead to bring the spirit of his wife, Eurydice, back to the world of the living; and Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, doomed to wander the earth through all history until the second coming. Kracauer does not refer to the *katabasis* in the *Aeneid*, but he draws on a connected example of *katabasis*, the description of Orpheus' journey to the underworld in the *Georgics*, whose themes and descriptive details Virgil expands

upon in the much longer *katabasis* in the *Aeneid*.<sup>11</sup> As Orpheus, Kracauer tells us, the historian brings the dead past back to life, but he also returns from the underworld with something more substantial: an understanding of the past that can be transformed into a political praxis in the present.<sup>12</sup> As Ahasuerus, he cultivates a trans-historical perspective that challenges any ideological conception of historical time.<sup>13</sup> Sebald's historical observers, I will argue, in their wandering and their engagement with the "underworlds of history," are also, like Kracauer's ideal historian, equal parts Ahasuerus and Orpheus. They combine a spatial, visual mode of engagement with the past with a peripatetic one—one, in other words, modeled on the idea of walking into and through spaces filled with evocative images of the past.

Finally, then, I will turn to those passages modeled on classical *katabasis* in Sebald's works, to show how they embody the unique "historical metaphysic," the distinct conception of historical time, that undergirds his nekyiastic mode of historical representation, which strives to "bring remembered events back to life." I will begin by examining katabatic passages in *Austerlitz*, which I have argued is a key text in understanding Sebald's historical thought, but I will also highlight katabatic passages in *The Rings of Saturn*, *The Emigrants*, and *Vertigo*. Sebald's wandering historical

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<sup>11</sup> Virgil, *Georgics*, 4.457-506.

<sup>12</sup> "Like Orpheus, the historian must descend into the nether world to bring the dead back to life. How far will they follow his allurements and evocations? They are lost to him when, re-emerging in the sunlight of the present, he turns for fear of losing them. But does he not for the first time take possession of them at this very moment—the moment when they forever depart, vanishing in a history of his own making?" Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, 79.

<sup>13</sup> "It occurs to me that the only reliable informant on these matters, which are so difficult to ascertain, is a legendary figure—Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. He indeed would know firsthand about the developments and transitions, for he alone in all history has had the unsought opportunity to experience the process of becoming and decaying itself. (How unspeakably terrible he must look! To be sure, his face cannot have suffered from aging, but I imagine it to be many faces, each reflecting one of the periods which he traversed and all of them combining into ever new patterns, as he restlessly, and vainly, tries on his wanderings to reconstruct out of the times that shaped him the one time he is doomed to incarnate.)" Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, 157.

observers encounter history as underworld everywhere they go. Every space they walk through has the potential to become a land of the dead, filled with evocative images out of the past. The prevalence of these passages, I argue, demonstrates that, for Sebald, history is itself a sort of classical underworld, where different moments may be thought of as occupying distinct locations in a shared space, each providing a perspective on the other.

### *Katabasis in the Aeneid*

When Aeneas descends into the underworld, he does something his epic forebear, Odysseus, never does. Odysseus, in the *Odyssey*, calls the dead up to him from a fixed point in the mortal realm—or, perhaps more aptly, from a liminal point between the two realms. Aeneas actually leaves the mortal realm and travels from place to place within the land of the dead. This is a distinction that the *Aeneid* is at pains to highlight as well. Several times in his travels around the Mediterranean, Aeneas encounters the traces of Odysseus' journey as narrated in the *Odyssey*.<sup>14</sup> When Aeneas is told, by Charon, the ferryman on the river Styx in the underworld, of those who have previously journeyed there, however, Odysseus' name is conspicuously absent from the list: *nec vero Alciden me sum laetatus euntem/ accepisse lacu, nec Thesea Perithoumque,/ dis quamquam geniti atque invicti viribus essent*, "But I was not pleased to take the journeying Herakles on the water, nor Theseus, nor Perithous, although they were the children of gods and

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<sup>14</sup> In Book III, for example, Aeneas tells Dido how his crew encountered a member of Odysseus' crew, whom Odysseus had left behind in his haste to escape from the Cyclops, Polyphemus (3.570-683). The story of Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops is told by Odysseus to the Phaiakians at *Odyssey* 9.105-566.

unmatched for strength” (6.392-4).<sup>15</sup> The Sibyl, Aeneas’ guide in the underworld, reinforces this distinction between those select heroes who have descended and returned from the land of the dead alive and those who have not, with her famous words: *sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras,/ hoc opus, hic labor est*, “but to recall your steps and to depart to the air above, this is the task, this the struggle” (128-9).

The forcefulness of the Sibyl’s distinction might be ascribed to the so-called “anxiety of influence.” By having his hero, Aeneas, outdo his predecessor, Odysseus, Virgil outdoes his own poetic predecessor, Homer. The difference between Odysseus’ *nekylia* and Aeneas’ *katabasis*, however, are not just quantitative—Aeneas does more, goes further than Odysseus—but qualitative as well. Odysseus’ encounter with the dead spirits in the *Odyssey*’s *nekylia*, as I have argued in Chapter 1, is comparable to a film or a photographic slideshow. There is a kind of screen between him and the land of the dead, at which the “images” of the dead spirits each flash up momentarily—*eidolon*, which means “image,” is the word Homer uses to refer to the dead spirits, and Virgil follows him by describing the spirits, occasionally, as *imagines*, the Latin translation of *eidola*. Aeneas’ *katabasis*, one might say, in contrast, is fully 3-D. He has no fixed perspective, but rather moves around a fully articulated, albeit supernatural, space. This space combines features of interior and exterior spaces. It has “groves” and “forests,” but also “vestibules” and “gates.” It has thus been connected both to the geography of the nascent empire, which was just then, in Virgil’s day, being mapped for administrative purposes

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<sup>15</sup> Orpheus is also not mentioned here, but Virgil himself has told the story of Orpheus’ *katabasis* in the *Georgics* (4.453-527). He comes up, as well, several times in Book VI of the *Aeneid*. Aeneas mentions him in a speech to the Sibyl as one of his predecessors in journeying into the underworld, and then actually encounters his spirit in Elysium (6.115-123, 645-7). Odysseus, in contrast, is not mentioned once in Book 6.

and thus made accessible to mental representation;<sup>16</sup> and to the interior “memory palaces” that orators were taught to construct in their minds as a mnemonic to remember the subjects of their speeches, and which were filled, like the underworld, with evocative “images,” *imagines*.<sup>17</sup> There is a spatial dimension to Virgil’s underworld almost entirely absent in Odysseus’ *nekylia*. It is not just the spirits’ position relative to the hero that is foregrounded in the *Aeneid*. The dead occupy specific spatial coordinates in relation to one another as well, both between the various distinct regions that comprise the underworld, and within these regions. This distinction is crucial for understanding how the *katabasis* uses different historical perspectives to undermine the master narratives of Roman history. The various visual perspectives provided by the ghostly figures who represent distinct moments and events out of the past force us to adopt the temporal subject-positions of these figures as well, and to understand the history which, taken together, they embody from these various subject-positions. This will be important, as well, when we turn to Sebald’s “underworlds of history” to understand how they undermine a progressive narrative of history.

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<sup>16</sup> “I begin from the assumption that the *Aeneid*’s depiction of the underworld as a sequence of distinct geographic regions that also appear as administrative units under the jurisdiction of judges and obedient to the laws they give, can be profitably related not only to earlier philosophical and literary traditions concerning life after death, but also to a contemporary interest in the representation of space in Augustan Rome. [There was] an important transformation in the Roman conceptualization of space and power during the beginning of the principate. As never before, geography comes to provide a schema of *imperium*: territorial entities increasingly coincide with administrative ones so that abstract conceptions of power and authority take on defined spatial limits.” Andrew Feldherr, “Putting Dido on the Map: Genre and Geography in Vergil’s Underworld,” 86.

<sup>17</sup> “Epic underworlds may be related to this venerable mnemonic technique, they may in fact contain the reminiscence of a technique of reminiscing. And yet the ‘places’ of memory [...] become the burial-places of memory only with the supervention of the idea of repression, an *active* forgetting, so to speak, as opposed to the merely passive decay of the memory trace. It is the psychoanalytic *ars memoriae* that the following chapters primarily address.” Ronald R. MacDonald, *The Burial-Places of Memory: Epic Underworlds in Vergil, Dante, and Milton*, 9-10. For an excellent discussion of the use of the so-called “art of memory” in ancient Rome, see Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 1-26. Russell J. A. Kilbourn connects this “art of memory,” via Augustine, to Sebald’s discussion of memory (he also connects classical *katabasis* to Sebald’s discussion of memory, although he does not draw a clear connection between the art of memory and *katabasis*). Kilbourn, “Architecture and Cinema,” 144.

The outline of Aeneas' *katabasis* is as follows: First, Aeneas retrieves the famous "golden bough" in the forest, the mystical token which, the Sibyl has told him, will be necessary for his journey to the underworld, and which will only yield to one who is meant to make the journey (183-212). Aeneas and the Sibyl then perform a sacrifice in a cave, similar to the one Odysseus performs before his *nekyia* in the *Odyssey* (236-263). Aeneas and the Sibyl then enter the underworld, where they first encounter monstrous shapes and the personified causes of death (old age, hunger, etc.) (268-294). Next, they encounter souls waiting to cross the river Styx and the ferryman, Charon (295-416). Among the spirits, here, is Aeneas' companion, Palinurus, who is not yet allowed to cross into the underworld proper because he has not yet been buried (337-383). After crossing the Styx, Aeneas and the Sibyl incapacitate the guard dog, Cerberus, with a drugged honey-cake, and proceed into the first region of the underworld proper, where they encounter the spirits of those who died in infancy and those unjustly condemned to death (417-439). Aeneas and the Sibyl then enter the "mourning fields" where they encounter the souls of those who have died because of love and who have held onto their grief in death (440-476). Among other famous figures, they encounter Dido, who has killed herself because she was spurned by Aeneas. Aeneas attempts to address her, but she does not say a word. Aeneas and the Sibyl then come to the "farthest fields," where famous warriors have their place. Among them Aeneas encounters the spirit of Deiphobus, Priam's son, still bearing the disfiguring wounds he received at the hands of the Greeks, to whom his wife, Helen, betrayed him during the taking of Troy (477-547). Next, they pass by the walls of Tartarus, on their left. It is there, the Sibyl tells him, that the most wicked spirits are punished, and she describes some of these punishments to Aeneas

(548-627). Aeneas and the Sibyl turn away from Tartarus and reach the entrance to the Elysian Fields, where he deposits the golden bough. There they encounter the blessed spirits of the great heroes of the past (628-678). They then find the spirit of Anchises, Aeneas' father, in a separate grove, admiring the spirits of those who will be reborn as the great figures of Roman history (679-723). Anchises explains the cycle of cleansing and reincarnation the soul endures in the underworld and lays out a cosmological system that borrows heavily from Plato among other philosophers (724-751). He then shows Aeneas the parade of future Romans, pointing out several and telling their story (752-892). He especially singles out Marcellus, Augustus' chosen heir who died young, and performs a sort of mock funeral for him (855-886). Finally, Aeneas and the Sibyl leave the underworld through the ivory gate of false dreams and return to the world above (893-901).

The first section of this journey, up through Aeneas' entry into the Elysian Fields, is full of more mythological and Homeric resonances.<sup>18</sup> As in Odysseus' *nekyia*, Aeneas encounters there figures out of his own past and the more distant past. Virgil signals this debt by modeling several of the episodes on those in the *nekyia*. Thus Aeneas' encounter

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<sup>18</sup> My division of Virgil's underworld into three parts expands upon R. D. Williams' division of the underworld into two distinct sections: "The events in the Underworld are presented in two parts: first a journey, a *katabasis*, through the various territories of the land of ghosts; and secondly a philosophical or theological account by Anchises of the notions of purification and rebirth, which introduces the pageant of Roman heroes by the stream of Lethe. Now in a way these parts are independent of one another, they perform different functions in the poem, and they certainly have not been combined by Virgil into a single consistent doctrine." Williams, "The Sixth Book of the *Aeneid*," 193. Brooks Otis makes roughly the same division, and refers to the two parts as the "Homeric" and the "Platonic" sections. Otis, *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry*, 291. My creation of another division, however, within their "philosophical" section, is inspired partially by an observation that Denis Feeney makes, that there is an incongruity between the values Anchises' cosmological speech espouse, which are spiritual, not earthly, and the love of earthly "glory" which the parade of heroes is explicitly meant to inspire in Aeneas: "At issue here is a fundamental paradox, an eschatology which is expressed and presented with a recognised philosophical tradition, but which appears to champion mundane values disparaged by that tradition, turning our eyes insistently towards this corporeal world, away from the concerns of the soul." Feeney, "History and Revelation in Vergil's Underworld," 2.

with the shade of Palinurus echoes Odysseus' encounter with his own unburied companion, Elpenor; Aeneas' encounter with the spirit of Dido, who still bears a grudge against him and will not speak to him, follows Odysseus' encounter with the spirit of Ajax; and Aeneas' encounter with Deiphobus is modeled on Odysseus' encounter with Agamemnon, who has likewise been betrayed by his wife and murdered.<sup>19</sup>

The next section, however, where Anchises explains the cycle of death and reincarnation to Aeneas and how the mortal realm sullies the soul, which must then be cleansed by a stay in the underworld, is modeled more on *katabaseis* that are a part of religious and philosophical texts. There was, in antiquity, a long line of such stories, in which a journey to the land of the dead was an occasion for cosmological revelation, but Virgil draws especially on the "myth of Er" at the end of Plato's *Republic*.<sup>20</sup> There, Socrates tells the story of Er, a man who dies on the battlefield but is revived twelve days later, before he can be buried.<sup>21</sup> While his soul is out of his body, Er sees a vision of the afterlife. The just souls ascend to heaven, but the unjust descend to a world below to be punished and purged of their misdeeds. In both cases, after a thousand years, the souls reunite, and they each choose a new body for a return to the mortal realm. There are

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<sup>19</sup> "Elpenor is clearly a model of Palinurus; each comes first in the description, each had died recently and begs for burial. The silence of Dido (6.469ff.) recalls the silence of the angry Ajax (*Od.* 11.563f.). The dialogue between Aeneas and Deiphobus has some points of similarity with that between Odysseus and Agamemnon." R. D. Williams, "The Sixth Book of the *Aeneid*," 195.

<sup>20</sup> "The notion of the afterlife as a relief from toil which we find in the last part of Book 6 of the *Aeneid* probably springs from popular belief and folklore crystallized and organized by Orphic mystery religions and Pythagorean philosophy; many Orphic ideas were developed by Plato, and many were assimilated in Stoicism. Orphic poems describing a descent into the Underworld (a *katabasis*) began to be written, perhaps from the sixth century onwards." Williams, 192. R. G. Austin tells us that the cosmology of Anchises' disquisition on the nature and the fate of the soul is "a poetic synthesis, blending the Stoic doctrine of the *anima mundi* with Platonic and Orphic-Pythagorean teaching of rebirth." Austin, *Aeneidos Liber Sextus*, 220. For a discussion of the various philosophical and poetic roots of Anchises' speech, including Plato, Cicero, and Ennius, see Philip R. Hardie, *Virgil's Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium*, 66-83. For a discussion of Orphic religious beliefs, the descent into the underworld, and the revelation of the afterlife, see especially chapter V of W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*.

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 614b-621d.



Platonic resonances throughout Book VI of the *Aeneid*.<sup>22</sup> The specific parallels, however, between Anchises' vision of the nature and the fate of the soul and that laid out in the "myth of Er"—reincarnation, the thousand year span which the cleansing of the soul demands, etc.—make it clear that Virgil has in mind as much the *nekylia* of Homer's Odysseus as the journey to the land of the dead of Plato's Er as models for Aeneas' *katabasis*.

Finally, the section in which Anchises shows Aeneas the parade of future Roman heroes is almost without precedent in katabatic literature.<sup>23</sup> Here, the concern is with something that is central neither for Homer in the *nekylia* nor for Plato in the "myth of Er": history, not just the representation of events, but an understanding of their connection to one another and their place in a larger pattern of human events in time. If the second, Platonic section addresses the larger spiritual significance of events on earth, this third, historical part deals with their larger earthly significance, how they fit into a conception of historical time as teleological, cyclical, or shaped according to some other pattern. It is this section with which I will be most concerned here. I will argue that the conception of Roman history as teleologically leading up to a new golden age under the reign of Augustus comes into conflict both with the conception of time laid out in the metaphysical, Platonic section of the underworld and with the perspectives on history

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<sup>22</sup> There is an excellent discussion of these Platonic resonances in the *katabasis* in D. A. West, "The Bough and the Gate."

<sup>23</sup> Anchises to some extent parallels Teiresias in the *Odyssey's nekylia*, who prophesies the future for Odysseus. In both cases, the conversation with these prophetic figures is specifically set out as the goal of the hero's journey (*Od.* 10.535-40; *Aen.* 6.735-7). Teiresias, however, predicts Odysseus' individual fate. He tells him of the individual trials he must face to get home and to appease the gods. Anchises tells Aeneas of the future of Rome, a fate that extends far beyond the scope of his own life. In fact, it stresses how Aeneas' adventures are embedded in the larger teleological historical process of the unfolding of Rome's ultimate glory, of which they are only a small, if crucial, part.

supplied by the figures Virgil chooses as part of the parade of future Romans to represent specific events in Roman history.<sup>24</sup>

### The Encounter with the Spirit of Dido: Historical Double-Vision

It is not only the section of the *katabasis* that deals directly with Roman history that undermines the Augustan imperial ideology. In the mythological section of the *katabasis* the different temporal perspectives provided by the shades also contribute to a larger unsettling of a teleological model of history. Each of the three spirits Aeneas addresses there, Palinurus, Dido, and Deiphobus, represent specific episodes in his past narrated in the earlier books of the *Aeneid*.<sup>25</sup> Aeneas, however, does not encounter any of these figures alone. They are each accompanied, in their specific, geographically distinct zone of the underworld, by groups of shades whose stories have certain thematic (and perhaps generic) similarities to their own. Dido occupies the ‘mourning fields,’ as the poet tells us they are called, together with multiple figures representative of different events in the mythological past. Aeneas sees, besides her, Phaedra, Procris, Eriphyle, Evadne, Pasiphae, Laodamia, and Caeneus, whom *secreti celant calles et myrtea circum/ silva tegit*, “hidden paths obscure and a surrounding forest of myrtle encloses” (443-4). The landscape thematizes what these figures’ stories have in common—the *error*,

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<sup>24</sup> This incongruity between the values implied by the cosmology Anchises presents in the metaphysical section of the *katabasis* and the values he promotes in the historical section has been pointed out by critics of the *Aeneid*, especially Denis Feeney in “History and Revelation in Vergil’s Underworld.” My analysis will focus on the way in which the spatial dimensions of Virgil’s description of the underworld at this point enhances this sense of incongruity.

<sup>25</sup> “[...] as Palinurus represents the voyage and Dido the stay in Africa, so Deiphobus represents the events of Troy’s last night.” Williams, 198. As Brooks Otis reminds us, this means that Aeneas is travelling through his past backwards: “The mythological Hades represents Aeneas’ past in the reverse of the temporal order: here he meets first Palinurus, second Dido, third Deiphobus (a hero of dying Troy). Virgil thus recalls Books 5, 4, 2 in that order.” Otis, 290.

“wandering,” associated in Latin poetry with doomed romantic love.<sup>26</sup> It also, however, can be read as a metaphorical representation of the uncertainty of memory, an interpretation which is further encouraged by the metaphor Virgil uses to describe Dido when Aeneas first catches sight of her. He sees her, *qualem primo qui surgere mense/ aut vidit, aut vidisse putat per nubila lunam* (453-4), “like the moon one sees, or thinks one sees, rising through the clouds at the beginning of the month.” The recognition of this figure out of the past, Virgil tells us, is uncertain—at first, he is not even sure it is her that he sees. The landscape of the “mourning fields” in which Dido resides, in other words, is a spatial representation of the past, and Aeneas’ encounter with her among other mythical figures in this landscape represents the act of memory, both public and private.

The figure of Dido also represents in a more abstract way certain episodes in Aeneas’ future and the future of Rome. The *Aeneid* draws a parallel between Dido and Turnus, Aeneas’ great Italian enemy in the *Aeneid*’s second half. It also draws a parallel between Dido and Cleopatra, who, together with Marc Antony, will be one of Augustus’ great enemies, and who appears in the *ekphrasis* of Aeneas’ shield in *Aeneid* 8.<sup>27</sup> Like Turnus, she has tried to keep Aeneas from his destiny, by having him stay in Carthage as her husband and rule together with her. Like Cleopatra, she is a foreign temptress who

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<sup>26</sup> “The grove itself is an amatory landscape, particularly when the wood of which it consists is sacred to Venus. So too, the wandering motion of Dido within the grove, contrasting with the purposeful, directed tread of Aeneas, is characteristic not only of her in her love-struck state, but of the distracted lover in general.” Feldherr, 104.

<sup>27</sup> The well-known parallels between Dido and Turnus are summarized in Reed, *Virgil’s Gaze*, 53, 61. Michael Putnam discusses the parallel between Dido and Cleopatra on Aeneas’ shield: “Again, an act of self-allusion can help extend our understanding of Virgil’s meaning. The phrase *pallentem morte futura* echoes words the poet had used of Dido ‘pale before her death to come’ (*pallida morte futura*) as she readies herself for suicide. The parallel is purposeful. Dido is a prefiguration of Cleopatra, a quasi-eastern potentate who nearly seduced the ancestor of Rome from his fated mission and whose heirs would battle the city in three wars for domination of the Mediterranean basin.” Putnam, *Virgil’s Epic Designs*, 148. David Quint simplifies this comparison: “Like Cleopatra on the shield, the woman Dido represented the otherness of the foreigner in the first half of the poem, as it explored Rome’s relationship with Carthage and the East.” Quint, “Repetition and Ideology in the *Aeneid*,” 80.

ultimately sets herself against the Roman *imperium*. She has, after all, called upon her descendants—that is, the Carthaginians who will be Rome’s great enemy in the Punic wars—to fight Aeneas’ descendants—i. e. the Romans—without respite in her final curse against Aeneas before killing herself (4.622-9). Dido, in other words, stands in for all those foreign powers who would seek to derail Aeneas’ and Rome’s imperial destiny.<sup>28</sup>

When Aeneas addresses Dido, here, it is with reference to this future and this destiny:

‘infelix Dido, verus mihi nuntius ergo  
venerat exstinctam ferroque extrema secutam?  
funeris heu tibi causa fui? per sidera iuro,  
per superos et si qua fides tellure sub ima est,  
invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi.  
sed me iussa deum, quae nunc has ire per umbras,  
per loca senta situ cogunt noctemque profundam,  
imperiiis egere suis; nec credere quivi  
hunc tantum tibi me discessu ferre dolorem.  
siste gradum teque aspectu ne subtrahe nostro.  
quem fugis? extremum fato quod te adloquor hoc est.’ (456-66)

Unhappy Dido, so the message that reached me was true, that you died, taking your own life by the sword? Alas, was I the cause of your death? I swear by the stars, by the gods above, and by whatever assurance there is beneath the earth—unwillingly, Queen, I left your shores. Rather, the commands of the gods, which now force me to go through these shadows, through places rough with neglect, and through deepest night, compelled me with their own power; and I could not believe that I could bring you such great sorrow as this by departing. Stay your footsteps and do not remove yourself from my gaze. Whom do you flee? This is the last thing fate allows me to say to you.

The *iussa deum*, the “commands of the gods” include not only the reminder Aeneas receives to leave Carthage, but the gods’ entire plan for him to conquer a swath

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<sup>28</sup> Both Turnus and Cleopatra are coded as foreign, compared to the Trojans who become more and more Roman as the epic goes on. Turnus may be a native Italian, but the *Aeneid* is at pains to cast him as foreign, Greek or Oriental: “The perspective given us by Turnus’ genealogy draws a boundary between the Greco-Oriental world on his side [...] and the Italian world which is owed to Aeneas and to which his *prima origo* can be traced. While in terms of the Trojan War [...] Turnus is opposed to Aeneas as Greek to Trojan, he also takes on the burden of the Oriental [...]” Reed, 70.

of Italy and prepare the groundwork for Rome, of which this journey through the underworld, Aeneas reminds us, is also a necessary preparatory step. This may seem to be a very weak excuse for Aeneas' abandonment of Dido, but it forces us to recognize the stakes of his conflict with her. From Aeneas' perspective in the present of the narrative, Dido may have been a victim of circumstance, but she also stood in the way of his destiny to found the city-state that is Rome's precursor, the ultimate goal of the gods' commands. From the perspective of Virgil's immediate audience, she represents all those who stood in the way of Rome's survival and the transition to the principate under the rule of Augustus, and who had to be sacrificed for these goals.

When Aeneas finishes his speech, however, it is not his perspective that Virgil emphasizes, but Dido's:

talibus Aeneas ardentem et torva tuentem  
lenibat dictis animum lacrimasque ciebat.  
illa solo fixos oculos aversa tenebat  
nec magis incepto vultum sermone movetur  
quam si dura silex aut stet Marpesia cautes.  
tandem corripuit sese atque inimica refugit  
in nemus umbriferum, coniunx ubi pristinus illi  
respondet curis aequatque Sychaeus amorem.  
nec minus Aeneas casu percussus iniquo  
prosequitur lacrimis longe et miseratur euntem. (467-474)

With such words Aeneas was trying to soften a mind raging and gazing fiercely and he was bringing forth tears. She for her part was holding her eyes fixed on the ground, nor did her face show itself more moved by the speech he had undertaken, than if a hard piece of flint or Marpesian marble stood there. Finally she tore herself away and fled, as his enemy, into the shadowy grove, where her first husband, Sychaeus, responded to her cares and matched her love. Nevertheless, shaken by her harsh fate Aeneas watched her a long time with tears and pitied her as she went.

Virgil, in a sort of double-vision, forces us to adopt two perspectives here, two focalizations. We both see and understand the situation here from two points of view.

The focus on Dido's mind and her eyes, gazing fiercely, makes us evaluate both Aeneas' present and the glorious future he hints at in his speech from her point of view.<sup>29</sup> There is a tacit rebuke in her averted gaze and her refusal to speak to him, and a tacit question—is all of this Trojan and Roman glory worth the sacrifices of the victims it demands? In Dido's case, as Virgil has shown us, the answer is no, or at least there was no need for her to be sacrificed in the wantonly cruel manner in which she was. When Aeneas is first reminded of the *iussa deum* in Carthage, he makes preparations to depart without telling her (4.288-306). He thus not only abandons her, ruins her reputation, and leaves her undefended against her enemies in the region, but also betrays her trust. She, on the other hand, has been mostly blameless in the affair—Venus, after all, has sent Cupid to make her fall in love with Aeneas in the first place (1.657-722).

Aeneas' eyes, however, and not Dido's are described as full of tears as he gazes at her. Aeneas, in his address to her, has asked her for something she has refused to give—forgiveness. Now he offers her something she has not asked for—his pity. He expresses a desire for reconciliation, but when this is not forthcoming his focalization seems to impose this upon the situation. Not only does he look at her with pity; in the end, he sees her becoming once again the image of the mythical heroic Dido, faithful to her first husband, Sychaeus, even in death—this is the Dido of which history told before Virgil altered the story for the purposes of his epic.<sup>30</sup> It is as if Aeneas' tryst with her had never happened. There is a hint here, though, that her take on events may be radically different.

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<sup>29</sup> “My point is an obvious one. In respect to focalisation, this passage [...] is a duck rabbit. The narrator speaks; but we can make the focaliser either Dido or Aeneas. We can choose to see it from the man's point of view or the woman's.” Don Fowler, “Deviant Focalisation in Virgil's *Aeneid*,” 54. Fowler discusses the problem of focalization in this scene in detail at 52-5.

<sup>30</sup> Servius, in his commentary on the *Aeneid*, tells us that this is what the histories said, *ut habet historia*. On account of this, she is called “Dido,” which he tells us meant *virago* or “heroine” in Phoenician, although her given name was “Elissa” (ad 4.36).

The poem reminds us that she remains Aeneas' *inimica*, "enemy." The two subject-positions shed a fundamentally different light on the events of Aeneas' journey. No wonder he cannot bridge the communication gap between them. To his question, *funeris [...] tibi causa fui*, "was I the cause of your death" (458), Dido by her silence and her "fierce gaze" implies that the answer is yes, and she finds no consolation for this in Aeneas' glorious destiny. He, on the other hand, cannot admit this. He offers her his pity, although it changes nothing. She will not be appeased; her anger will not be mitigated. Dido's perspective, thus, and the perspective of all those victims of Roman history she stands in for, remains a fundamental challenge to the teleological understanding of events as directed towards Aeneas' eventual victory and the future glory of Rome that he represents.

#### The Parade of Future Romans and the Spatialization of History

The kind of "deviant focalization" we find in Aeneas' encounter with Dido, however, is not the only means by which the *Aeneid's katabasis* challenges a teleological model of Roman history. Indeed, even when the visual focalization of the scene remains ostensibly fixed, Virgil manages to turn this into a kind of historical double vision that disrupts the view of Roman history as driven ever forward towards a glorious zenith under Augustus. In what I am calling the "historical section" of the *katabasis*, where Anchises shows Aeneas a series of spirits who will become the great figures of Roman history when they are reincarnated, Virgil does not ask us to see the scene from any physical perspective besides that of Anchises and Aeneas, standing side by side.

Nevertheless, Virgil does use the spatial and visual dimensions of the episode to allow us to view Roman history in a different light that subtly undermines the reigning historical ideology.

Throughout this section, Virgil reminds us, time and again, of the spatial and visual dimensions of the scene. It takes place in a secluded “green valley” (*penitus convalle virenti*, 679), within the Elysian Fields. Words implying vision crop up repeatedly, as when Anchises tells Aeneas, *huc geminas nunc flecte acies, hanc aspice gentem/ Romanosque tuos*, “turn your twin gaze [i. e. eyes] over here, see this race, your Romans” (788-9). The spirits they see also bear visible emblems of the figures they are to become. Thus, the Marcellus who killed a leader of the Gauls in single combat in 222 B.C.E. is described by Anchises as: *insignis spoliis Marcellus opimis*, “Marcellus distinguished by the rich spoils” (*spolia opima* is a technical term for spoils won by a Roman commander in single combat with an enemy commander) (855). The other Marcellus, Augustus’ adopted son and presumptive heir who died at a young age, is described by the poetic narrator as: *egregium forma iuvenem et fulgentibus armis,/ sed frons laeta parum et deiecto lumina vultu*, “a young man great in beauty and with shining arms, but with a troubled brow and downcast eyes” (861-2). Furthermore, when Anchises begins his catalogue of these future Romans, the poem tells us exactly where he and Aeneas are and from what vantage they observe the spirits he is describing:

Dixerat Anchises natumque unaque Sibyllam  
conventus trahit in medios turbamque sonantem,  
et tumulum capit unde omnis longo ordine posset  
adversos legere et venientum discere vultus. (752-5)

So Anchises spoke, and he drew his son and the Sibyl into the middle of the throng of the resounding crowd and he chose a mound, from which he



was able to survey and to discern all the faces in the long line of those to come.

Aeneas, the focalizer of this scene, views the procession of figures representative of Roman history from the “artificial” vantage point, as Sebald might say, of the elevated, central mound, which implies a synoptic understanding of this history, from a perspective outside of events and not identified with any of the figures who participate in them (this view of history from an artificial, elevated position is exactly what Sebald highlights in his description of the Waterloo panorama in *The Rings of Saturn*, as I have argued in my discussion of this description in Chapter 2). This might, at first glance, seem to be precisely the kind of perspective upon which an ideological vision of Roman history could be based, and certainly, as we shall see, Anchises’ goal is to instill precisely this ideological understanding of the Roman history to come in Aeneas. The presence of Aeneas, however, who is wholly ignorant of this history, paradoxically makes us aware of the distortions and elisions, in Anchises’ account of these figures, that make the ideological understanding of Roman history possible. The fact that we see the scene through Aeneas’ eyes makes us all the more aware that this parade of future Romans contains a number of figures whose stories might directly contradict Anchises’ point. The parade also juxtaposes other figures who, on their own, would fit into Anchises’ scheme but who, taken together, remind us rather that Roman history has been as much a story of continuous strife as one of unceasing progress towards greater glory. As in the description of the murals on the temple of Juno in Carthage, which I discussed in the last chapter, seeing the scene through Aeneas’ eyes makes us all the more aware of all that he is not seeing. And this awareness is reinforced, as I will show, at the end of the episode, when we realize that Virgil superimposes a very particular historical perspective on this

scene. He asks us to place ourselves at the funeral of Rome's great hope, Augustus' chosen heir, Marcellus, and to see this parade of Roman heroes as a funeral procession.

That the understanding of history Anchises wishes to instill in Aeneas is teleological, with the principate of Augustus as its end and goal, is made clear by the seventeen lines Anchises speaks in praise of Augustus.<sup>31</sup> Augustus, Anchises tells Aeneas, will inaugurate a new golden age: *hic vir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis/ Augustus Caesar, divi genus, aurea condet/ saecula qui rursus Latio*, "this, this is the man who, you have often heard, was promised to you, Caesar Augustus, who will bring the golden age back to Italy" (791-3).<sup>32</sup> Augustus, furthermore, will bring Roman dominion to the whole world. In a hyperbolic flourish, Anchises tells Aeneas that Augustus will extend Roman power to the peoples of Africa and the Far East, and even beyond the lands where the zodiac is visible at night:

super et Garamantas et Indos  
proferet imperium: iacet extra sidera tellus,  
extra anni solisque vias, ubi caelifer Atlas  
axem umero torquet stellis ardentibus aptum. (794-7)

And he will extend his rule to both the Garmantes and the Indians: a land [which he will rule] lies beyond the stars, beyond the path of the year and

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<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the best indication of the reigning historical ideology of the early principate is the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, the deeds of Augustus, which were inscribed on various monuments at Rome and throughout the empire. The *Res Gestae* were written more than thirty years after the *Aeneid*, most likely shortly before Augustus' death in 14 C.E. We find there, however, strong parallels to the vision of history the *Aeneid* ostensibly embraces, whose mouthpiece is Anchises. As Alison E. Cooley tells us in the introduction to her recent edition of the *Res Gestae*: "It was, in effect, a demonstration that Augustus had achieved his avowed intent of becoming the 'originator of the best order' (*optimi status auctor*), and had fulfilled his role of laying lasting 'foundations for the state (*fundamenta rei p.*) [...]. In addition, the *RGDA* promotes a claim to world conquest [...]." Cooley, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 36.

<sup>32</sup> According to Greek and Roman mythology, there were four ages that the world had passed through—the golden age, the silver age, the bronze age, and the iron age. Each of these ages represented a degeneration from the prior age, both in terms of the way people behaved and the conditions they encountered in the world—from the peace, prosperity, and happiness of the golden age, to the unceasing strife and uncertainty of life in the iron age. For a description of this sequence, see, for example, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.89-150. This sequence, however, was also said to repeat cyclically in what was called a "great year." Richard J. Clark has discussed this idea of the "great year" in the cosmology in *Aeneid VI* and its provenance, in "The 'Wheel' and Vergil's Eschatology in *Aeneid* Book 6," 126-7.

of the sun, where sky-bearing Atlas turns the heavens studded with burning stars.<sup>33</sup>

At the beginning of the catalogue of future Romans, Anchises tells Aeneas: *Nunc age, Dardanium prolem quae deinde sequatur/ gloria [...] expediam dictis*, “Now go on, I will lay out in words what glory is to follow the offspring of Dardanus” (756-7, 759).<sup>34</sup> At the end, Virgil explains what Anchises’ goal has been in showing Aeneas this vision of Roman history: *incenditque animum famae venientis amore*, “he enflames his mind with love of the fame to come” (889). Nothing, Anchises boasts at the end of his panegyric to Augustus, is more likely to instill this emotion, love of the “glory” and “fame” of great deeds done for Rome: *et dubitamus adhuc virtutem extendere factis,/ aut metus Ausonia prohibet consistere terra*, “do we hesitate to enlarge present virtue with deeds, or does fear keep us from settling in the Ausonian lands [i.e. Italy]” (806-7)? The answer to Anchises’ rhetorical question, after the encouragement offered by his praise of Augustus, is, of course, “no.” Augustus’ reign, in other words, is the irrefutable proof that Rome’s “glory” and “fame” are worth loving and fighting for. Anchises, with this rhetorical question, connects Augustus’ program of world domination with Aeneas’ own mission of colonization to establish the society that will be the precursor of Rome in Italy. Aeneas’ mission, Anchises implies, is one step in a program of global imperial expansion. Aeneas “extends [*extendere*]” virtue with deeds in the same way that Augustus will “extend” the empire—by conquering and settling foreign lands. In fact, Anchises tells Aeneas as much later in describing to him the “Roman arts” which I discussed in the last chapter. He conflates Aeneas’ own mission with the Roman

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<sup>33</sup> R. G. Austin discusses these cryptic lines in his commentary to the sixth book of the *Aeneid*. Austin, *Aeneidos Liber Sextus*, 244-5.

<sup>34</sup> “Glory,” *gloria*, is a key word, as Denis Feeney tells us, that crops up throughout this section of the *katabasis*. Feeney, “History and Revelation in Vergil’s Underworld,” 4.

imperial mission by addressing him as *Romane*, “Roman”: *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento/ (hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem,/ parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*, “you, Roman, remember to rule peoples with strength—these will be your arts—to impose the habit of peace, to spare the conquered, to war down the proud” (847-53).

Augustus’ reign, although it is more glorious than anything that has come before, is not described by Anchises as a break with the Roman history that has preceded it, but as the continuation of a glorious tradition. Anchises repeatedly describes this history in terms of temporal sequence and familial inheritance, as, for example, in those introductory lines in which he speaks of the “glory” of the history to come: *Nunc age, Dardanium prolem quae deinde sequatur/ gloria [...] expediam dictis*, “Now go on, I will lay out in words what glory is to follow the offspring of Dardanus” (756-7, 759). *Prolem*, “offspring,” implies a line of familial descent and *sequatur*, “follow,” tells us that this is meant to be seen as an unbroken sequence. Augustus’ reign, thus, does not represent an intervention in the violent and destructive history that has preceded it, but the culmination of a logical progression.

This historical ideology embodied by Anchises’ speech follows Polybius, the Greek historian of the Roman Republic, who wrote his *Histories* roughly a century before Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*. Polybius, who is credited as the author of the first “universal history,” sets out in the *Histories* to do what none of his predecessors in history writing did or could do, to write a history of the world as tied together by “one end [*telos*]” toward which all events are tending.<sup>35</sup> For Polybius, however, history does not become

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<sup>35</sup> Polybius, *Histories*, 1.3.4.

world history until Rome claims its place as the dominant power in the Mediterranean.<sup>36</sup> It is Rome's rise that ties the events of all parts of the world together, or at least demonstrates that they are bound together by the logic of "Fortune [*Tuche*]." <sup>37</sup> Polybius thus sets a precedent for later authors, both poets and historians, who write about history: they will have to contend with his vision of history as teleological and progressive, with Rome at its center.<sup>38</sup>

If Anchises, in his catalogue of future Romans, moves the *telos* of history forward a century or so, this has less to do with a disagreement as to the ends of history—Rome's dominance over the whole world—as a difference of perspective as to what geographically constitutes control over the world and as to when this power was truly consolidated. According to the Augustan ideology whose mouthpiece Anchises is in the catalogue, it is when Augustus defeats Marc Antony and seizes control over both the eastern and western halves of the empire that Rome's world dominance is, for all intents and purposes, ensured.

Both the form and the content of the catalogue, however, undermine Anchises' programmatic rhetoric. The panegyric to Augustus comes not, after all, at the very end of the catalogue, nor at the very beginning, but thirty-five lines in. In its very structure, in other words, Anchises' description of the parade of future Romans discourages us from seeing the history it embodies in linear terms—even if Virgil has hinted that we can picture these figures as lined up to take their turn drinking from the river Lethe (he describes them as *longo ordine*, which one could translate as "in a long line," 754).

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1.3.6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 1.4.1-2.

<sup>38</sup> Francois Hartog has discussed in more detail Polybius' role as the author of the first "universal history" in "Polybius and the First Universal History: "Seeing himself as the new Thucydides, Polybius finally became Polybius, the author of the first universal history." Hartog, 30.

Moreover, the placement of the catalogue immediately following Anchises' philosophical discourse on the nature and fate of the soul also seems to undermine the linear and teleological vision of history it claims to espouse. Anchises' philosophical speech, with its Platonic and Stoic resonances, encourages us to see life as part of an eternal cycle of death, purification, and rebirth. According to this understanding of human existence, earthly goods, such as "glory" and "fame," are almost entirely without meaning. They go hand in hand with the worldly impurities that must be purged after death. In fact, as Denis Feeney has argued convincingly, the philosophical sources of Anchises' disquisition encourage a lifestyle exactly counter to that the parade of Roman heroes is ostensibly meant to promote.<sup>39</sup> They encourage a life driven by humble virtue, rather than public recognition for great deeds done in the service of the state. This is the subtext of Anchises' philosophical speech. We are, thus, from the very beginning of the catalogue of Roman heroes prepared to be suspicious of the ideology Anchises' spirit is attempting to instill there in Aeneas.<sup>40</sup> As Feeney puts it,

The reader who has his expectations primed by such reminiscences is going to be considerably puzzled at a number of points where Vergil's drift runs directly counter to his models [...]. At issue here is a fundamental paradox, an eschatology which is expressed and presented within a recognised philosophical tradition, but which appears to champion mundane values disparaged by that tradition, turning our eyes insistently towards this corporeal world, away from the concerns of the soul.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Feeney, "History and Revelation in Vergil's Underworld," 2-3.

<sup>40</sup> The "myth of Er" in the *Republic*, for example, is one of the primary models for Anchises' speech. As in the *Aeneid*, the souls in the "myth of Er" drink from the river Lethe and return to the world above after a thousand years. Unlike in the *Aeneid*, however, the spirits are able to choose the kind of life they want to return to. Odysseus, who is cast as the wisest of the bunch, picks the life of a humble citizen who minds his own business (*Republic*, 620c-d). He eschews "glory" for a life of simple virtue. This, for anyone familiar with the *Odyssey*, might come as a great surprise—the epic hero foregoes the epic values of "glory" and "fame" for a life of simple pleasures. Thus Plato, in his underworld, asserts the primacy of his own philosophical virtues over those traditionally lauded in epic.

<sup>41</sup> Feeney, 2.

If we examine more closely the content of the catalogue, however, we find a number of equally puzzling details. The rest of the catalogue which precedes and follows Anchises' praise of Augustus is made up of a number of odd inclusions and juxtapositions which undercut its ideological thrust.<sup>42</sup> These inclusions and juxtapositions paint a very different picture of Roman history. This history, they imply, may not be so much a glorious progression towards a new golden age under Augustus, as a never-ending cycle of violence and destruction. Nor is this conflicted vision of Roman history entirely out of sync with that presented throughout the rest of the *Aeneid*. Many critics have pointed out that the *Aeneid* subtly undercuts rather than simply undergirds the imperial ideology of Augustan Rome. In fact, this was the central insight of the influential "Harvard School" of Virgil scholarship in the 1960s and '70s, including the work of Adam Parry and W. R. Johnson.<sup>43</sup>

Among those figures who would seem to undermine this teleological understanding of history are Pompey and Caesar, placed side by side, and mentioned explicitly for the civil war they fought against one another (826-35). There is no more vivid metaphor for the turmoil of this war than the one Anchises uses: *neu patriae validas in viscera vertite viris*, "do not turn your vital strength against the guts of your country" (833).

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<sup>42</sup> I rely, once again, on Denis Feeney's excellent description of these odd inclusions and juxtapositions in "History and Revelation in Vergil's Underworld."

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, for example, tells us: "The pathos does not nullify the grandeur, but the grandeur does not redeem the pathos. Nor does the counterpoint between the pathos and the grandeur function in such a way as to win through to an equilibrium that would permit us to say either, Yes, now we understand the glory of Rome because we understand the terrible price that has been paid, by guilty and innocent alike, for that glory; or, Yes, now we understand the anxiety and nightmarish vision of this poem because we see that the glory, however real at one level, is fraudulent at its core." Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 110-1. Adam Parry makes a similar argument, as well, in "The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*."

There is also Brutus, who led the revolt against the monarchy that established the Republic. As Anchises reminds us, he had his two sons put to death for the sake of the nascent Republic. More disturbing than this, however—at least for Virgil’s immediate audience—is the way he recalls his descendant, the Brutus who took part in the assassination of Julius Caesar, Augustus’ adoptive father. Both committed unspeakable acts in the name of *amor patriae laudumque immensa cupido*, “love of country and an immense desire for praise” (823).<sup>44</sup> The word, *amor*, “love,” though, creates a resonance with the statement of Anchises’ goal in showing Aeneas the parade of future Romans—he wants to inspire him with *famae venientis amore*, “love of the fame to come” (889). In fact, we might read Anchises’ description of what motivates Brutus as a paraphrase of this goal. “Fame” and “praise,” *fama* and *laus*, are, after all, overlapping concepts, and Rome, the *patria*, is exactly what Anchises’ catalogue has described as the future which is “to come,” *venientis*. The parallel, however, seems to call the entire catalogue’s ideological underpinnings into question. This is, the description of Brutus reminds us, a parade in honor of precisely those values that motivated both Bruti to such repugnant deeds. And in the case of the latter Brutus, it is hard to reconcile his actions, the murder of Augustus’ adoptive father and his predecessor in wielding absolute power over the *imperium*, Julius Caesar, with the catalogue’s teleological thrust.

Among the oddest details in the catalogue, however, is the inclusion of the founders of several Italian towns:

hi tibi Nomentum et Gabios urbemque Fidenam,  
hi Collatinas imponent montibus arces,  
Pometios Castrumque Inui Bolamque Coramque;  
haec tum nomina erunt, nunc sunt sine nomine terrae. (773-6)

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<sup>44</sup> Feeney also discusses these parallels and the potentially dissonant effect of the inclusion of Brutus in the catalogue. Feeney, 10-1.



These, for you, will found Nomentum and Gabii, and the city of Fidenae; these will build the towers of Collatia in the mountains, and Pometia, Castrum Inui, and Bola, and Cora; these will be the names, now they are nameless earth.

As Denis Feeney points out, these places are “now nameless earth” from two temporal perspectives.<sup>45</sup> In Aeneas’ time, these towns have not yet been founded. In Virgil’s time, however, they have all already vanished, or at least lost their former glory. Once again, although Aeneas may be inspired with a sense of pride in the great deeds of his descendants, there would have been a dissonance created in the minds of Virgil’s immediate audience. For a Roman, these names, after all, are not synonymous with glory, but with oblivion. The catalogue Anchises recites is not a parade of ever-increasing glory, but a reminder of the cycle of unrest, death, destruction, and decay that has constituted Roman history up to Virgil and Augustus’ day, and which, one might say, shows little sign of letting up.<sup>46</sup>

One of the commonalities of the descriptions of all of these figures is that they encourage us to view them from two different temporal perspectives, each of which casts them in a very different light. From Aeneas’ and Anchises’ perspective they may very well represent a parade of future glory. For Virgil’s audience, however, there are verbal cues which point to the darker side of Roman history. No part of this catalogue more

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<sup>45</sup> “The tenses are intriguingly two-sided, depending on whether one’s perspective in time is that of Aeneas, or of Vergil’s audience. To Aeneas, the words say that these will be famous names after his time, whereas now, in his lifetime, they are areas of land without any title (or else, places that exist but have no fame). To the contemporary audience, the words are saying that the places will be what they are in fact—*mere names*; now, for ‘us’, they are only *pieces of land*, without the *reputation* they once had [...].” Feeney, 7.

<sup>46</sup> This is not to say that the parade of heroes is a one-sided demolition of Augustan’ ideology, but rather that it betrays an ambivalence and an anxiety about the present and future order of Rome. As Basil Dufallo tells us: “Vergil at least puts forward the possibility of philosophical discussion that would reveal the order behind Augustan Rome *rather than* the futility of Republican politics. Ultimately, the choice remains with Vergil’s audience whether to believe in this possibility—and in the Augustan ideal—or not. However ‘false’ a Roman audience might have found Vergil’s underworld as a mimesis of Augustan realities, the *Aeneid* nevertheless prompts such an audience (particularly that of the imperial court) to think through the broadest implications of the new regime.” Dufallo, *The Ghosts of the Past*, 117.

encourages us to adopt these two conflicting points of view than its culmination in the description of Marcellus, Augustus' adopted heir who died too young to take his place as *princeps* of Rome. Here, surprisingly, we find what we had been led to believe was a display of future glory, with all the pomp and circumstance of a triumphal parade, turning into a funeral procession for the dead boy, Marcellus.

When Aeneas points to the spirit who will become this second Marcellus, Anchises' tone alters dramatically, from one of pride in the glory of Rome, to mourning.<sup>47</sup>

tum pater Anchises lacrimis ingressus obortis:  
'o gnate, ingentem luctum ne quaere tuorum;  
ostendent terris hunc tantum fata nec ultra  
esse sinent. (867-70)

Then his father, Anchises, began to speak, with tears welling up: "Oh my son, do not ask about this great sadness for your descendants; the fates will only show him to the earth, not allow him to live further."

Anchises' lament for Marcellus is poignant. He describes his death as a loss of hope, not only for those who knew and loved him, but for the whole Roman people: *nec puer Iliaca quisquam de gente Latinos/ in tantum spe tollet avos, nec Romula quondam/ ullo se tantum iactabit alumno*, "No boy of Trojan descent will so raise the hopes of his Latin elders, nor will the land of Romulus boast so greatly of any of its wards" (875-7). Finally, Anchises takes this grieving to the point of performing a sort of mock funeral for Marcellus:

manibus date lilia plenis  
purpureos spargam flores animamque nepotis  
his saltem accumulem donis, et fungar inani  
munere. (883-6)

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<sup>47</sup> "Bis die Marcellus-Episode einsetzt, ist die Stimmung stolz, freudig, zuversichtlich, der Anblick der großen Väter entflammt zu patriotischer Begeisterung. Im Abschnitt von Marcellus ändert sich der Ton völlig." Eiliv Skard, "Die Heldenschau in Vergils *Aeneis*," 64.

Give me handfuls of lilies, let me spread purple flowers, and at least heap up these gifts for the soul of my descendent, and perform an empty service.

Anchises' imaginary funeral offerings confirm our sense that the parade of Roman heroes that precedes Marcellus' appearance, in fact, has certain similarities to the funeral of a Roman aristocrat.<sup>48</sup> In a traditional Roman aristocratic funeral, the *pompa funebris*, family members would have formed a procession wearing masks and costumes, the so-called *imagines maiorum*, emblematic of various illustrious ancestors of their specific aristocratic clan.<sup>49</sup> The parade of Roman heroes, then, becomes a *pompa funebris* for Marcellus, but one that stresses not only his place as a member of his specific aristocratic clan, but as a Roman in general. It is a re-imagining, in other words, of the historical *pompa funebris* for Marcellus that took place in 23 B.C.E., in broader Roman terms.<sup>50</sup> The traditional *pompa funebris* was a visual means of telling the story of an aristocratic family. The catalogue of Roman heroes, as a funeral procession, tells the story not of a specific family, but of Rome as one big family, united under the *princeps*, Augustus. This is the legacy, it reminds us, that was meant to be inherited by Marcellus.

We find ourselves, thus, at the end of the catalogue, reflecting on this parade of Roman heroes from the perspective of a very specific moment in time, in the aftermath of Marcellus' death. This is a perspective, however, that seems, once again, to betray a

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<sup>48</sup> "Das Leichenbegängnis in einer Römischen Adelsfamilie umfaßte also einen historischen Aufzug, eine Ahnenmusterung und eine Lobrede, die sich auf die Berühmtheiten der Vorzeit und dann auf den zuletzt Verstorbenen bezog, über den wohl besonders ausführlich zu sprechen war. Gerade so ist es bei Vergil: Marcellus, der kürzlich verstorbene, tritt als letzter im Zuge auf und erhält eine ausführlichere Erwähnung als irgend einer der Vorhergehenden." Skard, 64.

<sup>49</sup> "Polybius is explicit also about the likeness of the *imagines* or masks to the persons they represented. He also points out that the living relatives wearing the various *imagines* would be equipped with the clothing and regalia appropriate to each ancestor." Paul F. Burke, "Roman Rites for the Dead and *Aeneid* 6," 222.

<sup>50</sup> "We shall see that Virgil has produced a funeral with national and not merely familial significance." Burke, 222.

certain anxiety about the ostensible goals of Anchises' catalogue and its teleological thrust. It is strange, to say the least, to end the catalogue with a funerary passage which stresses the loss of hope, the failure of great promise to come to fruition. It can only unsettle our belief in Augustus' reign as the beginning of a new, glorious golden age for Rome, that his chosen heir and adopted son, the one meant to carry on this legacy, has died before he could fulfill this promise.

This is the note on which Anchises chooses to end his catalogue. Immediately following this Aeneas returns to the world above, but not before Virgil includes one last detail that calls into question the ostensible ideological content of the pageant Aeneas has just witnessed:

Sunt geminae Somni portae, quarum altera fertur  
cornea, qua veris facilis datur exitus umbris,  
altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,  
sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia Manes.  
his ibi tum natum Anchises unaque Sibyllam  
prosequitur dictis portaque emittit eburna. (893-8)

There are twin gates of Sleep, one of which is made of horn, through which true shades are granted easy exit; the other one is shining, made of gleaming ivory, but the spirits send false dreams toward the sky [through it]. After these things were said, Anchises then accompanied Aeneas and the Sibyl there, and sent them off through the ivory gate.

There are two gates through which dreams are sent into the world, one for true or prophetic dreams, and one for dreams that are not true.<sup>51</sup> Aeneas and the Sibyl leave the underworld through the latter—a hint, perhaps, that everything Aeneas has seen in the underworld may be nothing but a “false dream.” We are, in other words, not meant to take the vision of the afterlife granted to us in the *katabasis* too literally. This detail,

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<sup>51</sup> This motif first appears in the *Odyssey*. In Book 19, Penelope speaks of the two gates. She says that a dream she has had in which she was told that Odysseus will return to her was a false dream that passed through the gate of ivory (19.560-9).

however, appears immediately after we are told that the pageant of future Roman heroes Aeneas has witnessed [*incendit*] *animum famae venientis amore*, “enflamed his mind with love of the fame to come” (889). If we were inclined to take the “fame” and the “glory” of this vision of the Roman future (from Aeneas’ perspective) at face value, this impression is immediately undermined by the suggestion that it may have been nothing but a misleading dream.<sup>52</sup>

Regardless, though, of how we interpret the stance the *Aeneid* takes with respect to the historical ideology of the principate, it is clear that Aeneas’ *katabasis* is a journey through a series of distinct spaces—river banks, woods, towers, fields, groves—where his encounters with the images of various figures from history and mythology provide various, often conflicting, perspectives on the history they collectively embody. The various spatial vantage points within these areas that the poem asks us to occupy, and from which we view figures representative of different historical moments and events, become different temporal vantage points, as well, allowing us to see the history these figures embody from the perspective of very different moments in time. Virgil’s underworld is thus a kind of “memory space” full of images representative of moments from the past (the past from the audience’s perspective—even if some of these moments are in the future from Aeneas’ point of view). It is a “site of memory,” as James Young might describe it, a memorial to events with which Virgil’s immediate audience at Rome

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<sup>52</sup> The significance of this detail of the “ivory gate” has been much debated, and no real critical consensus has been reached. There is a strong connection, in classical literature, between descriptions of dreams and *katabasis*. Virgil draws on both Plato’s “Myth of Er” in *The Republic* and the “Dream of Scipio” in Cicero’s *De Re Publica* in the metaphysical section of the underworld, which both contain a description of a vision of the afterlife that takes place within a dream. Perhaps the best way to interpret the detail that Aeneas passes not through the gate of true dreams but through the gate of false dreams is as a warning not to take either the cosmology or the history of the *katabasis* too seriously. The *Aeneid* is, after all, an epic poem and not a philosophical or historical treatise. This is, more or less, the argument D. A. West makes in “The Bough and the Gate,” 237-8. J. D. Reed has discussed this problem more recently in *Virgil’s Gaze*, 167-8.

would have been intimately familiar.<sup>53</sup> The reader, by following Aeneas' footsteps, comes face to face with representatives of these past moments, laid out side by side in specific circumscribed areas, like rooms at a museum.<sup>54</sup> This, however, is a space curated by an author with an eye for incongruous juxtapositions that call into question any potential historical master narrative.

This, I will argue, is exactly what happens, as well, in the *katabasis* episodes in Sebald's works: a character comes face to face with a space or spaces full of images representing distinct historical events and periods. Taken together, these images create perspectives that challenge a modern ideological conception of history that has obvious parallels to the teleological understanding of history Virgil's *Aeneid* interrogates: the Western narrative of progress. In this Sebald follows in the footsteps of the German Jewish critical theorist, Siegfried Kracauer.

Siegfried Kracauer's *History: The Last Things Before the Last*

Sebald, in his use of *katabasis* to frame his mode of engagement with the historical past, builds on Kracauer's work in his book on the writing of history, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, published posthumously in 1969. Kracauer argues in this book that traditional historiographical approaches rely on assumptions about the nature of historical time that distort their vision of the past. As I will show, he uses *katabasis* as a means of exploring a mode of historical thought that would forego these

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<sup>53</sup> Young, 7-8.

<sup>54</sup> “ [...] Aeneas is in this scene [...] a beholder of a sequence of images, a continuum of historical points which is organized by artistic (as well as historical) principles. [He is] once again a visitor in a museum without walls.” Johnson, 107-8.

assumptions. Kracauer's formulation of this alternative mode of historical thought, I will argue, anticipates Sebald's katabatic mode of engagement with the historical past in using spatial, visual, and peripatetic terms to describe the historian's work. In *History*, Kracauer brings *katabasis* into the context of modern historical thought in a form that Sebald will later appropriate and make his own. Kracauer's focus is on historiography as a discipline. Sebald, I will argue, expands this focus to include both the historical thought of those attempting to represent the past outside of disciplinary conventions as well as the lived relationship to the past embodied by modern subjects. Despite these differences, Kracauer's use of *katabasis* as a means to discuss the complexities of historical time encountered by historians, I will argue, helps us to understand the implications of the spatial, visual, and peripatetic explorations of the past in the *katabasis* episodes in Sebald's works.

Kracauer does not draw directly on the *katabasis* in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Instead, he makes reference to a different example of classical *katabasis*: Orpheus' descent into the underworld to reclaim the spirit of his dead wife Eurydice, who has died of a snake bite. As the story goes, the rulers of the underworld allow Orpheus to lead Eurydice back to the land of the living on the condition that he not look upon her until they reach the world above. Of course he does look back at her, just before they exit the underworld, and with this she is forced to return to the land of the dead. To put it more poetically, she dies, for Orpheus, a second time.

Julia Hell has argued for the importance of the Orpheus story for post-Holocaust writers including Sebald.<sup>55</sup> In "Modernity and the Holocaust," Hell argues that post-

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<sup>55</sup> In "Modernity and the Holocaust," Hell argues that "the Orphic trope is ubiquitously present in post-fascist culture [...]." Hell, "Modernity and the Holocaust," 127.

Holocaust authors use this image to interrogate both the aesthetic and the ethical implications of their visual engagement with the Holocaust.<sup>56</sup> In her analysis she argues that these authors, in adapting the Orpheus myth, tend to focus on Orpheus' "second gaze," his gaze back at his wife as they are leaving the underworld together that makes her die a second time.<sup>57</sup> Kracauer, however, as I will show, focuses on a very different moment in the Orpheus story: that in which Orpheus journeys down into and through the land of the dead, encountering not just Eurydice, but other spirits as well. He highlights something that often gets lost in the focus on the moment in which, by looking back, Orpheus loses his wife again: the Orpheus story is not just about the pathos of love lost; it is also, like the story of Aeneas' descent into the underworld, a full-blown *katabasis* in its own right, the story of a journey into and through the land of the dead.

Perhaps the clearest example of this is Ovid's version of the story in the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid, there, builds on Virgil's telling of the story in the *Georgics*, but

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<sup>56</sup> In discussing Peter Weiss, Hell tells us that an examination of Weiss' use of the motif of the "second gaze" "brings us to the question of the ethics of Weiss's post-Holocaust authorship and his strategy of visual confrontation." Hell, "Modernity and the Holocaust," 134.

<sup>57</sup> "Most Orpheus adaptations focus on the drama of the second forbidden gaze at her 'dear face' that kills Eurydice a second time. In the work of Peter Weiss, W.G. Sebald and Janina Bauman, this moment of danger which inspired Klee's painting, the Angelus Novus, and Benjamin's Angel of History plays a crucial role." Hell, "Modernity and the Holocaust," 129. Hell goes on to argue that Janina Bauman, who was interned in the Warsaw ghetto, and her husband, Zygmunt Bauman, in their separate writings, attempt to replace this focus with a focus on the "first gaze," when Orpheus recognizes Eurydice in the underworld. They use the Orpheus story to stage a recognition of her sovereignty as the author of her own story. Hell, "Modernity and the Holocaust," 138. Hell also addresses the Orpheus myth in the context of Sebald's discussion of the literary representation of the air war on the German cities during World War II in "Air War and Literature." In "Air War and Literature," Sebald uses the image of the "angel of history," drawn from Benjamin's theses "On the Concept of History," as a metaphor for the historical observer, looking back at the traumatic events of the air war and their aftermath. Hell draws out the Orphic element of this image in Sebald's essay, to show how Sebald addresses the ethical implications of representing these events: "This gaze is horrified not because the angel/author/historian realizes that history is but one single catastrophe; it is horrified because it remains fixed in fascination and cannot avert its gaze from an object of aesthetic pleasure: Sebald's artfully composed tableau of dead bodies. Sebald's angel is an Orphic angel, in love with a beautiful, and beautifully dead, object." Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 377.



also on the *katabasis* in the *Aeneid*.<sup>58</sup> Like Virgil's underworld in the *Aeneid*, Ovid's is described in primarily spatial terms that combine the geographical with the architectural: Orpheus enters through gates, like those through which Aeneas leaves the underworld, and comes to a place where the river Styx flows: *ad Styga Taenaria est ausus descendere porta*, "he dared to descend to the Styx through the Taenarian gate."<sup>59</sup> He begs the rulers of the underworld that he may lead Eurydice back *per [...] haec loca plena timoris/ per Chaos hoc ingens vastique silentia regni*, "through these places full of fear, through this huge Chaos and through the silence of this vast kingdom."<sup>60</sup> The dead spirits in this "kingdom," furthermore, like those in the *Aeneid*, are segregated into different zones. Orpheus finds Eurydice with the recent dead, whom Aeneas also encounters in a separate location in the *Aeneid* (there they have not yet crossed the Styx on Charon's boat, 6.295-383), and like some of the dead spirits Aeneas encounters, she still bears the wound that killed her.<sup>61</sup> For Ovid, then, the underworld Orpheus enters is also a memory space, like that Aeneas wanders through, with different figures out of the past in different places. Ovid, in other words, takes Virgil's Orpheus story of the pathos of love lost in the *Georgics*, and recasts it as a journey through Aeneas' spatial and visual underworld. This spatial and visual aspect of the hero's journey into the underworld, as I will show, is the most salient element of the Orpheus story for Kracauer as well.

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<sup>58</sup> Virgil tells the story of Orpheus' descent to the underworld at *Georgics* 4.467-506. There, Virgil does supply some geographical details of the underworld, but his focus is less on the journey into and through the underworld and more on the pathos of Orpheus' double loss of Eurydice. Ovid does obviously draw heavily on Virgil's telling of the Orpheus story, but some of the details in his own telling, especially those which emphasize the spatial dimensions of the underworld, seem to be drawn more from the *katabasis* in the *Aeneid*, and in fact contain specific verbal echoes of the *Aeneid's katabasis*. D. E. Hill discusses how Ovid's telling of the story in the *Metamorphoses* builds on Virgil's in the *Georgics* in "From Orpheus to Ass's Ears," 124-31.

<sup>59</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.13.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.29-30.

<sup>61</sup> *umbras erat illa recentes/ inter et incessit passu de vulnere tardo*, "she was among the recent shades, and she walked with a slow step because of her wound." *Ibid.*, 10.48-9. In the *Aeneid*, the shade of Deiphobus still bears the wounds of his mutilation at the hands of Helen, Menelaus, and Ulysses (6.494-7).

First however, it is important to understand what motivates Kracauer's turn to classical *katabasis* as a model of the historian's work. Kracauer, in *History*, has a bugbear that, as we have seen, animates Sebald's re-imagining of historical time as well: the idea of progress:

Many a general history seems to be informed with the ideas of progress, or evolution, or any mixture of them. It is not as if the narrator would have to impose them upon his material; the air is impregnated with these ideas, so that they may appear to him as something given and self-evident. Indeed, he may not recognize them as the speculative abstractions they are when he falls back on them in his quest for substantial unity [...]. The result is a more or less closed success story which, because of its necessary reliance on teleological considerations, not only spawns falsifying hindsight but further tightens the bonds between the elements of the narrative, thereby smoothing away all the existing rifts, losses, abortive starts, inconsistencies.<sup>62</sup>

The ideology of progress, in other words, has become so pervasive that neither the writers of history nor their audience fully realize the extent to which it influences their understanding of historical events. The assumptions this forces them to make, however, fundamentally distort their understanding of events and their relation to one another. It constitutes, according to Kracauer, a blind spot that elides the heterogeneous and disjunctive nature of human events.

It may seem anachronistic to link modern notions of progress to the teleological model of history that the *Aeneid* both ostensibly embraces and tacitly undermines. Nevertheless, the two ideas are similar in their valorization of the later over the earlier, of the present over the past, and a sense of an overarching continuity, even if the movement from one form of society, technology, political system, etc. to the next takes place in a series of violent ruptures (à la Marx). These, however, are exactly the characteristics of the teleological notion of history we isolated in Virgil's *Aeneid*: it makes the history of

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<sup>62</sup> Kracauer, *History*, 169-70.

Rome a single, continuous story, in which the present and the future of Augustus' reign are cast as more glorious and worthy of admiration than all that has come before. These conceptions of history, in other words, are similar enough that they might be undermined in similar ways.

These parallel notions that appear in vastly different historical contexts are also, however, genealogically connected.<sup>63</sup> For Kracauer, the main avatar of the idea of progress is Hegel. It is Hegel, for example, who is behind the progressive shape of Marx's history.<sup>64</sup> Hegel is also, according to Kracauer, behind Croce's re-importation of the idea of progress, which he had ostensibly banned from his philosophy of history:

Oblivious of the fact that, according to his own premise, the spirit does not spread over the expanses of history but reveals itself exclusively in concrete situations, Croce in his otherwise admirable sketch, "Concerning the History of Historiography," identifies its successive revelations [...] as phases of an intelligible dialectical process to which he moreover attributes a progressive quality [...]. In sum, after having thrown out Hegel with great aplomb, Croce reintroduces him by the back door, unaware that what is possible to Hegel is denied to him.<sup>65</sup>

Kracauer is not wrong. Hegel, in *The Philosophy of History*, does give history a progressive shape. According to Hegel, history is the continuous unfolding of the world spirit, a process that is synonymous with man's realization of his own "freedom":

The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom; a progress whose development according to

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<sup>63</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, in his essay, "Progress," traces a genealogy for the concept that implicates Marx, Hegel, and Kant, and goes back to Augustine and the Stoics. He even connects it to the imperial ideology of ancient Rome: "Historically the conception of humanity was already implicit in the middle Stoa's theorem of the universal state, which objectively at least amounted to progress, no matter how strange its idea otherwise might have been to pre-Christian antiquity. The fact that this Stoic theorem immediately reconciled itself with the founding of Rome's imperial claims betrays something of what the concept of progress underwent through its identification with increasing 'skills and knowledge.'" Adorno, "Progress," 146.

<sup>64</sup> "Even though Marx, for instance, is enough of a realist to perceive, and to codify, 'Ungleichzeitigkeit,' he nevertheless clings to Hegel's idea of a dialectical historical process which involves the conventional identification of homogeneous linear time as the time of history." Ibid., 149.

<sup>65</sup> Kracauer, *History*, 159.

the necessity of its nature, it is our business to investigate. The general statement given above, of the various grades in the consciousness of Freedom—and which we applied in the first instance to the fact that the Eastern nations knew only that *one* is free; the Greek and Roman world only that *some* are free; while *we* know that all men absolutely (man *as man*) are free—supplies us with the natural division of Universal History, and suggests the mode of its discussion.<sup>66</sup>

Hegel thus synthesizes the historical perspectives of two of his predecessors:

Kant's idea, in "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" (1784), that history is driven by "nature" towards the end of "perfect states" in harmony with one another, which provide the most "freedom" for mankind; and Herder's idea, in "This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity" (1774), that divine providence is realized in history: "Providence guided the thread of development further—down from the *Euphrates, Oxus, and Ganges to the Nile* and the *coasts of Phoenicia*—great steps!"<sup>67</sup>

Kant's eighth thesis in "Idea for a Universal History" reads: "The history of mankind can be seen, in the large, as the realization of Nature's secret plan to bring forth a perfectly constituted state [...] and also bring forth that external relation among states which is perfectly adequate to this end."<sup>68</sup> Kant also tells us that this "perfectly constituted state" is that with the most "freedom": "The highest purpose of Nature, which is the development of all the capacities which can be achieved by mankind, is attainable only in society, and more specifically in the society with the greatest freedom."<sup>69</sup> Herder actually opposes this idea of a universal history directed towards ever more sophisticated forms of society and ever greater freedom.<sup>70</sup> For Herder each

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<sup>66</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 19.

<sup>67</sup> Herder, "This Too a Philosophy of History," 280.

<sup>68</sup> Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," 21.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>70</sup> F. M. Barnard summarizes this stance of Herder's: "To serve such didactic purposes is one thing; it is quite another, though, to infer that history should be used to *justify* past sufferings and struggles as being the necessary preparation for a better life in the future. Herder was appalled by any such suggestion, both

age and each people has its own special ideal that its individuals are striving towards.<sup>71</sup>

None of these ideals is better than any of the others. From our perspective in the present, we can analyze and define these ideals. We cannot, however, know the divine plan for the whole of human history, much less give that history a progressive or teleological shape.<sup>72</sup>

One of the peoples whose character Herder analyzes is the Romans, whom he calls “the *manhood of human forces and strivings*,” in opposition to mankind’s “youth” in ancient Greece.<sup>73</sup> In describing the ideals that animated the Romans, he quotes directly from the programmatic speech in the *Aeneid*’s *katabasis* in which Anchises articulates a teleological model of history leading up to Augustus’ reign: *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento*, “remember, Roman, to rule peoples with imperial power” (6.851).

This, as we will remember, is Anchises’ famous description of the “Roman arts”—conquering, ruling, administering, civilizing—which he sets in opposition to Greece’s visual arts and sciences. For Herder, as for Anchises, Rome represents the striving towards specific virtues associated with empire-building:

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as a deeply religious thinker and as a proponent of ethical humanism. Hence, he rejected out of hand Kant’s suggestion [...] that people ought to toil for the sake of those coming after them. In his polemical essay *Yet Another Philosophy of History of Humanity* [I refer to this essay under the title “This Too a Philosophy”] he dismissed such an approach [...] as an apocalyptic aberration, and fiercely attacked those who viewed the past purely as prelude to the present and judged its achievements and failings wholly in terms of current standards or in the light of supra-historical absolutes.” Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History*, 107.

<sup>71</sup> “There often lay there in these seemingly *violent* episodes and connections something *firm, bonding, noble, and superior* which we, with our—God be praised!—*refined* ethics, *dissolved* guilds and, to compensate, *bound* lands, and *innate* cleverness, and love of peoples right *to the end of the earth*, truly neither *feel* nor scarcely any longer *can* feel.” Herder, 308.

<sup>72</sup> “Thos who have so far undertaken to unfold the *progress of the centuries* for the most part have in the process the pet idea: progress to *more virtue and happiness of individual human beings*. People have then for this purpose *exaggerated* or *made up* facts, *understated* or *suppressed* contrary facts, *hidden* whole sides, *taken* words for [deeds], *enlightenment* for *happiness*, more and subtler *ideas* for *virtue*—and in this way people have made up novels ‘about the *universally progressing improvement of the world*’—novels that no one believes, at least not the true pupil of *history* and the *human heart*.” Ibid., 298. Herder also says that we do not have the “standpoint” to view and understand all of human history, at least not yet: “And if one day we found a *standpoint* to take an overview of the whole merely of our species!” Ibid., 358.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 289.

*Roman bravery idealized: Roman virtue, Roman sense!, Roman pride!* The *great-hearted disposition* of the soul to disregard sensual gratifications, weakness, and even finer pleasure, and *to operate for the fatherland*. *The controlled heroic courage* never to be rash and plunge into danger but to *persist, to reflect, to prepare, and to act*. It was the unshaken course of letting oneself be deterred by nothing that is called an obstacle, of being greatest precisely in disaster, and of not despairing. Finally, it was the great *ever-sustained plan* of being satisfied with nothing less than when their eagle covered the circle of the world.<sup>74</sup>

Virgil, as I have argued above, takes Polybius' universal history with Rome at its center and brings it into the context of the early principate. Herder, here, holds on to this teleology, whose end is Roman domination over the entire Western world, "their eagle [covering] the circle of the world," but makes it and the ideal virtues which it implies the story of just one expression of humankind, one people. Nevertheless, this teleological notion, once brought in, seems to infect Herder's entire philosophy of history. By calling Rome humankind's "manhood" and Greece her "youth," he hints that the course of history may indeed be seen as the progressive realization of a teleologically directed divine providence, rather than a number of small realizations of providence circumscribed by the historical course of individual peoples and ages.<sup>75</sup> Mankind grows, like an individual life, towards greater maturity.

This is what Hegel's philosophy of history seizes upon in Herder. By combining Herder's idea that divine providence is realized and revealed through history with Kant's notion that history is a progression towards a society or societies which supply mankind with "the greatest freedom," Hegel successfully reinscribes an ancient model of universal

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>75</sup> The next step after Rome, for Herder, is the rise of Christianity in "the north." He describes the rise of this new Christian people as a rebirth, but also as growing out of the civilizations that came before it: "The human race had to be *prepared* for this deism for so many millennia, to be *gradually drawn forth* from childhood, barbarism, idolatry, and sensuality; its forces of soul had to be *developed* through so many *national formations*—Oriental, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, etc.—as *steps* and *approaches* before even merely the slightest beginnings towards perception, conception, and concession *of the idea of religion* and *duty* and *the connecting-together of peoples* could be made." Herder, 304.

history, encapsulated in Polybius' *Histories* and Anchises' speech in the *Aeneid*'s underworld, within the context of a history of humankind from a modern perspective. In doing so, however, he also reaffirms the imperial ambitions that, as Herder shows, go hand in hand with this teleology. Hegel's narrative of spirit's unfolding in history as the realization of mankind's freedom is, as Todd Presner has pointed out, also the story of colonial conquest over the world:

For our purposes, what is significant about Hegel's account is that the philosophy of history is a colonial travel narrative, in which the ruins of past empires merely confirm the progress of spirit and propel its march forward in a seascape that moves from overcoming the temporality of destruction and ruin to the permanent spatiality of a global Christian empire.<sup>76</sup>

The idea of progress Hegel embraces in *The Philosophy of History* thus rehabilitates many of the features of the teleological vision of history Virgil's *Aeneid* both ostensibly embraces and subtly undermines and brings them into a modern context: the valorization of the present over the past, the sense of an overarching continuity, and the inherent affirmation of an ideology of imperial expansion. This is the model of progress that, as we shall see, both Kracauer and Sebald strive to bring into question.

Kracauer, of course, is not the first critic who sought to undermine this Hegelian notion of progress. Walter Benjamin, in his theses "On the Concept of History" (1945), does much to make the deficiencies of the progressive model of history visible. Kracauer follows Benjamin in connecting this idea of progress to a problematic notion of time as "homogeneous, empty" and flowing ever forward. In the chapter titled "Ahasuerus, or

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<sup>76</sup> Presner, "Hegel's Philosophy of World History via Sebald's Imaginary of Ruins," 201. Here is one example of how Hegel, in *The Philosophy of History*, equates progress with colonial expansion: "As a *third* leading feature demanding our notice in determining the character of the period, might be mentioned that urging of Spirit *outwards*—that desire on the part of man to become acquainted with *his* world. The chivalrous spirit of the maritime heroes of Portugal and Spain opened a new way to the East Indies and discovered America." Hegel, 410.

the Riddle of Time,” Kracauer tells us: “As Walter Benjamin judiciously observes, the idea of a progress of humanity is untenable mainly for the reason that it is insolubly bound up with the idea of chronological time as the matrix of a meaningful process.”<sup>77</sup> In this chapter, he discusses what he sees as a counter to this notion of progress and the conception of time to which it is linked: the concept of “Ungleichzeitigkeit.” The term, coined by the philosopher, Ernst Bloch, refers to the simultaneous coexistence, within a society at a specific time, of social and economic structures associated with distinct historical periods.<sup>78</sup> Kracauer uses this concept as a challenge to the concept of a history that progresses uniformly ever-forward: “Since simultaneous events are more often than not intrinsically asynchronous, it makes no sense indeed to conceive of the historical process as a homogeneous flow. The image of that flow only veils the divergent times in which substantial sequences of historical events materialize.”<sup>79</sup> This, we will remember, is the same argument Sebald’s Austerlitz makes, in their conversation at the Greenwich Observatory, in almost the same terms. Austerlitz, too, sees the “Ungleichzeitigkeit [nonconcurrency]” of human events as a challenge to the concept of uniform historical progress, and he too describes the history conceived of in these terms as a “homogeneous flow”: “If Newton [...] really thought that time was a river [ein Strom] like the Thames, then where is its source and into what sea does it finally flow? [...] What would be this

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<sup>77</sup> Kracauer, *History*, 149-50. The passage from Benjamin’s theses “On the Concept of History” which Kracauer refers to (and from which Adorno quotes as well) reads as follows: “Progress [Der Fortschritt] as pictured in the minds of the Social Democrats was, first of all, progress of humankind itself (and not just advances in human ability and knowledge). Second, it was something boundless (in keeping with an infinite perfectibility of humanity). Third, it was considered inevitable—something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. Each of these assumptions is controversial and open to criticism. But when the chips are down, criticism must penetrate beyond these assumptions and focus on what they have in common. The concept of mankind’s historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself.” Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 394-5.

<sup>78</sup> Ernst Bloch, “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to its Dialectics.”

<sup>79</sup> Kracauer, *History*, 149.



river's qualities, qualities perhaps corresponding to those of water, which is fluid, rather heavy, and translucent?" (*Ae* 100/ *Ag* 150).<sup>80</sup>

The question arises, however, as to how historiography can harness this idea of "Ungleichzeitigkeit" to create a mode of historical thought that does not rely on the notion of progress. Kracauer's *History* might be described as a series of tryouts for different metaphors for an understanding of history that might fill this role. Kracauer's ideal historian is described, by turns, as: Erasmus, Tristram Shandy, an exile, a stranger, Orpheus, Ahasuerus, Proust's Marcel, and finally as a dweller in philosophy's "anteroom." History, as a discipline, Kracauer tells us, is an example of "anteroom thinking." It does not aspire to the universality or the rigidity of the "last things," like philosophy.<sup>81</sup> Instead, it maintains a degree of flexibility and contingency, residing in the anteroom of philosophy as one of "the last things before the last." As such, though, history remains essentially elusive. No description of it can be definitive. Neither can we prescribe definitive rules for what the historian should do, nor can we infer definitive

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<sup>80</sup> There is another resonance, as well, between Austerlitz' and the narrator's Greenwich conversation and something Kracauer says later in this chapter. Austerlitz asks the narrator: "And is not human life in many parts of the earth governed less by time than by the weather, and thus by an unquantifiable dimension which disregards linear regularity, does not progress constantly forward [nicht stetig fortschreitet] but moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption, recurs in ever-changing form, and evolves in no one knows what direction?" (*Ae* 100/ *Ag* 150). The weather, which is marked by neither eternal forward progress nor by eternal repetition in the exact same patterns, serves Austerlitz as a counterexample to the idea of historical time as flowing ever-forward like a river. Kracauer, too, in discussing Proust, uses this metaphor to articulate a similar non-linear conception of time: "Proust radically de-emphasizes chronology. With him, it appears, history is no process at all but a hodge-podge of kaleidoscopic changes—something like clouds that gather and disperse at random." Kracauer, *History*, 160.

<sup>81</sup> "Only now am I in a position to approach my objective—a redefinition, and rehabilitation, of certain modes of thinking peculiar to historians. Not to them alone. Their ways of arguing and reflecting prevail throughout the area into which history falls—an area which borders on the world of daily life—the *Lebenswelt*—and extends to the confines of philosophy proper. In it, which has all the traits of an intermediary area, we usually concentrate not so much on the last things as on the last things before the last. [...] From the philosopher's point of view, as I have tried to show in the opening sections of this chapter, this in-between area must be characterized as an anteroom. The statements made in it have not the kind of truth-value virtually inherent in philosophical statements. They lag behind them in terms of comprehensiveness; nor do they even aspire to the latter's binding power and range of validity." *Ibid.*, 212.

laws for how the object of his study, history in the sense of the events themselves and their connection to one another, works.

If we cannot create definitive rules for the historian's work, however, we can at least create models of understandings of history that might animate this work and test these models' limitations. Orpheus is, as I have said, one of the central figures who stand in for Kracauer's ideal historian. The other is Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, doomed to wander the earth until the second coming of Christ. The two ways of formulating the historian's work embodied by these two figures do not imply mutually exclusive approaches to history but ones that overlap in key ways. Taken together, I will argue, these two figures create a model of historical thought in spatial, visual, and peripatetic terms that resonates with Sebald's own. Sebald, in other words, synthesizes two connected strands in Kracauer's work in formulating his katabatic mode of historical thought.

In discussing Orpheus, Kracauer references the version of the myth of his descent to the underworld to which both Virgil's and Ovid's accounts of the story correspond:

Orpheus descended into Tartarus to fetch back the beloved who had died from the bite of a serpent. His plaintive music "so far soothed the savage heart of Hades that he won leave to restore Eurydice to the upper world. Hades made a single condition: that Orpheus might not look behind him until she was safely back under the light of the sun. Eurydice followed Orpheus up through the dark passage guided by the sounds of his lyre and it was only when he reached the sunlight again that he turned to see whether she were still behind him, and so lost her for ever."<sup>82</sup>

Kracauer's historian-as-Orpheus, however, does not lead just one spirit up to the world above, but a whole host of figures out of the past. He is, as Kracauer says, switching metaphors mid-stream, a kind of "Pied-Piper":

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 79. The quote is from Graves' *The Greek Myths*, vol. 1, 112.

Like Orpheus, the historian must descend into the nether world to bring the dead back to life. How far will they follow his allurements and evocations? They are lost to him when, re-emerging in the sunlight of the present, he turns for fear of losing them. But does he not for the first time take possession of them at this very moment—the moment when they forever depart, vanishing in a history of his own making? And what happens to the Pied-Piper himself on his way down and up? Consider that his journey is not simply a return trip.<sup>83</sup>

Kracauer uses the figure of Orpheus here to suggest his own version of the nekyiastic mode of historical representation we found in Sebald's works. The dead are "lost to" the historian in the present, but he also, paradoxically, gives them a kind of second life in the "history of his own making"—Kracauer tells us, after all, that his historian's goal is to "bring the dead back to life." Kracauer, in other words, like Sebald, demands that his representations of the past highlight their provisional and potentially misleading nature, while at the same time making the past come to life again for their audience.

The story of Orpheus' descent to and return from the underworld also functions as a way for Kracauer to explain his position with regard to what he calls "present interest theory." According to Kracauer, this "present interest theory," in its most polemical form, contends that: "present-mindedness is prerequisite to any significant reconstruction of historical reality."<sup>84</sup> It is, in other words, only by foregrounding his work's relevance for "contemporary issues," that the historian can get history right according to these proponents of "present interest theory."<sup>85</sup> Kracauer is uncomfortable with this idea. Nevertheless, he does allow that history ought to have some utility for those alive in the present (what Nietzsche might call a "use of history for life"): "the fact that we live only

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 63.

once involves a moral obligation toward the living. The historian's concern with them—his desire better to understand the present—inspires many of his inquiries into the life of the dead.”<sup>86</sup> In another clear reference to the Orpheus story, he tells us: “So much for the historian's journey into the past. The journey continues: he must return to the upper world and put his booty to good use.”<sup>87</sup> The description of the historian's “journey” as concluding in a “return to the upper world” makes it clear that, once again, Kracauer has the journey to the land of the dead in mind as his dominant metaphor for the historian's investigations into the past. The historian, however, Kracauer tells us, brings something tangible with him from the underworld of the past: reflections that may be of value for a political or social praxis in the present. Only thus can he truly “put his booty to good use.” Orpheus' return to the land of the living, then, corresponds to the historian's attempt to find some utility for his work in the present.

If Kracauer thus embraces one side of present interest theory's “present-mindedness”—the idea that history must have some utility in the present—he rejects another—the idea that history must therefore be understood only through the lens of present social and political conditions. As he tells us immediately before he explicitly turns to the metaphor of Orpheus:

The historian is not just a son of his time in the sense that his outlook could be defined in terms of contemporary influences. Nor is his conception of the past necessarily an expression of present interest, present thought; or rather, if it is, his aggressiveness may cause the past to withdraw from him. The historian's mind is in a measure capable of moving about at liberty. And to the extent that he makes use of this freedom he may indeed come face to face with things past.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 79.

Orpheus' journey into the underworld thus also represents a peripatetic vision of the historian's work, one according to which he is at liberty to move from historical perspective to historical perspective and, like the epic heroes, Orpheus and Aeneas, in the underworld, to come "face to face" with the representatives of different moments and events in the past.

This peripatetic vision of history is crucial to an understanding of Kracauer's historical thought. The chapter which follows immediately upon his description of Orpheus, for example, is titled "The Historian's Journey" and takes the image of the historian wandering from place to place as its central metaphor. Kracauer's historian is a stranger wandering the earth, an exile—just like the author himself, incidentally.<sup>89</sup> The past, for this ideal historian, is a foreign country. Indeed, Kracauer saw himself and his historian not only as "extraterritorial"—that is, spatially displaced—but "chronologically anonymous"—displaced in time, as well. He did not, in other words, believe that the interpretation of his work or that of his ideal historian should be bound to the specific time which gave birth to them.<sup>90</sup> They wander through the various periods their work addresses as well as around the world.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> "The exile's true mode of existence is that of a stranger. So he may look at his previous existence with the eyes of one 'who does not belong to the house.'" Kracauer, *History*, 83-4. Martin Jay discusses the importance of Kracauer's self-image as an eternal outsider in "The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer": "Marginality, alienation, outsidership have been among the stock obsessions of intellectuals ever since the time of Rousseau. Few, however, focused as consistently on the manifestations of the malaise throughout their entire careers as did Kracauer." Jay, 153.

<sup>90</sup> "The 'chronological anonymity' he so insistently guarded [...] helped discourage efforts to place Kracauer in the context of any one period, such as those that would define him as a 'Weimar Intellectual' with all the resonances that label has acquired over the years. By avoiding such a placement, he hoped to thwart the compartmentalization of his own work that he had sought to resist in the work of those he studied." Jay, 152.

<sup>91</sup> "Kracauer in contrast became increasingly 'extraterritorial' in terms of chronological time as well as of conceptual grids and circumscribed cultural spaces and periods. As he would argue in *History*, some people are outsiders to the periods in which they live, and this position does not *eo ipso* signify lack of understanding or of efficacy." Dagmar Barnouw, *Critical Realism: History, Photography, and the Work of Siegfried Kracauer*, 157.

No figure more exemplifies this peripatetic mode of historical thought for Kracauer than Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew.<sup>92</sup> The chapter which takes this figure as its guiding metaphor deals with the problem of historical time. For Kracauer, there is an insoluble antinomy at the heart of history's understanding of time. One can view historical time as the "homogeneous flow" we discussed above, or as marked by ruptures and incongruences, "bundles of shaped times in which the manifold comprehensible series of events evolve."<sup>93</sup> This latter is a decidedly spatial understanding of history—non-consecutive moments combine, according to this perspective, into static configurations, "shapes" and "bundles." Kracauer, here, strives to go beyond Walter Benjamin, who, he says, offers us an "undialectical approach" by merely rejecting the idea of continuous, flowing time.<sup>94</sup> He also strives to go beyond Proust, whose Marcel solves the problem of the discontinuous nature of his memories of his life by turning it into a single literary narrative at the end of that life.<sup>95</sup> Ahasuerus, who will wander through all the ages until "the end of Time," is the figure tasked with dialectically reconciling this antinomy.<sup>96</sup> That this can only be accomplished "at the end of Time," as

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<sup>92</sup> Inka Mülder-Bach draws a connection between Ahasuerus and the peripatetic, exiled "stranger": "Kracauer's characterization of the historian evokes the image of Ahasuerus, and behind this image appears the figure in whom he depicted himself at the end of his life, the figure of the stranger." Mülder Bach, "History as Autobiography: *The Last Things before the Last*," 154

<sup>93</sup> Kracauer, *History*, 154. Kracauer draws on the work of the art historian, George Kubler, for this idea of "shaped time." According to Kubler, Kracauer tells us, a linked sequence of events "evolves according to a time schedule all its own. Its time has a peculiar shape. This implies that the time curves described by different sequences are likely to differ from each other." *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>95</sup> "Proust succeeds in reinstating chronological time as a substantial medium only a posteriori; the story of his (Marcel's) fragmented life must have reached its terminus before it can reveal itself to him as a unified process. And the reconciliation he effects between the antithetic propositions at stake—his denial of the flow of time and his (belated) endorsement of it—hinges on his retreat into the dimension of art. But nothing of the sort applies to history. Neither has history an end nor is it amenable to aesthetic redemption." *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>96</sup> "The impossibility of reconstructing history as that logical course of chronological time which could be subsumed under a general principle engenders the image of a discontinuous world of ruptures and rejections, whose chronicler could only be a survivor who has passed through the cataracts of time unscathed. At this point Kracauer returns to a "legendary" figure who already formed the title of the

Kracauer tells us, however, means that the sense of time contained in any actual historian's work must only be provisional.<sup>97</sup> Proust's solution is, thus, not available to Kracauer's historian.

Ahasuerus, however, in Kracauer's book, is also a kind of Orpheus figure. As Kracauer tells us:

The antinomy at the core of time is insoluble. Perhaps the truth is that it can be solved only at the end of Time. In a sense, Proust's personal solution foreshadows, or indeed signifies, this unthinkable end—the imaginary moment at which Ahasuerus, before disintegrating, may for the first time be able to look back on his wanderings through the periods.<sup>98</sup>

This “look back,” accomplished now only “for the first time,” is an important part of the Orpheus story as well. Ahasuerus looks back at the path he has taken (“on his wanderings”) for the first time at the end of time; Orpheus does not look back on his own path through the underworld until he reaches the world above. The relationship between these two figures is similar to that Benjamin finds, in his theses “On the Concept of History,” between the Messiah and his ideal historical observer, the historical materialist, who has, as Benjamin says, “a weak messianic power.” The Messiah also comes “at the end of Time.” His coming puts an end to the homogeneous flow of historical time, and it redeems all of the figures out of the past. The historical materialist, though, can harness a weak version of this disruptive power. The political action he engages in, in the present, creates a rupture in historical time, and it also offers the dead a lesser form of redemption.<sup>99</sup> Ahasuerus, like the Messiah, can reconcile the antinomy at the heart of

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chapter: ‘Ahasuerus, or the Riddle of Time.’ In this figure Kracauer sees the lost unity as being sublated negatively.” Gertrud Koch, “‘Not yet accepted anywhere’: Exile, Memory, and Image in Kracauer’s Conception of History,” 106.

<sup>97</sup> Kracauer, *History*, 163.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>99</sup> “The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. Doesn’t a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn’t there an echo of now silent ones?”

historical thought, but only at the end of time. As Orpheus, on the other hand, the historian can look back on the past within the present moment, but the understanding of history he establishes can only be provisional.

There is, though, another detail in this description of Ahasuerus' "look back" that points to a crucial difference between these two figures for Kracauer: in the case of Ahasuerus, it is he himself who threatens to "disintegrate" upon looking back, not, as in Orpheus' case, the object of his gaze, the spirits he brings up with him from the underworld. Ahasuerus is, thus, a figure who stands in for the historian, but also one who internalizes the features of the historical object as well. He represents both the historian and the history he investigates. This insight helps us to understand the passage in which Kracauer introduces this figure of Ahasuerus to us:

It occurs to me that the only reliable informant on these matters, which are so difficult to ascertain, is a legendary figure—Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. He indeed would know firsthand about the developments and transitions, for he alone in all history has had the unsought opportunity to experience the process of becoming and decaying itself. (How unspeakably terrible he must look! To be sure, his face cannot have suffered from aging, but I imagine it to be many faces, each reflecting one of the periods which he traversed and all of them combining into ever new patterns, as he restlessly, and vainly, tries on his wanderings to reconstruct out of the times that shaped him the one time he is doomed to incarnate.)<sup>100</sup>

Ahasuerus is the historical observer par excellence. He has known all times, all "developments and transitions." This is more than just a matter of observation or knowledge of historical events. It is a matter of experience: he "has had the unsought

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Don't the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize? If so, then there is a secret agreement between the past generation and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this." "What characterizes revolutionary classes at the moment of their action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode." Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 390, 395.

<sup>100</sup> Kracauer, *History*, 157.



opportunity to experience the process of becoming and decaying itself.” This is the representation of a lived relationship to the past. Kracauer’s historian allows himself to be deeply affected by the past, to adopt, or at least to try to adopt, perspectives rooted in this past, and thus to emerge in the present changed by his explorations of the past. This is how he has described Orpheus, as well: “And what happens to the Pied-Piper himself on his way down and up? Consider that his journey is not simply a return trip.”<sup>101</sup>

When we enter the parentheses, however, in this description of Ahasuerus, the perspective shifts. We no longer view the past, the many roads he has walked down, through Ahasuerus’ eyes. We step outside of his skin and view his “terrible” face from the outside. There is a sense of transgression here. By putting this long section in parentheses, Kracauer hints that we are seeing something that we, the living, are not meant to see. He shows us a figure whose many faces reflect periods of the past that we, in the present, could not have experienced. These are, in other words, faces that could only belong to the dead. Orpheus comes “face to face” with figures out of the past in the underworld, but Ahasuerus literally wears these faces as his own, like the masks of the ancestors at the Roman *pompa funebris*.<sup>102</sup> These faces, furthermore, create ever-changing “patterns.”<sup>103</sup> This is not quite a “memory space,” but it is a spatialization of historical time, an otherworldly, spatial representation of the past. Different moments

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>102</sup> “Thus in the end, Ahasuerus becomes a figure representative of something else, namely the terrible face assembled from the many faces of the dead.” Koch, 108.

<sup>103</sup> These “patterns” are reminiscent of the “constellations” which Benjamin tells us history breaks down into for his historical observer. “Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad.” Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 396. As Eduardo Cadava points out, this too is an image of the historical past as spatial configuration: “Within this condensation of past and present, time is no longer to be understood as continuous and linear, but rather as spatial, an imagistic space that Benjamin calls a ‘constellation or a ‘monad.’” Cadava, *Words of Light*, 60.

occupy positions on Ahasuerus' face that, taken together, create distinct shapes. It is, in other words, a kind of map of the nether-realm of history.

Once again, though, the patterns formed by these "many faces," which represent distinct historical moments, are only provisional. They are continually "combining into ever new patterns." These patterns are representations of the past, but none of them can be final or definitive. The figure of Ahasuerus is meant to address the antinomy at the heart of history's sense of time. Time, Kracauer tells us here, cannot adhere to a strictly spatial and synchronic configuration while we continue to experience it as a continuous flow, moving ever-forward. This, however, does not stop Ahasuerus from attempting to understand the past or from representing it on his face. As Kracauer tells us, he "restlessly, and vainly, tries on his wanderings to reconstruct out of the times that shaped him the one time he is doomed to incarnate." This unified "one" time, the solution to the antinomy at the heart of historical thought, between the sense of time as a continuous flow and as a synchronic, spatial configuration, will have to wait until the "end of Time," when Ahasuerus can finally cease his wandering.

In the two figures whose journeys he describes for us, Orpheus and Ahasuerus, Kracauer gives us two linked visions of history and of the historian's work. As Orpheus, the historian temporarily abandons his perspective among the living in the present and comes face to face with the various perspectives offered by the dead figures out of the past in the underworld of history. As Ahasuerus, he attempts to understand history in spatial terms, but finds that the various spatial patterns and shapes he creates can only be provisional, since they cannot be reconciled with his experience of time as a continuous flow.

### *Katabasis in Sebald's Austerlitz*

Sebald's Austerlitz is also an Ahasuerus figure. He is, first of all, quite literally a "wandering Jew." Whenever the narrator encounters him, he is dressed in the costume of an inveterate wanderer. He wears "heavy walking boots [Wanderstiefel] and workman's trousers made of faded blue calico, together with a tailor-made but long outdated suit jacket," and he always carries the same army surplus rucksack (*Ae* 7/ *Ag* 14). He travels across Europe, searching for traces of his Jewish parents, both presumably killed in the Holocaust. And, like Ahasuerus, Austerlitz' journey is one without conclusion.<sup>104</sup> At the end of the book, having discovered a single photograph of his mother, Austerlitz goes off in search of traces of the fate of his father.<sup>105</sup> There is no sense of resolution, nor any sense that a resolution is even possible for Austerlitz.<sup>106</sup> Like Ahasuerus, he may be

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<sup>104</sup> John Zilcosky argues that this makes *Austerlitz* fundamentally different from the travel narratives Sebald writes in his other works, a more conventionally postmodern tale of the impossibility of ever finding home: "he did *not* claim that we are all hopelessly lost and unable to return to our origins. Rather, he demonstrated how our disorientations never lead to new discoveries, only to a series of uncanny, intertextual returns [...]. In the present essay, I will examine Sebald's last long fiction, *Austerlitz* (2001), arguing that it turns back toward a more conventional 'postmodern' model of lost-and-found, and leads us to consider the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of Holocaust representation." Zilcosky, 679-80. I would argue, though, that although in Sebald's other works there are more uncanny re-orientations, as one might say, where the narrator finds that he is not as lost as he thought, because of the uncanny resonance of his own experience with something he has read or seen before, this does not usually entirely dispel the narrator's disorientation and bring his wandering to a conclusion. There is a sense, in all of Sebald's works, I will argue, that the journey through the landscapes and cityscapes of Europe, with their historical traces, can never fully be brought to a close because any understanding of that history always remains provisional.

<sup>105</sup> "I don't know, said Austerlitz, what all this means, and so I am going to continue looking for my father, and for Marie de Verneuil as well" (*Ae* 292/ *Ag* 414).

<sup>106</sup> Amir Eshel argues that this open-endedness is part of the book's strategy of portraying the work of memory as a never-ending process: "Since the narrator does not continue his account of Austerlitz's search, it now becomes apparent that Austerlitz's search is not the means, but rather the end itself. The tension between his wish to uncover the past and his fear of its eternally dwelling in the present results in an open-ended exploration that, rather than reflecting a hope to clarify or to recover times past, suggests the simultaneity of all times in the realm of memory and the existential inability to mark the past as gone." Eshel, "Against the Power of Time," 79.

doomed by a primal trauma—the loss of his parents, his identity, and his home—to wander the earth forever.<sup>107</sup> Austerlitz' journey is, on the one hand, a very concrete and material one. One can chart his itinerary from train station to train station, and track his researches in various archives, museums, and libraries. On the other hand, though, there is also something supernatural about him. Like Ahasuerus, whose face, as Kracauer tells us, “cannot have suffered from aging,” Austerlitz too appears ageless to the narrator. Of his first encounter with him in the “Salle des pas perdus,” the “hall of lost steps,” in the Antwerp Centraal Train Station—the perfect place for an eternal wanderer—the narrator tells us: “One of the people waiting in the *Salle des pas perdus* was Austerlitz, a man who then, in 1967, appeared almost youthful, with fair, curiously wavy hair of a kind that I had seen elsewhere on the German hero Siegfried in Fritz Lang's *Nibelungen* film” (*Ae* 7/ *Ag* 14). When the narrator encounters him, again, in 1996, his physical appearance is almost unchanged, still unnaturally youthful:

He had not changed at all [Er war in seinem ganzen Aussehen unverändert geblieben] in either his carriage or his clothing, and even had the rucksack still slung over his shoulder. Only his fair, wavy hair was paler, although it still stuck out oddly from his head as it used to. Nonetheless, while I had always thought he was about ten years old than I, he now seemed ten years younger [...]. (*Ae* 39/ *Ag* 62)

Austerlitz is, thus, the image of the eternally young, unceasing traveler. Not only does his physical appearance remain unchanged; he wears clothes evocative of a bygone era, as well—the “long outdated suit jacket [längst aus der Mode gekommenes Anzugsjackett]” (*Ae* 7/ *Ag* 14), for example, and the rucksack, which Austerlitz bought

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<sup>107</sup> John Zilcosky points out that it is not just Austerlitz whose story is without conclusion, but the narrator whose story frames Austerlitz' as well: “Austerlitz's final sentence gives the story another turn of the screw, suggesting that the narrator has not come to any closure at all: he keeps reading Jacobson's book—he was only on chapter fifteen!—and heads back toward the town, probably to get on yet another train, headed perhaps for Austerlitz's home in the Alderney Street or perhaps in some unforeseen direction, toward yet another set of characters and stories.” Zilcosky, “Lost and Found,” 697.

“before he began his studies,” and which is compared to that of the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who died in 1951 (*Ae* 40/ *Ag* 62-3). Like Ahasuerus, Austerlitz wanders the earth, witnessing “the process of becoming and decaying,” while he himself does not change. No wonder that his experience of time is decidedly unconventional.<sup>108</sup>

Austerlitz, though, is also an Orpheus (and Aeneas) figure. Time and again, he travels to places described as a kind of land of the dead. In these katabatic episodes, I will argue, images representative of distinct moments in history come together in a single space and are made to reflect on one another, as in the underworld Aeneas journeys through in his *katabasis*. I will examine here two such *katabasis* episodes in Austerlitz’ story: first, one that takes place in the physical space of Liverpool Street Station, in London; and, second, in the figurative space of a dreamscape Austerlitz imagines during a nervous breakdown in Paris.

The historical event with which *Austerlitz* is most directly concerned is the Holocaust. Jacques Austerlitz, as we and the narrator only gradually become aware because Austerlitz himself has repressed all memory of it, has a personal connection to this history. He was rescued from the fate of his Eastern European Jewish parents by the *Kindertransports* and brought to England where he was adopted by a Welsh minister and his wife. The episode in which Austerlitz, as an adult, begins to recover the memory of this experience in a construction site in the former Ladies’ Waiting Room in Liverpool Street Station in London, the place where he first met his adoptive parents, the Eliases, is

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<sup>108</sup> This is one of the repeated themes of the narrator’s encounters with Austerlitz. In addition to Austerlitz’ description of his unique understanding of time in Greenwich, for example, the narrator tells us that “for Austerlitz certain moments had no beginning or end, while on the other hand his whole life sometimes seemed to him a blank point without duration [...]” (*Ae* 117/ *Ag* 173).

explicitly cast as a journey to the land of the dead.<sup>109</sup> Liverpool Street Station is, he tells us, “a kind of entrance to the underworld, as it has often been described” (*Ae* 127-8/ *Ag* 188).

Austerlitz, however, has begun to encounter otherworldly apparitions even before the hallucinatory vision he experiences in the station which brings him face to face with his repressed past. Leading up to this experience, he has suffered a kind of breakdown which has left him increasingly unable to produce or to understand language. This aphasia, as we find out, is connected to the loss of his mother tongue, Czech, upon his arrival in England as a child.<sup>110</sup> Along with the repressed memories of the past, he finds the language in which he experienced them resurfacing within him as well—a process that is only completed once he journeys to Prague and finds his childhood home and the nursemaid who cared for him there, Vera.<sup>111</sup> During the period of his breakdown in London, however, he begins to wander the city at night, constantly looping back to

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<sup>109</sup> Russell J. A. Kilbourn has also discussed this episode as an example of *katabasis* as metaphor for the work of memory in *Austerlitz*. Kilbourn, “Architecture and Cinema,” 143-6.

<sup>110</sup> Along with visual hallucinations, Austerlitz tells us: “And I would hear people behind my back speaking in a foreign tongue, Lithuanian, Hungarian, or something else with a very alien note to it, or so I thought, said Austerlitz” (*Ae* 127/ *Ag* 188). It is not a stretch to imagine that this “foreign tongue” might be his native Czech. Later, after he has experienced his return of the repressed within the station, the loss of this language is an explicit theme of his newfound recollections of his childhood: “[...] recently I have even thought that I could still apprehend the dying away of my native tongue [Absterben der Muttersprache], the faltering and fading sounds which I think lingered on in me at least for a while, like something shut up and scratching or knocking, something which, out of fear, stops its noise and falls silent whenever one tries to listen to it” (*Ae* 138/ *Ag* 203). The words Austerlitz uses, here, to describe this “dying away” of his native language, hint at the intimate connection Austerlitz draws between the loss of this language and the fate of his parents, the knowledge of which he has repressed. Within the words “Absterben der Muttersprache,” it is possible to hear “Sterben der Mutter,” “dying of [his] mother.” The language of imprisonment and terror, with which he describes this language’s continued presence within his unconscious mind, reinforces this connection—this is, after the all, the fate his mother endured, one can imagine, in the concentration camp.

<sup>111</sup> “In the middle of her account Vera herself, quite involuntarily, had changed from one language to the other, and I, who had not for one moment thought that Czech could mean anything to me [...], now understood almost everything Vera said, like a deaf man whose hearing has been miraculously restored [...]” (*Ae* 155/ *Ag* 227).

Liverpool Street Station and its environs.<sup>112</sup> Here, among the usual working stiff s on their way into the city while he is on his way home in the morning—who are also described as similar to the inhabitants of the underworld, “poor souls [arme Seelen] who flow from the suburbs towards the center at that time of day” (*Ae* 126/ *Ag* 187)<sup>113</sup>—he encounters ghostly figures whom he feels must be from some part of his past whose memory he cannot access: “As I passed through the stations, I thought several times that [...] I saw a face known to me from some much earlier part of my life, but I could never say whose it was. These familiar faces always had something different from the rest about them, something I would almost call indistinct [etwas Verwischtes] [...]” (*Ae* 127/ *Ag* 187).

The “indistinctness” of these faces is reminiscent of something he has told us earlier. Evan, the blacksmith of the Welsh village in which he was raised, has told him folktales of “the dead who had been struck down by fate untimely, who knew they had been cheated of what was due to them and tried to return to life” (*Ae* 54/ *Ag* 82-3). And it

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<sup>112</sup> “I had several such experiences in Liverpool Street Station, to which I was always irresistibly drawn back on my night journeys” (*Ae* 127/ *Ae* 188).

<sup>113</sup> One can read here an allusion to T. S. Eliot’s “Wasteland.” Eliot also describes London as a land of the dead, filled with lifeless figures:

Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,  
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

Eliot, “The Waste Land,” 60-8. For Eliot, this is a description of the modern condition. The figures he sees are insubstantial and ghostly because they lack autonomy. Sebald, one might say, tips his hat to Eliot, but then articulates a distinction between his underworlds and that Eliot finds in London. The spirits Austerlitz engages with here and in the other *katabasis* episodes in *Austerlitz* are images out of the historical past or out of his own personal memories, not just the exploited and powerless “working stiff s” of the modern western work-a-day world.

is worth noting that this description might equally apply to the victims of the Holocaust, like Austerlitz' parents, who were also "struck down by fate untimely" and "cheated of what was due to them." Evan goes on to tell him that sometimes these dead spirits do appear in the world of the living, but that their appearance is somewhat different from that of the living: "At first glance they seemed to be normal people, but when you looked more closely their faces would blur or flicker slightly at the edges" (*Ae* 54/ *Ag* 83). Both descriptions, of faces that would "blur or flicker" or appear "indistinct [verwischt]" call to mind old photographs or early films, and this connection between photographs and the ghosts of the past makes sense: it is primarily through photographs that Austerlitz connects to his own lost past. His quest for traces of his mother comes to a stop when he finds a single image that Vera confirms is of her. Photographs, for Austerlitz, are access points to the land of the dead, and where the dead appear to the living, in *Austerlitz*, they do so in the shape of images that have much in common with photographs.<sup>114</sup>

In addition to these apparitions, Austerlitz tells us:

I began seeing what might be described as shapes and colors of diminished corporeality through a drifting veil or cloud of smoke [eine Art von treibendem Rauch oder Schleier], images from a faded world [Bilder aus einer verblichenen Welt]: a squadron of yachts putting out into the shadows over the sea from the glittering Thames estuary in the evening light, a horse-draw cab in Spitalfields driven by a man in a top hat, a woman wearing the costume of the 1930s and casting her eyes down as she passed me by. (*Ae* 127/ *Ag* 188)

This is also how one might describe the ghosts of the underworld—"images from a faded world." The key, though, once again, to understanding the otherworldly quality of these images is something else Evan has told him: "nothing but a piece of silk [Seidentuch] [...] separates us from the next world" (*Ae* 54/ *Ag* 84). There is an echo,

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<sup>114</sup> See my discussion of photography as a nekyiastic mode of representation in Chapter 1.



here, of this “piece of silk,” in the “veil” that Austerlitz finds between himself and these “images from a faded world.” That this veil remains between him and these images, however, tells us that Austerlitz has not yet stepped into the underworld. Like Odysseus, he remains as yet on the side of the living, although he is already interacting with the inhabitants of the nether-realm.

The images that he sees, though, have a specific provenance. They are images drawn from the historical past of this quarter of the city, as is made clear by the brief history Austerlitz narrates, immediately following this, of the area, focusing especially on the infamous insane asylum Bedlam.<sup>115</sup> This gives the scene another resonance with classical *katabasis*. The classical underworld is, as I have argued, a kind of storehouse of such historical images. The images Austerlitz sees here, though, taken together, paint a very particular picture of this history. The history they create, as Austerlitz tells us, is the story not of change or progress but of the accumulation of “pain and suffering.” He wonders, “whether the pain and suffering [das Leid und die Schmerzen] accumulated on this site over the centuries had ever really ebbed away, or whether they might not still, as I sometimes thought when I felt a cold breath of air on my forehead, be sensed as we passed through them” (*Ae* 129-30/ *Ag* 190-1). For Austerlitz, history, even the history of one of the great urban centers of the western world, is not the story of a glorious progress toward ever more enlightened modes of living, but a continual accretion of suffering,

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<sup>115</sup> This is a Benjaminian mode of engagement with the historical past. History, for Benjamin’s “historical materialist,” his ideal historical observer, breaks down into “images [Bilder],” which flash up in the moments when they can be put to use for the purpose of political action: “The past can be seized only as an image [Bild] [...]. For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image [...]. Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.” Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 390-1.

which leaves traces, invisible to the untrained eye, within these architectural spaces.<sup>116</sup> He has, after all, described his task as an architectural historian as the illumination of “marks of pain [Schmerzesspuren],” which trace “fine lines” through history (*Ae* 14/ *Ag* 24). Here these “marks of pain” begin to take physical shape as a ghostly presence all around him.<sup>117</sup> He tells us that he feels “as if the dead were returning from their exile and filling the twilight around me with their strangely slow but incessant to-ing and fro-ing” (*Ae* 132/ *Ag* 194-6). It is not only the traces of the suffering they endured, but the dead figures who endured this suffering themselves that he senses intruding on the world of the living. The borders between the two worlds, in other words, are becoming increasingly unstable for Austerlitz.

Austerlitz next encounters one particular ghostly figure, a shabbily-dressed porter, sweeping up outside the train station ineffectually, whose work “in its pointlessness reminded me of the eternal punishments that we are told, said Austerlitz, we must endure after death” (*Ae* 132/ *Ag* 196). This porter is, in other words, like the spirits Aeneas sees far off in Tartarus, toiling futilely, or those in Dante’s *Inferno*. Austerlitz follows this porter into the Ladies’ Waiting Room where he promptly disappears, as ghosts are wont to do. In his place, however, Austerlitz sees opening before him a vision of a vast space,

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<sup>116</sup> This gives Austerlitz a perspective akin to that of Benjamin’s “angel of history,” who also sees history as the accumulation of suffering: “he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” For Benjamin this is a metaphorical image. For Austerlitz, however, whose work as an architectural historian involves the archeology of modern cityscapes, the pile of wreckage which history as catastrophe leaves behind is quite literal. Sometimes, as the text points out, the traces of pain and suffering are piled on top of each other right beneath our feet—included at this point in the text is a photograph of skeletons that Austerlitz tells us were dug up during demolition work at Broad Street Station in 1984 (*Ae* 131/ *Ag* 193).

<sup>117</sup> Amir Eshel connects Austerlitz’ prowess in delineating the history of such spaces to his ability to explore them as a kind of underworld: “Like Dante’s inferno, this underworld is labyrinthine and layered. What enables the movement from one section to another is Austerlitz’s excavating gaze. While dwelling in the station for hours, Austerlitz penetrates its enclosed past, a past still engraved in its image even after the station had gone through renovation at the end of the 1980s.” Eshel, “Against the Power of Time,” 85.

like the classical underworld both architectural and landscape, and fully in defiance of the laws of the physical universe:

From time to time, and just for a split second, I saw huge halls open up, with rows of pillars and colonnades leading far into the distance, with vaults and brickwork arches bearing on them many-storied structures, with flights of stone steps, wooden stairways and ladders, all leading the eye on and on. I saw viaducts and footbridges crossing deep chasms [...] and the longer I stared upwards with my head wrenched painfully back, the more I felt as if the room where I stood were expanding, going on for ever and ever in an improbably foreshortened perspective, and at the same time turning back into itself in a way possible only in such a deranged universe. Once I thought that very far away I saw a dome of openwork masonry, with a parapet around it on which grew ferns, young willows, and various other shrubs where herons had built their large, untidy nests [...]. (*Ae* 135/*Ag* 198-9)

This space, in its defiance of the laws of perspective, is reminiscent of a drawing by Piranesi or Escher.<sup>118</sup> It requires, as Austerlitz later says of the memory space he imagines to take the place of the linear understanding of historical time and in which “the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like,” a “higher form of stereometry” to understand (*Ae* 185/*Ag* 269). Not only, however, does it defy the laws of physics. It seems, paradoxically, to be both an interior and exterior space. It includes “halls,” “pillars,” “colonnades,” “arches,” and “many-storied structures,” but also “viaducts,” “footbridges,” “chasms,” as well as “ferns, young willows, and various other shrubs.”

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<sup>118</sup> Sigurd Martin points out this similarity to Piranesi’s drawings: “Es sind die Schlüsselworte ‘Gefangene,’ ‘labyrinthische Gewölbe,’ ‘Ruine,’ ‘Rohbau,’ und ‘Holzstiegen und Leitern, die den Blick immer weiter hinaufzogen, Stege und Zugbrücken,’ die jene Mappe von Radierungen aufrufen, die in der zitierten Passage geradezu akribisch beschrieben werden. Es handelt sich um Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s surreal durchtränkte Architekturphantasien der ‘Carceri d’Invenzione.’” Martin points out, as well, that Piranesi also subscribed to a non-linear understanding of historical time, which is perhaps figured both in his architectural drawings and in Sebald’s description of the interior of Liverpool Street Station, which draws on them: “Piranesi beschäftigte sich mit dem zyklischen Geschichtsmodell von Giambattista Vico. Nach Vico verläuft die Geschichte in Zyklen, bei denen frühere Stadien der Geschichte wiederkehren.” Martin, “Lehren vom Ähnlichen: Mimesis und Entstellung als Werkzeuge der Erinnerung im Werk W. G. Sebalds,” 88, 90.

Austerlitz sees this space illuminated by an “icy gray light, like moonshine, which [...] hung above me like a tight-meshed net or a piece of thin, fraying fabric [einem Netz oder einem schütterten, stellenweise ausgefransten Gewebe gleich]” (*Ae* 134/ *Ag* 198). There is, in this, a reminiscence of the “piece of silk” Evan tells him separates this world from the next or the “veil” through which he sees the ghostly apparitions outside of the station. This time, however, within the station, Austerlitz finds himself on the other side of this division between the two worlds. The “piece of fabric” is no longer between him and the vision he sees but spread above him and the otherworldly space in which he finds himself. It is now between him and the outside world.

Nor is the imaginary space in which Austerlitz finds himself entirely uninhabited. He sees, on the viaducts and the footbridges, crowds of “tiny figures [winzige Figuren] who looked to me [...] like prisoners in search of some way of escape from their dungeon” (*Ae* 135/ *Ag* 198). These figures are, once again, like the inhabitants of the classical underworld. They too, we will remember, can find no escape from a space often described as dungeon-like. There is, however, one more clue to be found in the passage where Evan describes the ghosts of the “untimely dead,” that we are meant to see these as figures of the dead. There, Evan has told him that the dead “were usually a little shorter than they had been in life, for the experience of death, said Evan, diminishes us [verkürzt uns]” (*Ae* 54/ *Ag* 83). Here, the figures Austerlitz sees are “tiny.” Like the dead Evan describes, there is something strangely diminished about them.

These figures, however, who are described as prisoners, diminished by their imprisonment, longing to escape, are reminiscent, as well, of inmates of a concentration camp. And, indeed, this is no accident—this is the past that Austerlitz has learned to

block out entirely from his mind. It is the fate of his parents, which he has thus far been unable to confront, the fate he himself escaped by being brought to England. Nor are these figures the only reminiscences of this past. Embedded in this otherworldly space, he sees images representative not only of the history buried, like the skeletons at Broad Street Station, all around him, but of his repressed memories as well. It marks the emotional climax of this episode as well as an important turning point in the book's plot when the scene of Austerlitz' first encounter with his adoptive parents as a child, and thus with his new life, which took place exactly here, in this waiting room, appears before his eyes:

And I not only saw the minister and his wife, said Austerlitz, I also saw the boy they had come to meet. He was sitting by himself on a bench over to one side. His legs, in white knee-length socks, did not reach the floor, and, but for the small rucksack [das Rucksäckchen] he was holding in his lap I don't think I would have known him, said Austerlitz. As it was, I recognized him by that rucksack of his [des Rucksäckchens wegen], and for the first time in as far back as I can remember I recollected myself as a small child, at the moment when I realized that it must have been to this same waiting room I had come on my arrival in England over half a century ago. (*Ae* 137/ *Ag* 201)

The scene Austerlitz describes here is oddly still. There is no movement and no sound. Neither the two adults nor the child do or say anything. It is, once again, in the form of a visual image, remarkably similar to a painting or a photograph, that Austerlitz encounters the past in this otherworldly space. Reading this image, though, decoding it by means, once again, of the emblematic rucksack (this, we will remember, is how the narrator recognizes him after a gap in their acquaintance of twenty years), allows him to reclaim this part of his past and thus a part of his identity. This is what his entrance into this underworld offers Austerlitz: the opportunity to come face to face with this episode in his past and to reclaim it as part of himself—something that has been impossible for

him elsewhere—but only in the form of a still image, just as it will be merely a still, photographic image of his mother with which he must content himself at the end of his search for her. This memory image takes shape only here, within the hallucinatory space he envisions in the interior of the train station. The space Austerlitz envisions here thus becomes a kind of external representation of his internal memory, full of the memory images of his past—the “scraps of memory [Erinnerungsfetzen],” as he says—even those, or perhaps especially those, that he has repressed (*Ae* 137/ *Ag* 199).<sup>119</sup>

Austerlitz’ memories as one of those saved from the fate of his Jewish parents by the *Kindertransports* have a larger historical significance as well. And indeed, there are hints, here—in addition to the description of the historical images associated with the station and its environs with which the episode begins—that we are meant to see this space as not only a representation of Austerlitz’ memory but of the larger history of which his life is a part as well. Austerlitz imagines the floor beneath his feet as “the board on which the endgame [das Endspiel meines Lebens] would be played, and it contained the entire plane of time” (*Ae* 136/ *Ag* 201). The interior of the station, then, contains not only Austerlitz’ personal past, but the entire span of time, although, in this case, mapped not onto the three-dimensional space of the station’s interior, but the two-dimensional space of the checkered floor.

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<sup>119</sup> Russell J. A. Kilbourn has pointed this out as well: “It is tempting to describe the scene in the waiting room as Austerlitz’s Proustian moment, where his ‘involuntary memory’ is engaged through a series of serendipitous events. But the differences are telling: rather than a catalyst for involuntary memory, the station and waiting room operate in a more complex manner as the externalised, concrete representation of the structure (*topos*) of Austerlitz’s hitherto suppressed and/or displaced long-term memory, laid bare to him for the first time, in a description that signifies at both individual and socio-historical levels. Within this vast pseudo-metaphorical structure he encounters highly realistic mnemonic images: bodies, but especially *faces*, for it is in the face that identity can be read—or so our predominantly visual culture would have us believe.” Kilbourn, “Architecture and Cinema,” 145-6.

Austerlitz occupies a unique position as both a historical researcher and one with a personal, memorial connection to the events of the Holocaust. Whether we see his encounter with the images of the past within the station as an act of personal memory or a kind of historical work, the journey to the underworld he enacts here represents a form of engagement with the past, one in which the linear flow of time is turned into a spatial, synchronic configuration where images representative of different moments occupy different positions. From within this spatial configuration of historical moments, Austerlitz as historical observer, whose position is not fixed, can reflect on each of them and their relationship to one another. This is what I have been calling a “memory space.” Here, this space is both figurative—a mental space created within the historical observer’s mind to help him visualize the history with which he is engaging—and literal—a real, physical memorial site, and the hallucinatory world which appears, magically, for him within it. Entering this space is, for Austerlitz, a prerequisite for the understanding of the history encapsulated here. That the understanding of the history created by this “memory space” can only be provisional, however, that, in other words, it is impossible to picture a space which would encapsulate all of the moments of history and their possible relationships to one another, is hinted by the fact that the space Austerlitz imagines is neither finite nor adheres to the laws of physics. It seems to go on forever, and to include areas that connect to one another in ways that defy any attempt to represent them according to a traditional, three-dimensional geometry. This space is, thus, truly “otherworldly,” in the sense that it could not exist in our own world. It is only this kind of space, though, that can contain the different historical moments, along with

their connections to one another, as images that can be then brought back to life via historical representation in the present.

The underworld of history Austerlitz enters here is thus a kind of hallucinatory museum. Like the underworld in Virgil's *Aeneid*, however, it represents a particular vision of history, one which highlights the non-progressive nature of historical events. The spectral images Austerlitz sees before he enters the station through the "veil" that separates the world of the living present from that of the dead past, are part of a history of eternally recurring "pain and suffering." After having this revelatory experience within the train station he comes to realize, as well, that: "the whole architecture and civilization of the bourgeois age, the subject of my research, pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before them at the time" (*Ae* 140/*Ag* 205). The images he sees in the station which are connected to the events of the Holocaust—the tiny "prisoners," himself as a child—in other words, are a continuation of this history of ever-recurring, inexpiable suffering. The two time frames reflect on one another—the "bourgeois age," of which the pre-history of the environs of the station that Austerlitz describes acts as an exemplary cross-section, and the events surrounding the Holocaust in which, according to Austerlitz, this "bourgeois age" culminated. They both reflect as well, however, on the present of Austerlitz' story and the modern world of the late twentieth-century in which it takes place. There is not much difference between the ghostly figures he imagines around him and the working stiffs, also compared to the ghosts of the underworld, he encounters on their way to work in the morning in the living present. Moreover, the encounter with his own ghost, the ghost of himself as a child, has an oddly reflective quality. Austerlitz, for a moment, does not seem to know which



Austerlitz he is—the child or the adult—both with their traveling rucksacks, both on the same never-ending journey from home, like Ahasuerus. He tells us that, “a terrible weariness overcame me at the idea that I had never really been alive, or was only now being born, almost on the eve of my death” (*Ae* 13/ *Ag* 202). Is he the adult who has lived so many years and is now, perhaps, approaching death, or is he the boy whose life has, relatively speaking, just begun?

The hallucinatory “memory space” Austerlitz imagines here is mapped onto a very real place which has a connection to the past he envisions. This, however, is not always the case in Austerlitz’ katabatic encounters with the historical past. Almost every place Austerlitz goes is described as a kind of underworld. Even the places the narrator goes without him are underworlds. The Nocturama in the Antwerp Zoo with which the narrator begins his tale is also described as a land of the dead, with anthropomorphic creatures who never see the light of day doomed to the kind of Sisyphean eternal toil that Austerlitz tells us, in describing the porter who leads him into Liverpool Street Station, is the fate of the dead souls in the underworld.<sup>120</sup> Likewise, the waiting room in Antwerp’s Centraal Station, where the narrator first encounters Austerlitz, and the fort and one-time Nazi torture chamber at Breendonk, to which he journeys afterwards and again at the end of the book, are both cast as similar to the classical land of the dead.<sup>121</sup> In *Austerlitz*, any place can become a classical underworld because the journey to the underworld

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<sup>120</sup> “The only animal which has remained lingering in my memory is the raccoon. I watched it for a long time as it sat beside a little stream with a serious expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again, 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” (*Ae* 4/ *Ag* 10-11).

<sup>121</sup> I have discussed this connection in my essay, “‘Eine Art Eingang zur Unterwelt’”: *Katabasis* in W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*.”

represents a mode of engagement with the past, the creation of a memory space with images representative of different moments occupying different positions.

Classical orators modeled the “memory palaces” in which they stored the images meant to remind them of the subjects of their speeches on real places—temples, houses, etc.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, they could reconstruct these spaces in their minds without being present in the actual places which served as their models and thus remember what they had stored there.<sup>123</sup> Likewise, the underworlds of history in which Austerlitz engages with the past are sometimes purely imaginary, with only a tenuous connection to a real, physical “site of memory.” The clearest example of this comes when Austerlitz describes a nervous breakdown he has in Paris in 1959, years before his revelation in Liverpool Street Station, in which he enters an evocative dream-world, purely in his mind, described as an underground labyrinth.<sup>124</sup> And it is worth noting that not only is the classical underworld often compared to a labyrinth, as it is in the *Aeneid*; it is also connected to the world of dreams—Aeneas, after all, exits the land of the dead through the gate of false dreams (6.893-8).<sup>125</sup> This dream-world, which includes images

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<sup>122</sup> Frances A. Yates tells us that, according to the *Ad Herennium*, a classical rhetorical treatise which addressed the art of memory: “It is better to form one’s memory *loci* in a deserted and solitary place for crowds of passing people tend to weaken the impressions. Therefore the student intent on acquiring a sharp and well-defined set of *loci* will choose an unfrequented building in which to memorise places.” Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 7-8.

<sup>123</sup> “We have to think of the ancient orator as moving through his memory building *whilst* he is making his speech, drawing from the memorised places the images he has placed on them.” *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>124</sup> After his experience in Liverpool Street Station, Austerlitz also falls into a deep sleep, in which, he says, his body “feigned death,” and has a vivid dream in which enigmatic historical images, some evocative of the Holocaust and his own escape from it via train, seem to be “forcing their way out of him” (*Ae* 138-9/ *Ag* 203-5). This dream is a continuation, in a different venue, of the hallucinatory encounter with the images of the past that he experiences in the station.

<sup>125</sup> One of the most important sources upon which Virgil draws in the *katabasis* in Book VI is the “Dream of Scipio” in Cicero’s *De Re Publica* (6.9-29). In this section of the *De Re Publica*, Cicero tells the story of a dream Scipio Aemilianus has. In this dream, the ghost of his grandfather, Scipio Africanus, shows him a cosmological vision, including the eschatology of the soul, largely based on that in Plato’s “Myth of Er” in the *Republic*. There is thus already a strong precedent, before Virgil’s *Aeneid*, for a connection between a vision of the fate of the soul after death and the world of dreams. D. A. West explains this connection as a kind of disclaimer. Virgil presents us with a vivid vision of the afterlife, the nature of the soul, and the

evocative of different historical moments—from the Napoleonic wars, to the Holocaust, to the present of Austerlitz’ story—is also cast as a kind of land of the dead:

I lay there in my semi-conscious condition for several days, and in that state I saw myself wandering around a maze [Labyrinth] of long passages, vaults, galleries and grottoes where the names of various Métro stations—Campo Formio, Crimée, Elysée, Iéna, Invalides, Oberkampf, Simplon, Solferino, Stalingrad—and certain discolorations and shadings in the air seemed to indicate that this was a place of exile for those who had fallen on the field of honor, or lost their lives in some other violent way. I saw armies of these unredeemed souls thronging over bridges to the opposite bank, or coming towards me down the tunnels, their eyes fixed, cold, and dead. (*Ae* 269-70/ *Ag* 382-3)

In this underworld of history, Austerlitz finds a subtle repression of the past at work in the official memorialization of European history. The history of ever-recurring violence and destruction, which is the obverse of the story of the glorious progress of Western civilization, lies literally buried beneath Paris, in the names of the Métro stations. The Métro stations Austerlitz lists are named after famously bloody battles throughout European history. Austerlitz’ own name connects him to this repression of Europe’s bloody past as well—Gare d’Austerlitz, conspicuously absent from this list, is another Métro station named after a bloody Napoleonic battle. This is another aspect of the journey to the land of the dead in Sebald’s works—it can be thought of, in Freudian terms, as an exploration of the historical unconscious, the dark side of history which

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universe, while at the same time, by casting this as a kind of dream, he avoids any claim for the absolute truth of this cosmology: “To avoid the incredible, he has blurred the narrative into a dream, exactly as Cicero had changed the narrative of Er into the dream of Scipio, and, no doubt, for the same reason. He has a second device for distancing himself from his myth [...]. He cannot without ruining the credibility of his narrative say that this vision is not true, but he devises an utterance acceptable in epic which conveys allusively to an educated audience that he holds no brief for the transmigration of souls or the rest of the Pythagorean dogma in the descent of Aeneas.” West, “The Bough and the Gate,” 238. Sebald, I would argue, often casts his historical visions as a kind of dream for a similar reason, because it allows him to present the understanding of history these visions create as provisional, not an ultimately true account of the past but part of a process of memory work that is ongoing.

underlies the official political and social discourse.<sup>126</sup> For Austerlitz as for Sebald what is repressed in the official discourse of Western history is exactly what Horkheimer and Adorno have called the “dialectic of enlightenment,” the way in which the story of the ever-widening scope of reason and scientific knowledge in Western culture is also the story of the ever-widening scope of man’s domination over his fellow man.<sup>127</sup>

There is a personal, memorial aspect to the past Austerlitz encounters here, as well. The dead figures, who “were crouching on the stony floor and, turning silently towards one another, made digging motions with their earth-stained hands,” are once again reminiscent of the prisoners in a concentration camp, with their pointless and humiliating toil (*Ae* 270/ *Ag* 383). Austerlitz also feels that his repressed memories connected to these events may be coming back to him, although it comes to nothing in the end:

And when at last I began to improve, said Austerlitz, I also recollected how once, while my mind was still quite submerged, I had seen myself [sah ich mich] standing, filled with a painful sense that something within me was trying to surface from oblivion, in front of a poster painted in bold brushstrokes which was pasted to the tunnel wall and showed a happy family on a winter holiday in Chamonix. The peaks of the mountains towered snow-white in the background, with a wonderful blue sky above them, the straight upper edge of which did not entirely hide a yellowed notice issued by the Paris city council in July 1943. (*Ae* 270/ *Ag* 383)

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<sup>126</sup> Bianca Theisen argues that Sebald’s works can be thought of as travel narratives in which the main character’s journeys through Europe become encounters with the traces of this historical unconscious: “For Sebald, the dark history of oppression has left a deep trace in our physical and psychological make-up that can only index a reality silenced by the micro-mechanisms of power all too often legitimized by reason and knowledge.” Theisen, “Prose of the World,” 175.

<sup>127</sup> Ben Hutchinson has described Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as fundamental to an understanding not only of Sebald’s intellectual approach to history but of his literary style in addressing that history: “In der Einleitung zur *Dialektik der Aufklärung* schreiben Adorno und Horkheimer bekanntlich, ‘Der Fortschritt schlägt in den Rückschritt um.’ Die beiden dialektischen Begriffe können mit Recht als die zwei Pole von Sebalds ganzem Schaffen aufgefasst werden [...]. Der historische Hintergrund der im amerikanischen Exil verfassten *Dialektik der Aufklärung* war der zweite Weltkrieg, wobei der Holocaust als Gipfel der zweiseitigen Entwicklung der Aufklärung ihrer dialektischen Auslegung eine zeitgeschichtliche Resonanz verlieh. Ähnliches gilt für Sebalds Prosa [...]: die Dialektik wohnt ihr stilistisch inne.” Hutchinson, *W. G. Sebald: die dialektische Imagination*, 5-6.

Here, once again, the underworld in which Austerlitz finds himself thematizes both his own personal repressed memories and the repressed history of Europe. Although Sebald does not give us enough clues to say for sure, it is strongly implied that the “yellowed notice” Austerlitz sees peeking out from behind the poster of a happy family on a vacation in the French Alps may have something to do with the deportations that were ongoing in occupied Paris in July of 1943. This interpretation is encouraged by the fact that it is here, in front of this poster, that Austerlitz, who, as we know, has repressed the memories of his personal connection to this story, senses his repressed past beginning to surface within him.<sup>128</sup> There is a strangely reflective quality to the scene. Austerlitz does not exactly tell us that he feels this return of the repressed first hand, but that he sees a version of himself who is feeling this. His identity is split. The Austerlitz who can come to terms with this past, and the one who cannot yet, are two different figures with two different perspectives.

The dream space Austerlitz enters here does draw on the underground setting of the Métro, in which he first loses consciousness, and the hospital in which he regains consciousness, days later.<sup>129</sup> Austerlitz, though, is not aware of where he is while he is having this dream. The underworld of history he envisions here is not mapped onto a real, physical memorial space, but rather borrows features from various places to create a new world wholly in Austerlitz’ mind. Any place can be an entrance to the underworld

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<sup>128</sup> Later, we will learn that Austerlitz’ father was himself most likely deported from Paris. “I kept wondering whether [my father] had been interned in the half-built housing estate out at Drancy after the first police raid in Paris in August 1941, or not until July of the following year, when a whole army of French gendarmes took thirteen thousand of their Jewish fellow citizens from their homes [...]” (*Ae* 257/ *Ag* 336).

<sup>129</sup> “I did not return to my senses until I was in the Salpêtrière [...], somewhere in that gigantic complex of buildings where the borders between hospital and penitentiary have always been blurred, and which seems to have grown and spread of its own volition over the centuries until it now forms a universe of its own between the Jardin des Plantes and the gare d’Austerlitz” (*Ae* 269/ *Ag* 382).

for Austerlitz. It need not be a place constructed as a memorial to certain historical events. Austerlitz merely has to find there an evocation of some part of the past, and he can envision a memory space in which he engages with the images of this past. The journey to the land of the dead in Austerlitz is not about traveling to any particular physical place or set of places; it represents a particular mode of engagement with the historical past. It means thinking of the past itself in spatial terms, and the work of the historical observer as a journey through that space.

### Orfordness as Isle of the Dead in *The Rings of Saturn*

*Austerlitz* is, as I have argued, a particularly epic text, and its allusions to the classical epic journeys of heroes such as Odysseus are manifold. It is, however, an epic text structured on the repetition of one particular archetypal episode, *katabasis*, and the foreclosure of another, *nostos* or homecoming. Neither for Austerlitz nor for the narrator can there ever be a conclusion to the epic journey through the traces of the historical past. *Katabasis*, for the character Austerlitz, represents a confrontation with the events of the Holocaust—as well as the history leading up to it—events that are both part of his own personal, remembered past and part of the history he studies. *Austerlitz*, however, is not the only text where the classical trope of *katabasis* serves as a means to frame the encounter with the historical past in spatial terms, in which images representative of different moments in the past appear in a specific location and thus provide perspectives on one another. The Holocaust is, for Sebald, as for Horkheimer and Adorno in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a kind of historical black hole, towards which all previous

events in Europe were heading, and from whose shadow, even for those of us born afterwards, there can be no escape.<sup>130</sup> The trauma of the Holocaust, so one might interpret Sebald's thesis in both *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, lingers on, even if we are not always aware of how its traces are all around us all the time. Nevertheless, in Sebald's other works, the Holocaust plays a less central, or at least a less explicit role. The focus of the *katabasis* episodes in these works is more on the events prior to, concurrent with, and subsequent to the Holocaust, which bring to light the darker side of the "progress" of Western civilization, whose apotheosis Sebald finds in the Holocaust—although, as we shall see, this connection between the Holocaust and the historical events directly addressed is almost always subtly hinted at. The darker side of progress, which Sebald highlights in these episodes, is evidenced partially by the defeat and destruction to which even the most powerful nations and empires have been subject, but also by the violence and injustice done to foreign peoples abroad (as well as to many within the European centers of imperial power) in the service of imperial and colonial enterprises.

<sup>131</sup> Sebald thus undermines a Hegelian notion of progress, in these *katabasis* episodes, by highlighting its connection to an ideology of imperial and colonial expansion of whose

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<sup>130</sup> Anne Fuchs has described Sebald's curious lack of interest in historical developments since World War II as the result of the understanding of the catastrophic events of that period as a "caesura" in human history: "Gegenwart kommt in Sebalds Prosa daher auch kaum jemals im Paradigma der Entwicklung zur Darstellung, sonder fast ausschließlich aus der Perspektive des Verlusts. Seine auffällige Indifferenz gegenüber den jüngsten geschichtlichen Bewegungen gründet in dem Verständnis von 1945 als Zäsur von einer geradezu manichäischen Kraft: Angesichts der Ungeheuerlichkeit des Holocaust erscheinen alle geschichtlichen Entwicklungen danach als bloße Fußnoten in der Geschichte der Menschlichen Selbsterstörung." Fuchs, "'Ein auffallend geschichtsblindes und traditionsloses Volk,'" 98.

<sup>131</sup> Sebald also makes us keenly aware of this in *Austerlitz*. In the episode in Antwerp's Centraal Station in which the narrator first encounters Austerlitz, Austerlitz points out the connection between the iconography in the stations' architectural decorations and Belgium's colonial enterprise in the Congo, through which the wealth used to build the station was accumulated. He even directly links Belgium's colonial exploitation with the idea of progress: "at that time, now so long ago although it determines our lives to this day, it was the personal wish of King Leopold, under whose auspices such apparently inexorable progress [der anscheinend unaufhaltsame Fortschritt] was being made, that the money suddenly and abundantly available should be used to erect buildings which would bring international renown to his aspiring state" (*Ae 9/ Ag 17-8*).

bloody consequences we are, today, fully aware, and by showing that even this bloody expansion has not saved imperial centers from being conquered and destroyed themselves.

Perhaps the clearest example of *katabasis* as the journey through a space containing different historical moments and different historical perspectives appears in *The Rings of Saturn*. The narrator's journey, in the midst of his walking tour of East Anglia, to the abandoned military laboratory on the island of Orfordness is explicitly cast as a journey to the land of the dead. Here, the *katabasis* takes place in an outdoor space, although, once again, the distinction between these two kinds of spaces, exterior and interior, becomes unclear in the land of the dead that the narrator finds in the ruins of the military base. He is brought to the island by a "ferryman [Fährmann]," like the ferryman Charon who carries both Aeneas and Dante's Pilgrim across the river Styx and into the underworld proper (*Re* 234/ *Rg* 291). When he gets to the island, he imagines it as "an undiscovered country [ein unentdecktes Land]" (*Re* 234/ *Rg* 291). Although the original phrase is in German, the translation, which Sebald approved, uses the exact words Shakespeare's Hamlet uses to describe the afterlife in his famous soliloquy.<sup>132</sup> And indeed, everything the narrator encounters here is evocative of death. Part of the landscape is made up of the "dead arm of the river" (*Re* 235/ *Rg* 293), and the abandoned bunkers look to him like ancient burial mounds: "like the tumuli [Hügelgräber] in which the mighty and powerful [große Machthaber] were buried in prehistoric times with all

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who would fardels bear?  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of. (*Hamlet*, III.I.76-82)



their tools and utensils, silver and gold” (*Re* 236/ *Rg* 293). Later, he tells us explicitly that he sees this place as “a mysterious isle of the dead” (*Re* 237/ *Rg* 294).

The underworlds of history Austerlitz journeys to are hybrid spaces—part real, physical, architectural space, part imaginary dreamscape—and they are inhabited by figures, some real some imaginary, who evoke both the spirits of the classical underworld and the victims of the Holocaust. Here in Orfordness, however, the narrator wanders in the light of day through what is, for the most part, a real, physical space, and in this space, which is, after all, technically off-limits, he encounters no one—or almost no one. The journey to the land of the dead he enacts here is divided into two sections. The ferryman drops him off at a part of the island some distance from the ruins of the military lab. He must walk across a natural landscape and cross a bridge—another symbolic threshold—to get to the ruins where he will confront the traces of the historical past. In this first section, though, before he crosses the bridge that takes him, so to speak, to the underworld proper, he does encounter a figure of sorts, a curiously anthropomorphic hare who springs up and away from him across the landscape. This might seem somewhat absurd—in a situation rife with tension, trespassing, alone, with no witnesses for miles, the narrator encounters not a potentially dangerous stranger or a guard bent on keeping him out, but the most gentle of creatures. Nevertheless, there is something distinctly otherworldly about this encounter:

[...] I was frightened almost to death when a hare that had been hiding in the tufts of grass by the wayside started up [...]. In that very fraction of a second when its paralysed state turned into panic and flight, its fear cut right through me. I still see what occurred in that one tremulous instant with an undiminished clarity. I see the edge of the gray tarmac and every individual blade of grass, I see the hare leaping out of its hiding-place, with its ears laid back and a curiously human expression on its face that was rigid with terror and strangely divided; and in its eyes, turning to look

back as it fled and almost popping out of its head with fright, I see myself become one with it. (*Re* 234-5/ *Rg* 291-2)

One might describe this hare as the narrator's "totem animal," leading him into the land of the dead where he will encounter images representative of different historical moments.<sup>133</sup> It is a common feature of animistic cultures, including certain Native American tribes, that they practice a kind of "vision quest," in which the individual is led by an animal spirit that has particular significance for him on an imaginary journey through a space in which he often encounters the spirits of dead ancestors. This totem animal, in other words, in these cultures' religious practice, stands in the place of the Sibyl in Aeneas' journey to the land of the dead, or Virgil in Dante's. Indeed, Sebald elsewhere writes about this particular animal, the hare, in precisely these terms: "Totem animal [Totemtier]" is the word he uses, in his essay on the poetry of Ernst Herbeck, to describe the role of this symbolic animal in Herbeck's work.<sup>134</sup> As the individuals in these cultures identify with their totem animals, Sebald tells us, so Herbeck, who was born with a "harelip [Hasenscharte]," sees the hare as the reflection of himself. Likewise, the narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* finds himself identifying with the hare that races away from him. The hare has "a curiously human expression on its face," and he finds himself filled with the same fear and panic he imagines that the animal feels. Finally, he even sees himself "become one" with the hare. The distinction between the animal with the curiously anthropomorphic features and the narrator who shares the animal's emotions disappears in a sort of magical communion.

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<sup>133</sup> One might also connect this enigmatic hare to the rabbit that Alice follows down the rabbit hole and into Wonderland, in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

<sup>134</sup> "The hare so miraculously produced from the top hat is undoubtedly the totem animal in which the writer sees himself." "Das Häschens Kind, der kleine Has," English 130/ German 175.

As Sebald tells us, though, in his essay on Herbeck, referring to the anthropological studies of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the hare has an even greater symbolic significance: “This duality in one person makes the hare, with its split face, one of the highest deities, mediating between heaven and earth.”<sup>135</sup> This is exactly how the narrator describes the hare here as well, as having a “strangely divided [irgendwie gespaltenen]” face. The hare, then, in its role as mediator between heaven and earth, between this life and the next, is the perfect guide for the narrator into the land of the dead. This encounter is a preparatory step for his journey into the underworld—with this spiritual union with his totem animal complete, he is ready to come face to face with the images representative of different historical moments in the land of the dead he finds among the ruins of the abandoned base.

This spiritual communion between the narrator and the hare, however, also creates a *mise en abyme* that destabilizes the sense of a fixed perspective. It thus prepares us for the many temporal, historical perspectives we will encounter when the narrator journeys from here into the heart of the underworld of history among the ruins of the abandoned base. The narrator sees the animal and his surroundings, but he also sees himself reflected in the hare’s eyes, as it turns back to look at him (a perspective, one might add, that is highly unrealistic—it seems impossible that one might truly notice, even for a split second, one’s own reflection in the eye of an animal shooting away at top speed). This shift of perspective, from the narrator’s point of view to that he sees reflected in the animal’s eye, creates an uncertainty as to the focalization of the scene. The visual details, which the narrator stresses he still “sees” in his memory even to this day, and the affects he describes might just as easily belong to the hare looking back into

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<sup>135</sup> “Das Häschens Kind, der kleine Has,” English 132/ German 177.

his eyes as to the narrator himself. As in Aeneas' encounter with Dido's spirit, we do not know where we are or from whose point of view we are viewing the scene the narrator describes.

Once he walks across the bridge to the abandoned military base, it is not only where we are but when we are that becomes uncertain as well. The narrator, in fact, expresses this uncertainty explicitly: "Where and in what time I truly was that day at Orfordness I cannot say, even now as I write these words" (*Re* 237/ *Rg* 295). As one might expect, we find here the same multiplication of historical time frames, each reflecting on one another, that we found in the land of the dead in the *Aeneid*. The site seems to him, as I have said, at first like a prehistoric burial ground, a series of "tumuli [Hügelgräber]," and the photograph included here shows a number of bunkers that resemble man-made hills with crypts built into them (*Re* 236/ *Rg* 293). The narrator finds himself, in other words, at the beginning of his wanderings through the ruins of the abandoned military base, in the pre-historical period.

There is, furthermore, an implicit connection drawn here between the powerful rulers of ancient civilizations who were buried along with the worldly possessions they had accumulated, presumably through violent and oppressive means, and those who were in charge of the potentially destructive experiments done at Orfordness, who left behind these ruins. Sebald is at pains, after all, to emphasize that it is only the "mighty and powerful [große Machthaber]" and not their subjects who were monumentalized in this way, and that buried with them is the gaudy wealth, the "silver and gold," they kept for themselves even in death. There is a hint, then, that the ruins of the abandoned base may also be the remains of wealth accumulated through unjust means and put to use in ways

that now seem, at best, superfluous. This parallel paints a picture of human history as characterized more by a compulsion to accumulation, domination, and violence, than by an eternal progression ever-forward to more and more advanced ways of life and forms of civilization.<sup>136</sup>

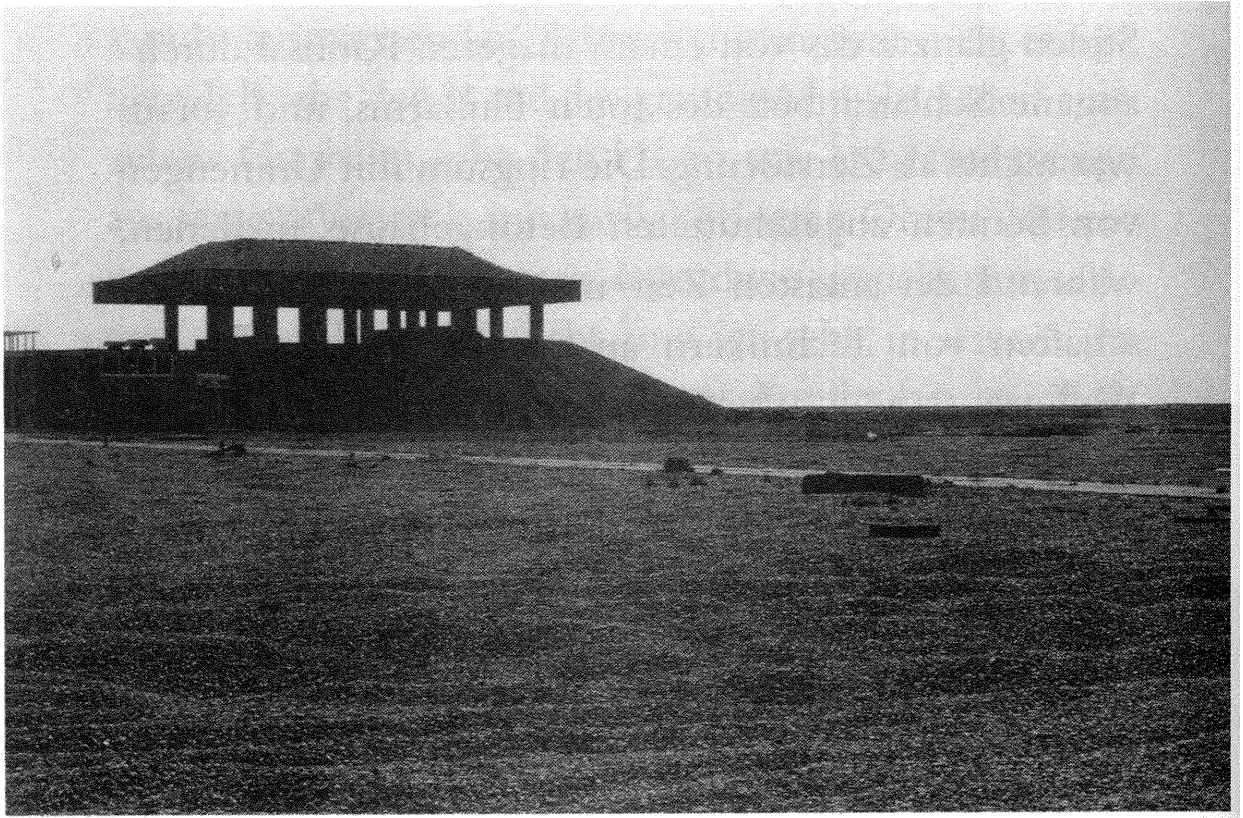


Figure 10. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (English), p. 236.

The ruins of the abandoned military base also evoke the classical period. Sebald's narrator, after all, is not the first literary traveler to be captivated by the sight of ruins.

The encounter with classical Greek and Roman ruins has been an important motif of

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<sup>136</sup> Simon Ward has argued that the various historical perspectives the narrator provides here contribute to a vision of human history as inextricable from "natural history," as, in other words, driven by compulsions that eclipse conceptions of historical agency: "As the narrator comments that he felt 'out of time' and 'out of place', these projections can be read as establishing a parallel between the prehistoric and the futuristic modern in a continuity of, or return to, natural history." Ward, however, also argues that Sebald undermines the definitiveness of this vision of history, by casting it as merely a progression of the narrator. Ward, "Ruins and Poetics in the Works of W. G. Sebald," 60-1.

Western travel-writing—and literature in general—at least since Goethe’s *Italian Journey*.<sup>137</sup> The narrator hints at the connection between these modern ruins and the ruins of classical antiquity by comparing the ruined buildings he sees to “temples or pagodas.”<sup>138</sup> He thus casts himself as an explorer of both Eastern and Western classical sites. A photograph included here bolsters this impression. It shows a ruined building in silhouette that does look strangely like a pagoda, but also like a ruined classical temple, with columns and a pediment, both hallmarks of classical Greek and Roman architecture (*Re* 236/ *Rg* 294, fig. 10). Yet in addition to the idealistic tradition of contemplating Greek and Roman ruins as examples of the heights of human enlightenment, Sebald is also well-rehearsed in the counter-arguments, that these ruins are equally monuments to violence, slavery, and oppression. I have already discussed the debt Sebald owes to Peter Weiss. In the last chapter, I discussed Weiss’ *ekphrasis* of the Pergamum frieze at the beginning of *Die Aesthetik des Widerstands*. This is exactly how Weiss’ characters read the frieze, which once decorated the central temple in the Greek city-state of Pergamum (in modern-day Turkey)—as a monument to the defeat and enslavement of foreign peoples by the Pergamene aristocracy. For Sebald, such classical ruins, like the tumuli of pre-historic peoples, are mementos of wealth expropriated by unsavory means as much as they are monuments to the heights of culture and engineering of these cultures, and the desire to produce buildings which replicate their forms expresses a compulsion to domination and destruction which has not yet abated.

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<sup>137</sup> Both John Zilcosky in “Sebald’s Uncanny Travels,” and Bianca Theisen, in “Prose of the World,” repeatedly connect the peripatetic narrators in Sebald’s prose works to Goethe’s description of himself in the *Italian Journey*.

<sup>138</sup> This detail is also meant to reinforce the sense that he is on a spiritual journey into the land of the dead. The buildings that look like temples or pagodas heighten his sense of “being on ground intended for purposes transcending the profane” (*Re* 236/ *Rg* 293-4).

The contemplation of classical ruins, however, also often leads to a consideration of the transience of even the most splendid of human creations and the most powerful of civilizations—even Rome fell. Classical ruins thus serve as a reminder that even the present world order will someday cease to exist, leaving only traces behind.<sup>139</sup> Indeed, this is where the narrator’s reveries here among the ruins of the military lab take him next. He imagines this future when our present civilization will have crumbled and uses it as a vantage point from which to look back on the present. He imagines a post-human figure, a “stranger” as he calls him, who will wander through the ruins of Western civilization, as he is now wandering through the ruins of the abandoned base. In other words, as Aeneas, in the parade of future Roman heroes, comes face to face with figures who represent perspective from the future of Rome, so the narrator, here, imagines a figure who would look back, from the future, at his own present, in order to bring this present into sharper focus:

But the closer I came to these ruins [...] the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe. To me too, as for some latter-day stranger [Wie einem nachgeborenen Fremden] ignorant of the nature of our society wandering about among heaps of scrap metal and defunct machinery, the beings who had once lived and worked here were an enigma, as was the purpose of the primitive contraptions and fittings inside the bunkers [...]. (*Re* 237/ *Rg* 294-5)

The assumption underlying the adoption of this last perspective, that we are bound to destroy ourselves “in some future catastrophe,” far from a hopeful vision of progress, is in consonance with the negative understanding of human history we found in

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<sup>139</sup> Julia Hell traces this tradition of “ruin-gazing” back to the second-century B.C.E. historian, Polybius, who writes about Scipio’s contemplation of the ruins of the Carthage. She finds, however, that it has also been an important part of modern historical thought, from historians of the eighteenth century, including Edward Gibbon, to those of the twentieth century, including Oswald Spengler. Far from undermining imperial ideology, she argues, the idea that all empires eventually crumble, of which the ruins serve as a reminder, has been integrated into that ideology, especially in the case of the imperial aspirations of the Nazis. Hell, “Imperial Ruin Gazers, or Why did Scipio Weep?”

*Austerlitz*—that technological progress always includes a dark side, the increased potential for dominance and destruction.<sup>140</sup> The ruins the narrator explores here are a veritable monument to this darker side of progress, even if he is unsure exactly how to interpret the traces the former inhabitants of the island have left behind. No one knows, he tells us, exactly what kind of weapons were developed here, during a period that includes the enormous leaps forward in military technology of World War II—he lists a few perhaps outlandish but nevertheless frightening rumors circulated among the local inhabitants—but the narrator raises the possibility that it may have been something with a catastrophic potential for destruction (*Re* 231-3/ *Rg* 287-9). He compares the island, implicitly, to nuclear weapon test sites: “the Orfordness site [...] though perfectly visible from the town, was effectively no easier to reach than the Nevada desert or an atoll in the South Seas” (*Re* 233/ *Rg* 289). The ruined outpost, thus, not only evokes the distant past and the distant future—the narrator speculates that it has a very real, historical connection to the unprecedented destructiveness of World War II as well.

The pattern created by the overlay of the various timeframes evoked here is quite complicated. The narrator, in the present of the narrative, is looking at artifacts last in use only two decades before.<sup>141</sup> He imagines them, however, as the ruins of an ancient civilization. Simultaneously, he is thinking of a far distant future, perhaps as distant as those imagined burial mounds or temples are to him, a future in which the objects he himself uses and interacts with in the present will be ancient and mysterious artifacts.

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<sup>140</sup> Maya Barzilai characterizes the philosophy of history Sebald articulates in *The Rings of Saturn* as a counter to the notion of progress put forth by Western philosophers of history including Kant and Hegel: “His ‘history of destruction’ is, moreover, marked in the text as melancholic. This version of melancholia is not a mere expression of individual suffering, but is more of an intense preoccupation with the suffering of others around the globe and a resulting skepticism of the modern notion of progress as employed by Hegel, Kant, and others.” Barzilai, “Melancholia as World History,” 75.

<sup>141</sup> Although Sebald does not tell us this, the base was last in use in 1983.



There is, though, one more timeframe evoked here as well: the present of the narration of this story. The narrator frames the story of his wanderings in East Anglia at the beginning of the book by telling us that he began writing this account a year afterwards, and immediately after suffering a nervous breakdown.<sup>142</sup> Here he reminds us of this frame: “Where and in what time I truly was that day at Orfordness I cannot say, even now as I write these words” (*Re* 237/ *Rg* 295). The evocation of this frame calls into question the reliability of the narrator’s account. The uncertainty which he expresses about his experience on Orfordness forces us to ask to what extent the encounter with the various timeframes he finds among the ruins of the abandoned military base is part of that original experience, rather than a product of the act of memory required to write his account, and thus to call into question the vision of history these various historical perspectives, taken together, create.

There are thus six different time-frames evoked in this short passage, six perspectives that reflect upon one another in a remarkably complicated fashion—the prehistoric past, the classical period, World War II, the present of the narrative, the present of narration, and the distant, post-apocalyptic future. Sebald ends the chapter with an evocation of one last era. The narrator has a hallucinatory vision in which he sees “the sails of the long-vanished windmills turning heavily in the wind” (*Re* 235/ *Rg* 295). This is a reminder of a more peaceful era, when the region was characterized by simple pastoral beauty, rather than military ruins. Set against the relentless destruction of the other eras evoked here, however, this vision takes on a more ominous tone. We are reminded that this pastoral age is also now “long-vanished,” and that its more peaceful

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<sup>142</sup> “Perhaps it was because of this that, a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility. It was then that I began in my thoughts to write these pages” (*Re* 3-4/ *Rg* 11).

technological innovations, the windmills, have been eclipsed by the destructive inventions of the military laboratory.<sup>143</sup>

It is not, however, merely different moments in time but distant places as well that this isle of the dead brings together. In his essay, “Hegel’s Philosophy of World History via Sebald’s Imaginary of Ruins,” Todd Presner argues that the encounters with the ruined and forgotten places of Suffolk in *The Rings of Saturn* create a new imaginary geography by highlighting connections between these places and more distant places tied to the history of colonialism and World War II (and thus seek to undermine Hegel’s narrative of history as a colonial expansion ever outward, away from the shores of places like Suffolk). His main example of this is the narrator’s visit to Somerleyton, the old manor house of the industrialist Morton Peto, with its relics of England’s colonial past and her involvement in the war (*Re* 31-40/ *Rg* 43-55):

In Sebald’s multilayered and multispatial dialectic, Somerleyton is connected to the spaces of the Arctic shore, the African continent, and the firebombed cities of Germany, thereby rendering it contiguous with geographies that are noncontiguous and synchronic with histories that are ostensibly nonsynchronic. Far from undertaking any kind of voyage of discovery or seafaring adventure leading to foreign lands and the subjugation of native peoples, Sebald’s narrator never leaves England; instead, he walks along the shore of the origin, the places of departure for an empire that at one time reached out, embraced, and conquered much of the earth.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Simon Ward sees this hallucinatory vision as a further reminder of the provisional nature of the understanding of history Sebald’s narrator constructs here: “The windmills are a reminder that the perception of ruined technology is indeed a matter of perspective. The passage suggests not only a historical continuity of technological rise and fall, but also a literary continuity of projection into the extraterritorial ruined space that is also the space of the imagination, the space for a literary stylisation of the narrator as a Quixote tilting against the (imagined) windmills of progress. So while it is possible to read Orfordness as a site of natural-historical processes from the prehistoric past to the catastrophic future, all these perspectives are marked as projections, as possible, but not definitive, ways of seeing.” Ward, “Ruins and Poetics in the Works of W. G. Sebald,” 61.

<sup>144</sup> Presner, “Hegel’s Philosophy of History via Sebald’s Imaginary of Ruins,” 204.

The episode on Orfordness, however, does not just bring together places tied to England's modern history, but far distant places and times as well. The temple or pagoda-like buildings recall the centers of pre-modern empires in both the Mediterranean and the Far East. The burial mounds he mentions might recall locations closer to home in the British Isles, but also places in Eastern Europe or Scandinavia. If Sebald's text turns Orfordness into an underworld of history, a site of historical memory that challenges the notion of progress, it does so by mapping onto this space an imaginary geography which far exceeds the scope, not to mention the timeframe, of Great Britain's imperial ambitions.

Bringing together distant lands and distinct timeframes, however, is a function one might ascribe to the photographs included in this episode—and in fact to many of the photographs in Sebald's works—as well. There is such a thing, I would claim, as katabatic photography, and this is one of the types of images Sebald includes in his works: photographs that seem to juxtapose distinct timeframes and locations. I have already said that the photographs of the buildings here do, in fact, corroborate the opinion of the narrator that they resemble pagodas or temples, as do the photographs of the tumulus-like mounds. The photographs thus assist Sebald's prose in bringing together different moments and distant places in this *katabasis* episode.

Photographs can do this even without reference to a text to guide our interpretation of them, however, because they lack an index tying them to a specific place and a specific time. Because we have to use clues external to the photograph or contained within the image itself to place the snapping of the picture in space and time, photographs can harness a productive uncertainty about when and where they were taken

to evoke multiple places and multiple times. And because Sebald's texts often give us limited or misleading clues about the photographs juxtaposed with them, they enhance this effect.<sup>145</sup> Even where there are fairly certain markers within the text as to what the photographs show, the instances where this is not so train us to be on our guard and to be open to multiple options for interpreting the images.

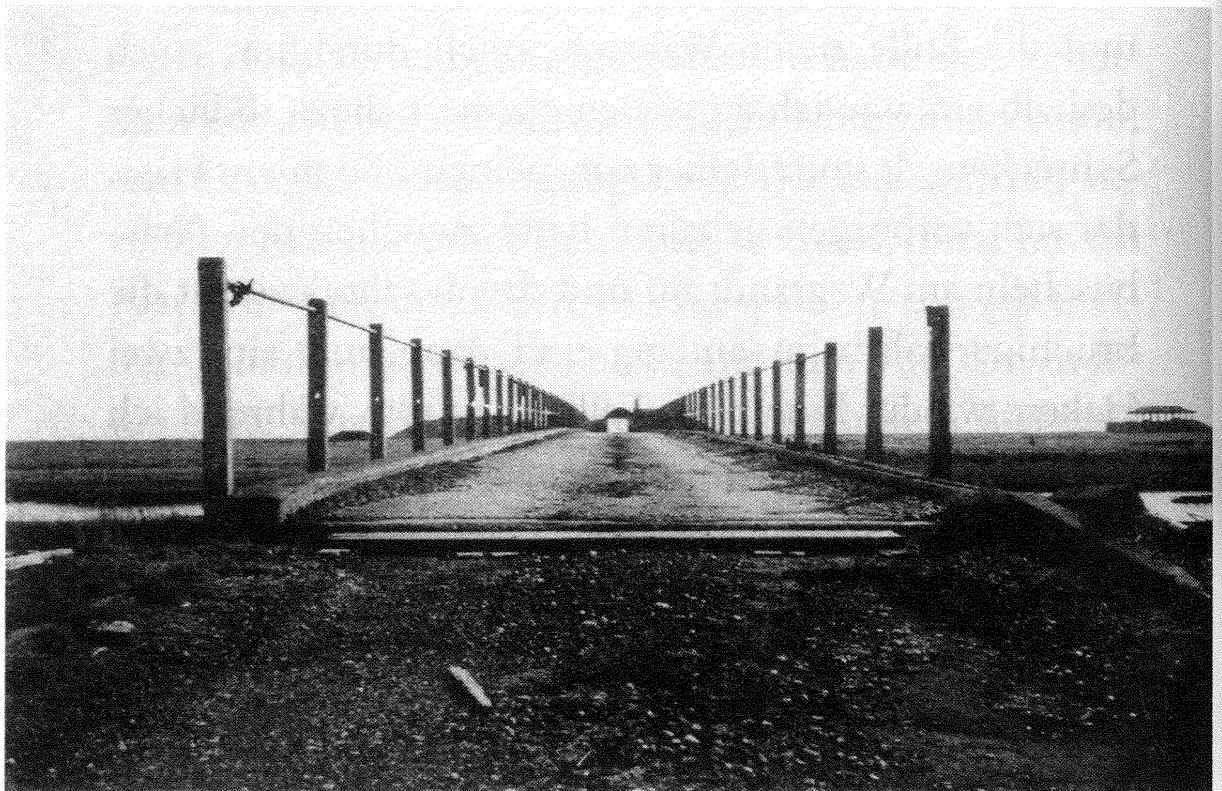


Figure 11. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (English), p. 235.

This is certainly the case with one of the other images included in this episode, (ostensibly) a photograph of the bridge the narrator must cross before reaching the ruins of the abandoned base (*Re* 235/ *Rg* 292, fig. 11). The Holocaust, as I have said, is one of

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<sup>145</sup> J. J. Long tells us, apropos of the photographs included in *The Emigrants*: “The nature of the chemical and physical process involved means that photographs always represent specific realities, but the text that situates the photograph historically and geographically may mislead, undermining the documentary reliability of the photographic image.” Long, “History, Narrative, and Photography in W. G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten*,” 117.

the finer threads woven into the fabric of *The Rings of Saturn*, evoked often but only ever subtly. The photograph of the bridge may seem to have a clear provenance and therefore to serve a simple function: it is an authenticating document, enhancing the reader's sense that this is a real place and that the episode did really happen; at the same time, as a well-composed and beautiful image, it is an aesthetic enhancement adding to the melancholy beauty of Sebald's prose. It clearly also alludes, however, to one of the most ubiquitous images associated with the memory of the Holocaust: the famous photograph of the railway entrance to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the so-called "gate of death" (see Introduction, fig. 2).<sup>146</sup> In both pictures, the camera is situated at ground level, and lines in the image—in the case of the photograph of Auschwitz-Birkenau the lines of the railway tracks, in the photograph in *The Rings of Saturn* the lines created by the edges of the bridge—enhance the sense of perspective drawing the viewer's eyes to a doorway in the center behind which is nothing but empty sky. Sebald's photograph thus puts us on unstable ground. We are uncertain where or when we are—are we moving towards the ruins of an abandoned military base, or could we instead be heading towards a concentration camp? This image makes a connection that Sebald makes elsewhere, as I have argued in Chapter 1, between the horrific violence perpetrated by the Allies against Germans during World War II, which this lab was meant to assist, and that perpetrated by Germans against their victims in the Holocaust (although it is important to bear in mind

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<sup>146</sup> There is a certain logic to the inclusion of this allusion in this episode. The image of the gate to Auschwitz-Birkenau, as I have argued in the Introduction, is one of the ways that Holocaust memory culture alludes, via the trope of the concentration camp as hell on earth, to Dante's *Inferno* and the larger tradition of underworld journeys. In other words, in an episode described as a journey to the underworld, Sebald alludes to an image that itself alludes to the classical journey to the underworld. Marianne Hirsch writes about the centrality of this image for Holocaust memory culture: "The same could be said of the 'Gate of Death' to Birkenau with the multiple tracks leading into it. Those who read and study about the Holocaust, encounter this image obsessively, in every book, on every poster. Like the gate of Auschwitz I, it is the threshold of remembrance, an invitation to enter and, at the same time, a foreclosure." Hirsch, "Surviving Images," 18.

that this connection is not an equivalency). This photograph thus brings in yet one more time frame and one more distant location: the concentration camps of the Holocaust.

This is, though, a common feature of the photographs Sebald includes in these *katabasis* episodes. The photographs are palimpsests over-written with multiple temporal and spatial indices. They enhance the sense of the juxtaposition of multiple temporal and spatial frames within the memory spaces Sebald evokes in the texts of these episodes. The history of the Holocaust is, of course, for Sebald, almost always one of these timeframes. The implication of this particular image is that the history of modernity cannot be uncoupled from the Holocaust which was, for Sebald, its terrible apotheosis.<sup>147</sup> Modern ruins remind us of the failure and the collapse of ancient civilizations. The failure of the modern Western world, however, is embodied not by the complete collapse of Western civilization, but first and foremost by the Holocaust, which stripped bare all of its illusions about itself.

The photographs included here thus enhance the sense that Sebald's narrator is like Kracauer's Orphic historian, wandering through a land of the dead where he comes face to face with images representative of different historical moments that took place in distant locations. And, as in Kracauer's *History*, the perspectives provided by these different moments also undermine a progressive understanding of history, both by showing its link to an ideology of imperial conquest and by highlighting the way imperial centers have themselves been subject to decay and destruction. Both Kracauer's Orphic historian and the classical heroes who explore the underworld, however, encounter not just images but figures who represent the different time periods and events in which they

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<sup>147</sup> In my essay, "Eine Art Eingang zur Unterwelt," I have argued that the *katabaseis* in *Austerlitz* vividly demonstrate this point, that the Holocaust can be seen as the apotheosis of the violent impulses that were already present in the colonial age that preceded it.

took part and thus call on us to adopt the perspectives of these periods. Aside from his ferryman and the hare who serves as his spirit guide, the narrator encounters no one here, nor do the photographs included capture a single living creature. The narrator does, granted, imagine certain figures—the ancient rulers who left behind burial mounds and the post-apocalyptic stranger wandering among the ruins of our civilization. Even this stranger, however, although he represents a kind of subjectivity, does not necessarily represent a human perspective. In fact, he, almost by necessity, cannot be human, since the narrator tells us he will appear only after human beings have destroyed themselves in some future catastrophe. The narrator can project himself onto the perspective of this post-human consciousness, but, to a certain extent, the stranger’s understanding of our world has to remain beyond the narrator’s ken and our own, since he is exempt from the external entanglements and internal compulsions, which, as the vision of history Sebald puts forth here makes clear, are part of human existence. He has, like Benjamin’s “angel of history,” an imagined but impossible perspective, outside of human history.<sup>148</sup>

The absence of any recognizably human figure here, however, is partly the point of the katabatic encounter with different historical timeframes the narrator enacts here. The vision of history he finds is one where nothing escapes the inevitable process of ruination. From prehistoric tumuli, to classical temples, to modern military bases, and even to the entire modern world, everything is destined to be emptied out, abandoned,

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<sup>148</sup> The past Benjamin’s “angel of history” “sees [sieht]”—and Benjamin too describes the angel’s engagement with the past in visual terms—is a continuous process of ruination. Like Sebald’s “stranger,” he encounters history only as a ruin, a “pile of wreckage,” as Benjamin says. And like the “stranger,” he is unable to intervene in this history whose wreckage he sees: “This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned to the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.” Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392.

and to collapse into enigmatic and only partially legible traces. This is the vision of history Sebald, through his narrator, offers us, one that has often been described as “melancholic.”<sup>149</sup>

#### Conclusion: *Katabasis* as *Nostos*

The psychological underpinnings, however, of the narrator’s projection of this vision of history onto the ruined landscape he encounters at Orfordness may be more complicated than one might first imagine. There is a strong dose of libido in the narrator’s melancholy. The narrator, after all, actually seems to relish this melancholic vision of doom and destruction. Just before he ends this episode with a description of the hallucinatory vision of the windmills that once dotted the coast here, he tells us: “There, I thought, I was once at home” (*Re* 237/ *Rg* 295). This is an odd detail, and one that jumbles our sense of the classical archetypes the episode draws upon. We thought that the episode was a *katabasis*, a journey to the land of the dead, but it turns out to be a *nostos*, or homecoming, albeit one that is only transitory (the narrator cannot feel at home anywhere for very long).<sup>150</sup>

This confusion of *katabasis* and *nostos*, though, is a common feature of Sebald’s prose works. Both *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* end their tales of the narrator’s journey across Europe—precisely where we might expect a homecoming scene—with *katabasis*

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<sup>149</sup> Maya Barzila has discussed Sebald’s melancholic historicism in *The Rings of Saturn* in depth in “Melancholia as World History.”

<sup>150</sup> The most famous classical example of *nostos* is Odysseus’ homecoming, which one might say takes up almost the entire second half of the *Odyssey* (Books 13-24). David Quint has discussed the structure of the first half of the *Aeneid* as a series of false homecomings, an argument that will help us to understand how Sebald uses the motif of *nostos* in his literary works, which I will discuss briefly in the Conclusion. Quint, “Repetition and Ideology in the *Aeneid*.”



episodes. In *Vertigo*, this juxtaposition is made explicit: the final section, in which the narrator really does briefly return to his childhood home in a small town in Germany (only to find that you cannot go home again), has the Italian title, *Il Ritorno in Patria*, “the return to the homeland,” the very definition of *nostos*. If, then, we expect the book to end with a comfortable homecoming, be it in the narrator’s childhood home or his adoptive home in England, we are surprised when the story takes a sudden strange turn and ends with an episode evocative of the classical journey to the underworld instead.<sup>151</sup>

The narrator travels through the “labyrinth” of London streets to a particularly otherworldly underground station and then encounters ghostly figures reminiscent of the spectral inhabitants of London T. S. Eliot describes in “The Waste Land” on the train out of Liverpool Street Station—just, as we have seen, Austerlitz does, and in practically the same location, Liverpool Street Station and its environs (*Ve* 258-60/ *Vg* 282-5). Once again, though, the episode and the book end with the narrator entering a dreamscape evocative simultaneously of many different timeframes. He finds himself wandering through a post-apocalyptic landscape in which he hears words from Samuel Pepys’ account of the 1666 Great Fire of London. Finally, the book ends with an enigmatic postscript, the number “2013”—a dateline from the future, presumably meant to be taken as the date of composition of the story the narrator is telling, although the text has given us no previous hint of this timeframe (*Ve* 260-3/ *Vg* 285-7). This short passage, then, evokes not only the present, but the historical past, the distant future, and the relatively

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<sup>151</sup> Greg Bond has pointed out that there is a connection drawn between the narrator’s journey and death throughout this final chapter of *Vertigo*: “The frequency with which oppressive, dark landscapes are invoked in Sebald’s prose indicates a very deliberate technique whereby landscape, and particularly the journey through it, invoke not merely alienation or disorientation, but death. This is at its most apparent, perhaps even overdone, in ‘Il Ritorno in Patria’ [...]” Bond, “On the Misery of Nature and the Nature of Misery,” 35.

near future as well, and once again, the implications of this juxtaposition of different time frames are ominous. The destruction to which human constructions are prone, for which the description of the Great Fire of London serves as one particularly striking demonstration, could just as easily occur now or in the near future and might eventually result in the annihilation of all life.

Similarly, the *ekphrasis* (discussed in Chapter 2) with which *The Emigrants* ends, describes a real photograph, but takes place in an otherworldly dreamscape in which the narrator finds himself after checking into the once magnificent, now deteriorating Midland Hotel in Manchester.<sup>152</sup> He imagines he hears a German tenor, who performed at a nearby music hall in the 1960s, singing arias from *Parsifal*. On the stage where the tenor is singing he imagines he sees the photographs from the Lodz ghetto, which he really did see, he tells us, at an exhibition in Frankfurt the year before. The episode thus juxtaposes several times and places, including the heyday of Manchester in the 1960s, the gallery in Frankfurt where he saw the exhibition, and, of course, the Lodz ghetto during the Holocaust. Here, as he does throughout this final section of *The Emigrants*, Sebald draws a connection between the once booming industrial city of Manchester and the Eastern industrial cities whose Jews were imprisoned and killed in the Holocaust—the same forces of modernization which led to the industrial success of places like

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<sup>152</sup> This hallucinatory vision is preceded by an episode with many of the markers of a journey to the underworld. The narrator visits a graveyard (*Ee* 221-5/ *Eg* 332-7), then travels on a ferry—although this time the “ferryman” is a woman (*Ee* 226-7/ *Eg* 338-40). There is even an image of a salt-encrusted branch reminiscent of the famous golden bough which is Aeneas’ token that he is allowed to travel in the underworld and the offering he makes to the queen of the underworld, Persephone (*Ee* 230/ *Eg* 344). As the golden bough is compared by Virgil to the parasitic mistletoe, which attaches itself to a healthy tree, so the narrator finds the salt that encrusts the blackthorn branches and twigs in the salt-frames near Kissingen, which, after attaching to the branches, begins, itself, to grow in shapes similar to those of the branches, to be an artificial imitation of the natural form to which it attaches itself.

Manchester (which, now that the boom is over, is turning into a ruin) are responsible for the Holocaust as well.<sup>153</sup>

There are practical reasons why these *katabasis* episodes might come at the end of Sebald's narratives. It is only after the narrator has come face to face with the traces of history in his wanderings throughout the real world that he can synthesize these experiences into an imagined memory space. This, however, does not change the generic expectation that the journeys Sebald's works describe will end in homecoming. Sebald's works encourage this expectation, and then surprise the reader by rewriting these expected homecomings as *katabaseis*. Nor does this juxtaposition of *katabasis* and *nostos* always come at the end of his books. In *The Rings of Saturn*, we will remember, the *katabasis* which is also explicitly described as a *nostos* comes in the middle of the narrator's wanderings through Suffolk.

The ubiquitous confusion of these two classical tropes can be read as an existential statement about the modern condition. The modern condition, for Sebald, is to be so traumatized by the horrific events of our collective past whose traces are all around us, that it is rather in the memory spaces evocative of this past than in the active world of the present that we feel most at home. Indeed, he says as much in a speech he gave on the occasion of the opening of the Literaturhaus in Stuttgart in 2001. The speech, published under the title "An Attempt at Restitution," is, as I argued in the Introduction,

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<sup>153</sup> Sebald draws this connection in a number of ways. One example, however, is that the artist, Max Aurach, whose story is the ostensible subject of this final section of *The Emigrants* and who is the child of Jewish Holocaust victims, feels that Manchester is the place he belongs, just as Peter Weiss tells us, in "Meine Ortschaft," that Auschwitz, the place he was destined by the Nazi bureaucracy as a European Jew, is "his place." Indeed, Aurach's description of his adopted home paints it as oddly similar to a concentration camp. He tells the narrator, for example, "that I am here, as they used to say, to serve under the chimney" (In English in both editions, *Ee* 192/ *Eg* 287). I have discussed this connection in the section of Chapter 2 on the *ekphraseis* of Aurach's work in *The Emigrants*.

one of Sebald's clearest statements of his poetic philosophy.<sup>154</sup> There, after evoking both the Holocaust and the air war that destroyed much of Stuttgart, he tells his audience he feels that "since the terrors of the last war years [...] we have been living in a kind of underground zone [in einer Art Untergrund wohnen]."<sup>155</sup>

*Katabasis*, thus, for Sebald, may serve as a description of the modern condition, of the lived relationship to history which is our birthright in the post-World War II, post-Holocaust era. It is also, however, a description of a kind of engagement with the historical past which is part of a praxis for the representation of history. Austerlitz is himself a professional historian. Sebald's narrators may not be, but the desire to understand history and to communicate that understanding drives the stories they tell, stories which, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, often themselves become meditations on the possibilities for and the limitations of historical representation. Virgil uses Aeneas' exploration of the underworld in the *katabasis* in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, in which the

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<sup>154</sup> Ruth Vogel-Klein argues that Sebald articulates in this speech an aesthetics of "Gegen-zeitigkeit," which she connects to Austerlitz' musings about the non-linearity of time in *Austerlitz*: "Unter literarischer Restitution kann hier die Rekonstitution verschollener Lebensläufe und untergegangener Welten verstanden werden, als Schreiben, das vor dem Vergessen rettet. Indem Sebald Vergangenes/Verschwiegene in Literatur umsetzt, schafft er eine 'Gegen-zeitigkeit,' eine Anachronie, die sein ganzes Werk kennzeichnet. Unter dem Begriff, 'Gegen-zeitigkeit' verstehe ich einen Widerstand gegen die Auslöschung der Erinnerung, wie er in Sebalds werk in der Umkehrung der linearen Chronologie und der Wiederkehr der Toten zu Tage tritt." This concept of "Gegen-zeitigkeit" is similar to the non-synchronous vision of historical time which I have argued is encapsulated in the *katabasis* episodes in Sebald's works. Vogel-Klein, "Rückkehr und Gegen-zeitigkeit," 100.

<sup>155</sup> Published in *Campo Santo*, English 201/ German 244. This "underground zone" in which he and his audience have been living since the war instead of the active world above is also a sort of classical underworld, as Sebald makes clear by bringing the speech to a close with a quote from an elegy by Hölderlin, in which Hölderlin describes the fate of the "untimely dead" in the underworld: "Am I, Hölderlin asked himself, to fare like the thousands who in their springtime days lived in both foreboding and love, but were seized by the avenging Parcae on a drunken day, secretly and silently betrayed, to do penance in the dark of an all too sober realm where wild confusion prevails in the treacherous light, where they count slow time in frost and drought, and man still praises immortality in sighs alone." Concerning this quote, he tells us: "The synoptic view across the barrier of death presented by the poet in these lines is both overshadowed by and at the same time illuminates the memory of those to whom the greatest injustice was done." This "greatest injustice," as he makes explicit in his statements immediately preceding the quote from Hölderlin, is the fate endured by the victims of the Holocaust. "An Attempt at Restitution," English 204-5/ German 247-8.

hero encounters figures representative of different historical moments and different historical events, to explore the history of Rome leading up to the establishment of the principate under Augustus. The vision of Roman history Virgil presents there betrays an extreme ambivalence about the reigning historical ideology. The history whose representatives Aeneas encounters in the underworld might more readily be described as a cycle of violence, destruction, and loss with no end in sight than a glorious progression toward a new golden age under Augustus. Siegfried Kracauer turns the classical underworld journey, of which the *katabasis* in the *Aeneid* is archetypal, into a historical praxis. He models the work of his ideal historian on another famous explorer of the underworld, Orpheus. The underworld the *Aeneid* presents us with is what I have been calling a memory space, a spatial representation of history that allows for the simultaneous juxtaposition of different historical time frames and different historical perspectives. By journeying through this space, the hero can adopt each of these perspectives one after another, and thus see a set of linked historical events from many distinct vantage points. Kracauer's historian, as Orpheus but also as Ahasuerus, the immortal wandering Jew, likewise enacts a journey through an otherworldly memory space filled with images representative of different moments in time and different historical perspectives.

Sebald, in representing the engagement with the historical past as a journey to the land of the dead, follows in Kracauer's footsteps. I have argued in Chapter 1 that Sebald draws on the classical motif of *nekylia*, bringing the dead back to life, to articulate a unique mode of historical representation. This mode of historical representation, "bringing remembered events back to life," as his narrator says of Austerlitz, presents the

events of the past in evocative images, but in such a way as not to lose sight of the constructedness of these images (*Ae* 13/ *Ag* 23). Sebald also offers us, however, prior to this mode of historical representation, a mode of engagement with the historical past—and indeed not just the past, but the present and the future upon which this past reflects as well. Sebald turns to *katabasis*, the classical epic motif most closely related to *nekyia*, to articulate this mode of engagement with history. Like Kracauer’s Orphic historian, Sebald’s ideal historical observer journeys through a memory space, adopting a number of different temporal perspectives on a series of historical events. Austerlitz has hallucinatory visions which draw on the physical “sites of memory,” in which the traces of the history leading up to and including the Holocaust are sedimented, as models for these memory spaces. The narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* turns the abandoned ruins of the military lab at Orfordness into a partly real, partly imaginary memory space. Sebald thus uses *katabasis* to craft a mode of historical thought consonant with his nekyiastic mode of historical representation. If his version of historical representation, like Odysseus raising the dead, brings the past back up to the world of the living out of the underworld of history, his version of historical thought is an exploration of this underworld. Sebald’s katabatic mode of historical thought also follows Kracauer, and Virgil as well, in another sense. Kracauer, in articulating his spatial and peripatetic mode of historical thought, draws on Benjamin’s critique of progress as tied to a strictly linear understanding of time. Virgil’s historical underworld in the *Aeneid*’s *katabasis* undermines what might be called the Roman imperial version of progress, which understands the events of Roman history as leading up to a new golden age under Augustus. Sebald, like both Kracauer and Virgil, uses the spatial presentation of the past

in his *katabasis* episodes to undermine the notion of progress as the engine of history. Austerlitz finds the telltale signs of the looming Holocaust in the traces of the era preceding it, an era characterized by a naive hope in progress. Narrators in *The Rings of Saturn* and Sebald's other works find that even the present and the future will be characterized by violence, destruction, and decay. This katabatic mode of historical thought therefore also serves to undermine one of the ideological master-narratives of Western history, and thus attempts to give historical observers, those who will in turn represent the events of the past, the chance to see that past with fresh eyes.

## Conclusion

I ended the last chapter by arguing that Sebald rewrites episodes that we might expect to be examples of the trope of *nostos*, homecoming, as *katabaseis*, journeys into the underworld. *Nostos* is one of the central motifs of classical epic.<sup>1</sup> Everything in the *Odyssey* is directed towards Odysseus' returning home and reestablishing order in his household and his kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Although the *Aeneid* is not about Aeneas' return to a home he has previously known, Virgil does very clearly allude to the *nostos* in the *Odyssey*, as I explain below, in several episodes in the *Aeneid*.<sup>3</sup> I would like to conclude this dissertation by focusing on this trope of *nostos* in Sebald's works—not, as I have argued in the case of *nekylia*, *ekphrasis*, and *katabasis*, as a motif he uses to formulate his mode of historical representation, but as an expectation that he creates and then consistently disappoints or re-routes in other directions, into *katabasis* for example.

The argument I have made in this dissertation is that *nekylia*, *ekphrasis*, and *katabasis* function together in Sebald's works as a means to articulate a hybrid modernist-realist mode of historical representation, which I call nekylastic modernism,

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<sup>1</sup> Homecoming was an important theme of epic poetry from the very beginning. One of the lost poems of the epic cycle about the Trojan War of which the *Odyssey* was a part, for example, was called the *Nostoi* and told the tale of the return home of the other Greek heroes.

<sup>2</sup> Critics have recognized the centrality of *nostos* in the *Odyssey* as well as the way the *Odyssey* firmly establishes *nostos* as an important trope in classical literature. According to Gregory Nagy, for example, the *Odyssey* "tells the story of the hero's *nostos*, 'return, homecoming.' This word means not only 'homecoming' but also 'song about homecoming' [...]. As such, the *Odyssey* is not only a *nostos*: it is a *nostos* to end all other *nostoi* [...]." Nagy, "The Epic Hero," 79.

<sup>3</sup> Aeneas' mission may not be to return to a home he himself has known before, but it is a homecoming of sorts. Aeneas' ancestor Dardanus, as Virgil reminds us several times, hails from Italy.



and to demonstrate how this new mode of representation implies a new way of relating to the historical past as well. In Chapter 1, I argued that Sebald uses *nekyia* to outline a mode of representation suited to the traumatic and complex events of the twentieth century. I examined the *nekyia* in Homer's *Odyssey* to show that, already in what is often considered the original example of this trope, the idea of raising the dead serves as a means of exploring the way in which literary writing can bring the past back to life. I also showed that this trope has been taken up by twentieth century theorists of photography, especially Roland Barthes and Siegfried Kracauer, as a way to explain the power photography has to connect us with the past it captures, and that Sebald draws on their work in his books which combine literary writing with photographs.

In Chapter 2, I argued that Sebald uses *ekphrasis* to explore the relationship between the nekyiastic mode of historical representation he articulates and other modes of representation, especially realism. In this chapter, I used two examples of *ekphrasis* from Virgil's *Aeneid* as models for two ways in which descriptions of works of art can become poetic statements about what literature and art can represent and what efficacy they can have in the world. I then used these models to analyze examples of *ekphrasis* both in Sebald's works and in the works of Peter Weiss, a writer who had an important influence on Sebald. Sebald, I showed, seizes upon Weiss' use of *ekphrasis* as a way to make a poetic statement within a work of literature, but turns it to a slightly different purpose. Weiss' *ekphraseis* explore the political efficacy of his literary works, while Sebald's explore the possibilities for and the limitations of the literary representation of historical events.

In Chapter 3, I argued that Sebald uses *katabasis* as a way to explore how his new mode of historical representation fundamentally reorders the relationship embodied by his works between the historical observer in the present and the past. I showed that Sebald asks us to think of history as a space which we can enter whenever we engage with the past, and to see this underworld of history, in which the past is waiting to be brought back to life, all around us. I also argued that the *katabasis* in the *Aeneid* serves as a model for thinking of the engagement with the past as the exploration of a spatial, visual, and peripatetic “memory space,” and that Siegfried Kracauer, in *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, brings this model into the context of modern historical thought, by casting the work of the historian as a journey into the underworld.

I want to argue here that Sebald uses *nostos*, or rather the foreclosure of *nostos*, to explore another aspect of the engagement with the past he articulates by means of these classical motifs. By setting up an expectation for homecoming and then consistently disappointing or re-routing it, Sebald stresses the diachronic nature of this engagement with the past, demonstrating that it is meant to be seen as an open-ended process with no definitive conclusion. *Nostos*, in other words, is how Sebald emphasizes that he essentially agrees with Adorno, as I have said in the Introduction, that working through this past does not mean simply getting over it.<sup>4</sup>

Although I would claim that Sebald uses *nostos* in this way to a greater or lesser degree in all of his literary works, *Austerlitz* is the clearest example of this. In the last chapter I said that although *Austerlitz* styles itself as an epic, it defies our generic expectations by repeating a single epic episode over and over again, *katabasis*, the journey to the underworld. *Austerlitz*, however, is also structured on the repetition of

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<sup>4</sup> Adorno, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” 103.

*nostos*, or rather the failure of *nostos*. It is an endless cycle of homecomings that turn out not to be the end of the story, or which are re-styled as *katabaseis*. In Chapter 1, I mentioned that Jacques Austerlitz hears the story of the Kindertransporte—which, he finally realizes, is also his own story—on the radio in the background of the antiquarian bookstore of a certain “Penelope Peacefull,” who is doing the crossword in the *Telegraph* (*Ae* 140-2/ *Ag* 206-9). This is a clear allusion to the *nostos* of the *Odyssey*—Odysseus comes back to his wife Penelope who has been engaged in a similar activity, cross-stitching the shroud of Odysseus’ father, Laertes.

The episode in Penelope Peacefull’s shop, however, is hardly the beginning of Austerlitz’ journey of self-discovery. Following this, Austerlitz really does return to the home of his early childhood in Prague, and similarly he also recovers a piece of his identity and becomes conscious of part of his past there, but this too turns out only to be a waystation on his journey (*Ae* 150-62/ *Ag* 220-37). After several more adventures, the book ends with Austerlitz going off in search of traces of the fate of his father (he has learned as much as he can, for now, about his mother—both of his parents are presumed to have died in the concentration camps, although the exact circumstances of their deaths remain unclear) (*Ae* 292/ *Ag* 414). Like so many of the characters Sebald’s narrator meets in his books, who are often traumatized exiles, Austerlitz can never come to rest—there is nowhere on earth where he can feel truly at home.

In “Repetition and Ideology in the *Aeneid*,” David Quint points out that the first half of the *Aeneid* is also structured on the repetition of a series of false homecomings.

The Trojans who travel with Aeneas find or create facsimilies of their first home, Troy, wherever they go.<sup>5</sup> Quint gives a largely Freudian reading of this detail:

The two ways of repeating the past in the two halves of the *Aeneid* and the alternative romance and epic narratives they respectively produce—the regressive repetition of the Odyssean wanderings, the successful repetition-as-reversal of the Iliadic war—conform to the two models of psychic behavior that, for Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, comprise the *repetition compulsion*. The victim of an earlier trauma may neurotically reenact his victimization over and over again.<sup>6</sup>

The *Aeneid*, in other words, is the story of Aeneas and his followers' attempt to work through the trauma of the war. The encounter with the facsimiles of their demolished home, therefore, is a kind of repetition compulsion in response to this trauma. As traumatized individuals experience flashbacks to the traumatic events they experienced, so Aeneas and the Trojans experience flashbacks to their destroyed city and their lost homeland.

Quint goes on to point out that Aeneas and his followers end up “working through” this past in a very different way in the *Aeneid*'s second half, by taking the role of the Greeks who defeated them and inflicting defeat on someone else, the native Italians whose lands they invade.<sup>7</sup> According to Quint, this represents a different Freudian model of the reaction by a victim to a traumatic experience: “Alternatively, [the victim of a trauma] may replay the original traumatic situation in order to create a new

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<sup>5</sup> Quint points out that Virgil emphasizes the falseness of these new versions of Troy. Of one of these encounters in Book 3, for example, he tells us: “Here Aeneas finds a ‘simulataque... Pergama’ (349-50); this other Troy is a factitious copy, as false and empty as the tomb of Hector at which Andromache offers her sacrifice.” Quint, “Repetition and Ideology in the *Aeneid*,” 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> “Aeneas and his Trojans go from being besieged to being besiegers, Trojans to ‘Greeks,’ losers to winners.” *Ibid.*, 68.

version of it, a situation of which he is now the master, rather than the victim, thereby ‘undoing’ the past and gaining control over his psychic history.’<sup>8</sup>

It goes without saying that this kind of closure, in which one gets over the traumatic past by inflicting trauma on others, is one that Sebald’s works reject.<sup>9</sup> Consequently his narratives tend to spiral out into irresolution, the endless repetition of failed *nostoi* becoming the sign of open-endedness in the engagement with the past they enact and prescribe. They embrace, as Quint might put it, the romantic tendencies of the first half of the *Aeneid* while rejecting the epic closure of the second half.

Sebald’s insistence on writing his narratives as a series of failed *nostoi* might also, however, be seen as a response to the work of two of the most influential critics who have written about the traumatic history of the twentieth-century, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno read the quintessential epic of homecoming, the *Odyssey*, as an allegory of the “dialectic of enlightenment.” What they mean by this term is the way in which instrumental reason, elevated to a guiding principle of Western culture in the Enlightenment, has a hidden dark side, a need to dominate nature and, in turn, one’s fellow man, and how it has therefore led to the traumatic events of the twentieth century which are Sebald’s primary concern. The *nostos* at the end of the *Odyssey* plays a central role in Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of the *Odyssey* as an allegory of this dialectic of enlightenment:

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>9</sup> Quint also points out that the attempt to get over the past in this way embodied by the second half of the *Aeneid* does not entirely erase the psychological damage done by the destruction of Troy: “The escape from this repetition still hinges on a repression or forgetting of the past [...]. It is only when the past has been successfully repressed [...] that it can be repeated *with a difference* in order to be reversed and undone.” The *Aeneid*, in other words, does not represent a simplistic model of working through a trauma, in which the past can be effectively gotten over simply by inflicting one’s pain on another—the trauma of the victim still remains in this case, even if it has been repressed. Ibid., 65.

It is a yearning for the homeland which sets in motion the adventures by which subjectivity, the prehistory of which is narrated in the *Odyssey*, escapes the primeval world. The fact that—despite the fascist lie to the contrary—the concept of homeland is opposed to myth constitutes the innermost paradox of epic. Precipitated in the epic is the memory of an historical age in which nomadism gave way to settlement, the precondition of any homeland. If the fixed order of property implicit in settlement is the source of human alienation, in which all homesickness and longing spring from a lost primal state, at the same time it is toward settlement and fixed property, on which alone the concept of homeland is based, that all longing and homesickness are directed. Novalis's definition according to which philosophy is homesickness holds good only if this longing is not dissipated in the phantasm of a lost original state, but homeland and nature itself, are pictured as something that had had first to be wrested from myth. Homeland is a state of having escaped.<sup>10</sup>

Odysseus' homecoming, in other words, exemplifies the securing of one's place and one's property that is, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the capstone of the dialectic of enlightenment, the thing that marks the domination of nature, whose frightening power is crystallized in myth, and one's fellow man as accomplished. And as homecoming is the goal of Odysseus' voyage, so this securing of place and property serves as the goal of the process of domination which, Horkheimer and Adorno have argued, is allegorized in Odysseus' adventures leading up to his return to Ithaka. It is the desire for security that drives those who have bought into and participated in this program of domination. The securing of their place and property represented in Homer's epic by Odysseus' homecoming, however, also allows them to claim a kind of closure on the memory of this domination, to narrate it as a series of challenges overcome, hostile forces subdued:

Speech itself, language as opposed to mythical song, the possibility of holding fast the past atrocity through memory, is the law of Homeric escape. Not without reason is the fleeing hero repeatedly introduced as narrator. The cold detachment of narrative, which describes even the horrible as if for entertainment, for the first time reveals in all their clarity the horrors which in song are solemnly confused with fate. But when

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<sup>10</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, "Dialectic of Enlightenment," 60-1.

speech pauses, the caesura allows the events narrated to be transformed into something long past [...].<sup>11</sup>

What, then, would Sebald's continual frustration of *nostos* mean to Horkheimer and Adorno? I believe it would mean a memorial engagement with the past that seeks to unravel the dialectic of enlightenment by recasting the engagement with the past as one where closure is neither achieved nor desired. Sebald seeks to undermine the cycle of dominance and destruction which has led to the horrific events at the center of his works by dissolving the bracketed vision of the historical past that allows that cycle to continue. In fact, to extend David Quint's reading a bit, this is exactly the lesson that the *Aeneid* might be said to teach us: that, by bracketing the traumatic past as no longer relevant or worthy of consideration, we allow more violence to be perpetrated and more traumatic events to occur. This is what I would claim Sebald's nekyiastic modernist mode of historical representation and the new mode of engagement with the historical past it provides seek to counteract. Sebald's works contain the faintest glimmer of hope that, by thinking about how we represent history and the place it has in our lives, we may change history.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 61.

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