

# Giving Voice to Uncertainty

Memory, Multilingual and Unreliable Narration

in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

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**Abstract:**

*In W.G. Sebalds Roman Austerlitz werden andere Sprachen – Französisch, Englisch, Tschechisch – auf vielfältige Weise im deutschen Text in Szene gesetzt. Sie sind integraler Bestandteil der literarischen Inszenierung von Traumata, von Gedächtnislücken und Wiederfindung von Erinnerungen. Gleichzeitig wird über die textinterne Mehrsprachigkeit die Frage der Zu- bzw. Unzuverlässigkeit des Erzählers und des Erzählens verhandelt. Indem der Beitrag diesen Zusammenhang systematisch aufarbeitet, wird das Phänomen der literarischen Mehrsprachigkeit aus erzähltheoretischer Perspektive beleuchtet.*

## INTRODUCTION

The novels of W[infried] G[Georg] Sebald have been widely acclaimed, among other things, for their approach to memory, especially regarding trauma and the Holocaust, and many studies have already been published on his work. However, only a few have remarked upon the use of foreign languages in these texts, except in terms of intertextual references.<sup>1</sup> The current study analyzes the use of multilingualism not as a representation of identity, polyphony<sup>2</sup> or an expres-

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**1** | One particular exception is a recent article: Dubow/Steadman-Jones 2012. This article argues for an exilic function of language in *Austerlitz* and suggests a dialectical reading of the novel between history and primal expression as language or the failure thereof. Whereas Dubow and Steadman-Jones read the use of multiple languages in Sebald as generating tension between identity, diaspora and the impossibility for Austerlitz of giving voice to his trauma, I take a more analytical approach to the narrative structure itself in order to examine narrative reliability and the reading experience. For the aspect of translation and interculturality in Sebald see Wolff 2011; Cook 2011; Hulse 2011; Pakendorf 2009; Elcott 2004.

**2** | I refer here to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept, as laid out in his work (Holquist 1981).

sion of political (e.g., post-colonial) or cultural divergence (e.g., minority literature), but rather as a literary device impacting narrative reliability. In this essay, I investigate the use of foreign language interjections in Sebald's last novel, *Austerlitz*,<sup>3</sup> in order to trace their narratological function, effects on the reader, and significance for a German audience – on the surface his texts presuppose a multilingual reader.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, I examine and evaluate the (un)reliability of the figure of the narrator through the device of multilingualism.

First, I define the narratological terms I use. Then, I examine the kinds of textual devices – including foreign languages – employed that I read as signals demarcating the narrator's degree of (un)reliability. Thereafter, I show how the linguistic anomalies of these interjections disrupt narrative flow, drawing the reader's attention to details critical to understanding the text in an almost Brechtian manner.<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, contributes to the effects of the unreliable narrator (narrative instability, indeterminacy), whose dubious narrative undermines the novel's, i.e., *implied author's* (see Booth 1961) appeals to authenticity. Moreover, the use of foreign languages and their connection to memory and identity creates distance between the protagonists and narrators, and again between the narrators and reader. This distance adds a level of self-reflexivity to the novels and intensifies instability in the narrative structure, which, I argue, changes the reader's experience of the texts and shows further doubt about the narrator's reliability. I conclude with a discussion, based on my findings, of the implications for multilingual or translingual criticism, and argue for a new, hybrid approach to interpreting the incorporation of multiple languages in this kind of postmodern literature.

## NARRATOLOGICAL THEORY AND TERMS

Narratology offers a very useful set of tools for identifying and theorizing about the narrator. The field is divided largely into two approaches: rhetorical (the text

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**3** | For the purposes of the current study, I use the second printing (Sebald 2003) instead of the original (Sebald 2001).

**4** | Although I refer to a German audience and reader(s) throughout this essay, I do not presume that a homogenous German audience exists, nor do I posit an essentialized reader; rather, I employ these terms in order to denote a community and individuals within that community that have shared cultural knowledge and practices, though this certainly is not to assume that these are the same across all demographics. This is precisely why I do not pursue a reader-oriented approach, such as Hans-Robert Jauss's (Jauss 1982), according to which theory the reader's reception of the novel is determined by to what extent it fits or subverts the reader's *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectations). This theory (*Rezeptionsaesthetik*) presupposes a somewhat homogenous audience.

**5** | Though not explicitly didactic like Brecht's 'epic theater', this shattering of the narrative story-world induces heightened awareness in the reader, leading to reconsideration of the text as presented to the reader.

as origin of meaning) and cognitivist/constructionist (the reader as constructor of meaning). In the present study, I combine elements of both in order to analyze the text, its effects on the reader, and the reader's implication in deriving or attributing meaning to the text. Pertinent to this essay is the concept of the unreliable narrator, which requires explication of certain related terms and their effects on the reader's perceptions of the narrative's thrust and meaning. Among these are the implied author, implied reader and ethical turn in narrative theory.

Since Wayne Booth's definitive work on rhetorical structures and strategies in fiction, in which the figure of the unreliable narrator is first theorized, the state of current narratological research differentiates between rhetorical (text-centered) and cognitive or constructionist (reader-oriented) approaches to analyzing, i.e., interpreting literature. According to Booth, the degree of reliability is in direct proportion to how much (or little) the narrator's values and norms coincide with those of the implied author.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the idea of an *implied reader* concerns an idealized or hypothetical reader, whose critical position is controlled or determined in large part by the text itself (see Iser 1972).<sup>7</sup> The implied reader can be used in both rhetorical and cognitivist approaches – in the former, the implied reader is the specific instance of a particular (implied) reader's reaction to disparity (or congruity) between the narrator and implied author, whereas in the latter the scope increases to include multiple or many readers and their generalized horizon of expectations. In reader-response approaches, which are cognitivist in method, the unreliability of the narrator is open to interpretation based on various readers' sensibilities and values – which is to say that some readers will not view what for others is unreliable as such. Gauging narrator reliability on the basis of readers' values becomes more difficult when a work, such as *Austerlitz*, is translated into another language.<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of the current investigation, I adopt the rhetorical understanding of the implied reader.<sup>9</sup> Because Sebald was a German who lived and worked in Great

**6** | Here the implied author – a highly debated and contested term – refers to the values and norms of the work itself, and is used in order to move analysis of the narrative away from interpretations based on the author and his or her own views. For an updated discussion of this construct, see Shen 2011.

**7** | Hans-Robert Jauss, on the other hand, extends reader-response theory (*Rezeptions-theorie*) by suggesting the reader's horizon of expectations (*Erwartungshorizont*) determines how the literary works are read, which can lead to a theorizing of what the implied reader's values and norms would be for a given historical context (Jauss 1982).

**8** | For example, the English translations of Sebald's novels by Michael Hulse and Anthea Bell, although excellent and faithful to the original works, cannot convey all cultural information to an English audience; rather, specialized readers (e.g., literary critics, Germanists) will be among the few who can interpret German norms, values and attitudes in translation.

**9** | This is due to the complications of expanding cognitivist/constructionist and reader-response criticism across German- and English-speaking cultural contexts, themselves which are not wholly consistent (e.g., England and the United States, Germany and Switzerland), in order to compare the effects of foreign language insertions in the German and English versions of Sebald's work.

Britain, but wrote predominantly in German, and his work was received differently in the U.S., U.K. and Germany, I find it methodologically clearer to focus on Sebald's novels in their original German form, so as to address those aspects of his work that are aimed at a German audience, i.e., reader.<sup>10</sup>

The third term I address is the »ethical turn« in narrative theory, which refers to the increased focus on ethics in literature vis-à-vis philosophical, rhetorical and narratological investigations since the 1980s (Korthals Altes 2008: 142). This is best exemplified through pragmatist (concerned with moral and value judgements) and deconstructionist (based on an ethics of alterity or being political in nature, i.e., from a marginalized voice or perspective, such as post-colonial criticism) approaches to ethics. The non-politicized deconstructionist method favors ambivalence, resists closure, and posits undecidability or indeterminacy as a goal of the narrative. This is particularly important, as Sebald's work, I argue, plays with and thwarts genre conventions, while calling attention to its constructedness by employing postmodern, metafictional narrative strategies.

Returning to the concept of the unreliable narrator, several aspects require further explanation. Rhetorical narratologists (e.g., Wayne Booth, Seymour Chatman, James Phelan) view unreliability as a tension or disparity on the level of narrative discourse (arrangement of narrative elements, how the narrative is told) versus story (action/plot, what is told) – in other words, whether the narrator is accurate or sufficient in relaying his/her narrative –, whereas cognitivist/constructionist narratologists (e.g., Tamar Yacobi, Ansgar Nünning) view reliability as a product of readers' divergent readings of the text. A narrator, according to James Phelan, can be unreliable when mis- or under-reporting, interpreting or evaluating events and characters in the narrative, which can occur along three axes: axis of facts, axis of values or ethics and axis of knowledge and perception (Phelan cited in Shen 2008: Paragr. 4–6). As will become clear in the following, the trustworthiness of the narrator in *Austerlitz* can be measured along the axes of facts and knowledge/perception. Yacobi posits five *integrating mechanisms* for describing unreliability: genetic (author's mistakes), generic (deviance from general [genre] conventions), existential (fictional versus possible), functional (intrinsic to the creative act), and perspectival (discord between narrator's and author's observations).<sup>11</sup> Several of these mechanisms do play a role in Sebald's novel, as I discuss later.

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**10** | At the same time, however, the idea of competing and/or varied readings of a literary text offered by reader-response theory provides an opportunity to address translingual and transnational effects in literary interpretation, a point deserving more critical attention in an increasingly diverse world literature, but which is beyond the scope of the current investigation. In addition, the reader of world literature today, in my view, can no longer rely on only the most commonly used languages in assessing important literary works (e.g., works from languages other than English, French, Spanish, Italian, German and Russian may not be relatable to European and North American cultural ideas, and thus would be less readily understood or even misinterpreted).

**11** | This last mechanism is a rhetorical strategy in disguise, as it sets the reader up to evaluate whether the narrator and implied author are of the same opinion.

One particular difficulty with the constructivist approach is the formulation of a generic reader within a community of readers, who all share the same worldviews or mental models of the world. Another equally problematic methodological gap is found in the rhetorical approach. The concepts implied author and implied reader presuppose an idealized (authorial) reader, who correctly interprets the intended message of the implied author, rendering all other readings *ipso facto* misreadings (Shen 2008: Paragr. 28). In the present study, I forego any attempt to evaluate unreliability on the basis of actual readers (this would include readers reading Sebald in translation) and, instead, elect to use the rhetorical method of comparing the implied author and narrator. By doing so, I narrow the scope of narrator reliability to that of the German novel addressed to a German-speaking audience. Moreover, the concept of »estranging« – as opposed to »bonding« – unreliability, which increases distance between the narrator and (authorial) audience (i.e., implied reader), will be utilized in assessing the (un-)reliability of the unnamed narrator in *Austerlitz*.

## **RUPTURING THE READING PROCESS: THE EFFECTS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN SEBALD'S AUSTERLITZ**

The reliability of narration is explicitly tested through the use of multiple languages in Sebald's novels, such that a new way of thinking about foreign languages in German literature – that is, other than political approaches (e.g., feminist, post-colonial, queer theories) – is needed. I contend that a rhetorical narratological analysis, combined with an ethics of alterity, will help to better understand and theorize German literary texts that are multilingual *and* written by native speakers of German. In all four of Sebald's novels, the reader encounters interjections of foreign languages, whether they are Italian, English, French, Czech or even Welsh. These often coincide with the speaker's<sup>12</sup> location and/or the place she/he is talking about (e.g. French quotes while in or talking about being in Belgium and in France in *Austerlitz*). From phrases to sentences, the incidences of non-German text are often neither prefaced nor explained; rather, they function as extended, literary code-switching, though some are, in fact, introduced using punctuation such as colons, while others are paraphrased or translated into German for the German reader immediately before or after the quotes, as in the following:

Also stammelte ich nur den Satz, den ich tags zuvor mühselig einstudiert hatte: Promiňte, prosím, že Vás obtěžuji. Hledám paní Agátu Austerlitzovou, která zde možná v roce devatenáct set třicet osm bydlela. Ich suche eine Frau Agáta Austerlitzova, die möglicherweise hier 1938 noch gewohnt hat. (Sebald 2003: 223)

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**12** | In order to avoid a reduction of the use of foreign language in the novel, I employ the term speaker to denote that not only the narrator or protagonist, but also other minor characters are speaking in a language other than German.

This code-switching appears to be – at times – an unconscious act on the part of the narrators and narrating protagonists, for example, whenever foreign words occur mid-sentence or change over from German to another language from one sentence to the next. However, we as readers must keep in mind that the narrative text we read, in this case *Austerlitz*, is a creation of the frame narrator and not the other characters.<sup>13</sup> These occurrences indicate to us that entire conversations actually take place in a language other than German, though the narrator records these to the best of his ability – a fact which requires further scrutiny.

The unnamed frame narrator withholds this information until after the conversations, whereupon he meta-reflexively comments on his difficulty with the language in question or else the transcription of conversations with the Jewish protagonist (Sebald 2003: 50, 146). After extensive monologues impressively reported by the narrator, self-reflexive questioning of his ability to transcribe what he allegedly heard in its entirety places the reader in a position of incredulity and suspicion. Moreover, the code-switching suggests fractured subjectivities – due to trauma in the case of Austerlitz –, memory linked to specific languages and their contexts (e.g., Austerlitz's repression of his native Czech leads to his inability to recall his early childhood), and problematic relationships between the protagonists and the narrators of their stories.<sup>14</sup> Let us turn now to the effects of foreign language use on interpretation of the novel.

The *implied reader*, to use Wolfgang Iser's term (1978: 27–38), would certainly have to be a well- and widely-read aficionado of European literature.<sup>15</sup> Sebald's texts, however, frustrate the concept of an *implied reader* insofar as no reader can reasonably be expected to embody the predispositions implicit in their *textual structure*,<sup>16</sup> due mostly to a ubiquitous narrative instability. This is achieved through the use of the unreliable narrator, extensive reported speech, unmarked intertexts and quotations, and conflation of *narrative mood* and *narrative voice* (Genette 1980: 161f. a. 212f.). The intended or *authorial audience* (Rabinowitz 1977) (as opposed to an *implied reader*), however, is German-speaking, which does not necessarily imply the reader's familiarity with more than one's native German and, therefore, cannot be led by the *textual structure*.

The insertions of foreign words, phrases and sentences disrupt the reading process by catching the reader off-guard, particularly the reader who might not be conversant – much less fluent – in multiple European languages. For the reader unable to understand French, for example, she/he would either have to

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**13** | Due to the limited scope of the current investigation, I focus only on Sebald's final novel, *Austerlitz*. In my narratological analysis, I combine elements from both Genette and Bal's theories of narratology, favoring a hybrid approach.

**14** | As I have suggested elsewhere (Kohn 2012: 129f. a. 145), the narrator and protagonist may not necessarily be separate individuals, and, due to unreliability in the frame narrator, Austerlitz could be said to be a construct of the narrator.

**15** | Of course, Sebald's literature plays with such theoretical constructs, and especially those concerned with memory. In fact, most of the examples to be found in his novels are counter-examples, instilling the texts with ambivalence.

**16** | As defined by Iser (*ibid.*).

ignore the passage and simply move on, or else attempt to translate the text. In either case, the flow of the narrative is interrupted, dispelling the reader's projection of him- or herself into the world of the text.

There is an emphasis on foreign language passages, as they stand out visually from the rest of the (German) text. The quotes serve to underpin the »facticity« of the transmitted words of the protagonist and other characters. This includes the use of »original«, i.e., foreign language and quotes where applicable, the coincidence of actual names of people and places with those in the narrative (Yacobi's »existential« integrating mechanism), and the documentary style of photographic and pictorial »evidence« ubiquitous throughout the novel and, indeed, Sebald's other novels (»functional« integrating mechanism). *Austerlitz* appears to be an autobiographical narrative<sup>17</sup> about the author's encounters with a Jewish Holocaust survivor, and the verbatim quotes in their original languages lends the narrative an air of a faithful reporting of actual events.<sup>18</sup>

Important information is imparted by way of these snippets of foreign languages. Firstly, the uncovering of the protagonist's true identity takes place in English: »It appears, sagte Penrith-Smith, that this is your real name.« (Sebald 2003: 101) Then, in a later passage describing his reunion with his childhood neighbor and nanny, Austerlitz is greeted in French in response to his Czech inquiry: »Věra ... sagte nur ... diese französische Worte: Jacquot, so sagte sie, est-ce que c'est vraiment toi?« (Ibid.: 224) Here Austerlitz recovers fragments of his childhood evidenced by his ability to count in Czech (»jeden dvě, tři, zählte Věra, und ich, sagte Austerlitz, zählte weiter, čtyři, pět, šest, sedm, und fühlte mich dabei wie einer, der mit unsicheren Schritten hinausgeht aufs Eis.« [Ibid.: 234]) and recollect a conversation with her: »[...] un petit sac à dos avec quelques vivres, sagte Austerlitz, das seien die genauen, sein ganzes späteres Leben, wie er inzwischen denke, zusammenfassenden Worte Věras gewesen.« (Ibid.: 253) As mentioned elsewhere, Austerlitz's recovery of Czech has less to do with »expressive identity«, but, rather, language serves »to figure the break in a psychic structure and describe a condition that might properly be called exilic« – he is a native speaker of Czech, which he had been unaware of until being confronted with it (Dubow/Steadman-Jones 2012: 19). After all, when viewing a photograph of himself as a child dressed in costume, Věra has to identify the picture of the child as Austerlitz: »Jacquot Austerlitz, paže růžové královny« is written on the back of the picture (Sebald 2003: 267). An allusion to his mother's fate also appears in a foreign interjection like the question by five-year-old Austerlitz that triggers an association in Věra with Agáta: »Ale když všechno zakryje sních, jak

**17** | In the scholarship on Sebald, there occasionally appear slippages in which the critics refer to the unnamed narrator(s) of Sebald's novels as the author himself (see for example Morgan 2005).

**18** | However, in the case of the English translation of the novel, the English passages are effectively obscured and generally unmarked, whereas French, Welsh and Czech passages are not translated (see, for example, Sebald 2003: 66–69).

veverky najdou to místo, kde si schovaly zásoby?»<sup>19</sup> (Ibid.: 295) Lastly, references to the Holocaust permeate the text, as when Austerlitz retains an impression from the sermons of his foster father (»von der Sündhaftigkeit und der Bestrafung der Menschen die Rede war, von Feuer und Asche und dem drohenden Ende der Welt«) and Isaiah's lament for the destruction of Israelites/Jews at the hands of God<sup>20</sup> (»unter dem 21. Mai 1944: Chapel Bethesda, Corwen – Isaiah XLVIII/18 ›O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea!« [Ibid.: 74f.]).

## THE NARRATOLOGICAL IMPACT OF MULTILINGUALISM IN SEBALD'S NOVEL

In addition to the visual interference of foreign words, there are serious implications for the narrative as a whole on the textual level, in particular as regards the transmission of the Jewish protagonist's story and whether we can passively accept it as reliable. The novel is, essentially, Austerlitz's story (intradiegetic narrative) embedded within a frame (extradiegetic) narrative told by the unnamed German narrator. The narrator appears on both the extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels, but is not the main character or protagonist; rather, he is *homodiegetic*, to use Genette's term, which means he is a character in the story he

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**19** | »But when everything is covered with snow, do the squirrels find a place where they hid supplies?« (my trans.) Only a few pages prior, Austerlitz sees a squirrel in a window in Terezín, which conjures up the Czech word, »veverka« (Sebald 2003: 284). As Dubow and Steadman-Jones argue (and which I agree with), however, this is not a recuperation of identity or a »national return« (Dubow/Steadman-Jones 2012: 20). This passage is curious, in that a sentence written in free indirect discourse occurs just two sentences later: »Ja, wie wissen die Eichhörnchen das, und was wissen wir überhaupt, und wie erinnern wir uns, und was entdecken wir nicht am Ende?« (Ibid.) This meta-reflexive statement is made after indirectly reported speech of Véra by Austerlitz (in special subjunctive), is followed by preterite indicative (»berichtete Véra«), and is ambiguous in its atemporality – is it present tense on the frame narrative level, within Austerlitz's narrative, or are these Véra's words reported to the narrator through Austerlitz? The statement resonates with Véra's lack of information regarding Agáta's, Maximilian's and Austerlitz's fates – Agáta presumably died in Terezín (or Auschwitz) and Austerlitz and his father's whereabouts were unknown to Véra. Moreover, this passage underscores the difficulty in writing about traumas suffered in the Holocaust.

**20** | This is not to suggest that the biblical destruction of the Jews by God is similar to the Holocaust perpetrated by Germans; rather, I draw a parallel to the fact that Orthodox Jews commonly conceived of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust as collectively suffering and atoning for the sins of all of humanity (Isaiah's figure of the suffering servant).

tells, but not the main character.<sup>21</sup> As such, the frame narrator has no access to Austerlitz's thoughts, feelings, or emotions except what is apparent through facial expressions and body language, though this is arguably an unreliable means for »knowing« what the protagonist is thinking or feeling. In essence, the inability of the narrator to gain insight into Austerlitz as a person is a distancing device.

In *Austerlitz*, the unnamed German narrator reports the protagonist Austerlitz's speech in German. The use of the special subjunctive (reported speech) and declarative markers (e.g. »sagte Austerlitz«) indicate when Austerlitz is »speaking«, and distances his story through a mediation effect of the German language.<sup>22</sup> However, the absence of quotation marks, the disappearance of the special subjunctive and only the occasional declarative marker (at times only every few pages) lead to the blending together of Austerlitz's words and those of the narrator's voice – which effectively disappears – in the present tense, giving one the impression of »hearing« Austerlitz speak, as if the reader were witness to Austerlitz's life story or testimony.<sup>23</sup> This transgression of strict narrative levels, which is only possible through the use of a single language to avoid disrupt-

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**21** | Genette lays out three categories of focalizer (heterodiegetic, homodiegetic and autodiegetic) to distinguish between grammatical voice (who is »speaking«; e.g., first-person) and position (who is »seeing«; e.g., frame narrator) and two distinctions of narrative level (extradiegetic, intradiegetic) between them. These terms are defined as follows: heterodiegetic refers to a narrator absent from the narrative she/he tells; homodiegetic expresses that the narrator is a character in the story she/he tells; and autodiegetic indicates a narrator that is also the main character in the (intradiegetic) narrative (Genette 1980: 245f.). Furthermore, extradiegetic narrative level describes the position of narrative level one, often resulting in a frame narrative (external focalizer level one or EF1; Bal 1985: 105, 112). When a frame narrator's voice disappears and a character within the story instantiated by him/her takes up narration, it is said to be intradiegetic (character focalizer level two or CF2). Thus, a frame narrator (EF1), who is also a character in the story-within-a-story and narrates from this position (CF2), can be considered extradiegetic *and* homodiegetic or autodiegetic, depending on whether she/he is the main character.

**22** | The special subjunctive, absent in English and, thus, in the English translation of Austerlitz, is a key factor in establishing uncertainty and ambivalence in the novel.

**23** | In order to experience this effect fully, the passage should be read in its entirety. In the interest of brevity, I have condensed the passage into a representative selection: »Austerlitz verstummte, als er dies gesagt hatte, und schaute eine Weile, wie es mir schien, in die weiteste Ferne. Seit meiner Kindheit und Jugend, so hob er schließlich an, indem er wieder herblickte zu mir, habe ich nicht gewusst, wer ich in Wahrheit bin. [...] Ich bin aufgewachsen, so begann Austerlitz an jenem Abend in der Bar des Great Eastern Hotel, in dem Landstädtchen Bala in Wales, im Hause eines calvinistischen Predigers und ehemaligen Missionars, der Emyr Elias hieß und verehelicht war mit einer furchtsamen, aus einer englischen Familie stammenden Frau. Es ist mir immer unmöglich gewesen, zurückzudenken an dieses unglückliche Haus [...] Nur spärlich mit einem Bett oder einem Kasten möbliert, die Vorhänge selbst untertags zugezogen, dämmerten sie in einem Halbdunkel dahin, das bald schon jedes Selbstgefühl auslöschte in mir. So ist mir aus meiner frühesten Zeit in Bala fast

ing narrative flow, destabilizes the integrity of the narrative structure.<sup>24</sup> For the reader not fluent in French and English, she/he would not be able to »hear« Austerlitz speak if his words were not already transcribed into German. Of course, Austerlitz really is not speaking insofar as everything we read is a product of the narrator's memory, which introduces another level of mediation to Austerlitz's narrative. In addition, when the declarative markers reappear, the reader is abruptly reminded of the frame narrative, that what she/he is reading is at a couple levels' remove. This kind of »trick« casts doubt on the narrator's reliability by exposing his manipulation of the text.

Interestingly, the text presents Austerlitz's words as though they were spoken in German. The blending out of the actual language(s) spoken during the narrator and Austerlitz's conversations remain in tension with periodic and brief expressions in foreign languages, which are set aside by declarative markers and quotation marks. It is not until page 50 the reader learns that Austerlitz and the narrator were conversing in French – a literal *lingua franca* – as it was the first one for Austerlitz to speak in when they met in Antwerp, a Flemisch-speaking part of Belgium. The reader might, however, presume that the conversation, were it to be held in German, would be in order, owing to its status as one of the three official languages of the country, including Dutch. Here, the narrator mentions his passing ability to speak French (»mit schandbarer Unbeholfenheit«), which contrasts with the eloquence of the German into which he purportedly translates Austerlitz's story. Oddly enough, up to this point, neither character knows where the other comes from. Indeed, as early as their first encounter, the narrator mistakes Austerlitz for a German:

Eine der in der *Salle des pas perdus* wartenden Personen war Austerlitz, ein damals, im siebenundsechziger Jahr, beinahe jugendlich wirkender Mann mit blondem, seltsam

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nichts mehr erinnerlich, außer wie sehr es mich schmerzte, auf einmal mit einem anderen Namen angedet zu werden.« (Sebald 2003: 68f., my emphasis) The passage continuously switches between the present, present-perfect and preterite tenses creating the impression of a second-hand story while, simultaneously, calling attention to the mediated nature of what is being reported. In the above-referenced passage, the special subjunctive changes to first-person indicative (»wie es mir schien«), signifying the switch from the frame narrator to the homodiegetic narrator – the latter narrator is about to »hear« Austerlitz speak in the present(-perfect) tense, despite the reader's knowledge that this is actually taking place in the past (the frame narrative is written almost entirely in the preterite tense). For the reader, however, the mediating voice of the narrator entirely and surreptitiously disappears for up to several pages at a time, effacing the distance between the reader and protagonist. This appears to include the reader in the conversation taking place between the protagonist and the narrator.

**24** | Dubow and Steadman-Jones also mention this particular »awkwardness« through the doubling of declarative markers, while suggesting that this reflects the author's own difficulty as a self-exiled German writer. Moreover, they refer to the reader's reactions to these kinds of textual effects (Dubow/Steadman-Jones 2012: 25f.).

gewelltem Haar, wie ich es sonst nur gesehen habe an dem deutschen Helden Siegfried in Langs Niebelungenfilm. (Sebald 2003: 14, emphasis in the original)<sup>25</sup>

This revelation has the jarring effect of calling into question the complexity and eloquence of the protagonist's expression(s), owing to the contrast between the narrator's minimal French ability and his rather articulate transcription of Austerlitz's words, not to mention the delay in disclosing the language in which they communicated. Furthermore, the narrator mistakes Austerlitz for a Frenchman, citing his perfectly formed French as evidence, a statement which the reader is asked to accept at face value. In the third section of the book, we discover that Austerlitz, born and raised in former Czechoslovakia, learned French from his childhood nanny and neighbor, Véra, and Francophile parents in Prague (see *ibid.*: 173–362).

The narrator's reliability is consistently questioned by the reporting and translation and/or transcription of several languages, not just French, with apparent ease and great aptitude. Clear examples are the interactions between Austerlitz and his former Czech nanny in Prague, which suggest the narrator is not only able to remember what Austerlitz's words in Czech were, but was also able to transcribe it many years later, despite no evidence as to whether the narrator even understands the language (see *ibid.*: 223f., 234, 253, 266f. a. 295). In fact, it becomes apparent to the reader of Sebald that Austerlitz's stories as represented by the narrative text are either beyond the ability of the narrator to reproduce in their extant forms from memory – that is, unless the narrator were provided with manuscripts, diary entries or similar documents from Austerlitz – or the narrator is concealing important information about his background and knowledge from the reader, which would be a case of paralipsis (Genette 1980: 195f.). The sheer magnitude of such an eidetic undertaking defies logic and our understanding of cognitive ability and memory.<sup>26</sup>

One other detail that stands out for the reader is the near total absence of foreign language use by the narrator. In each instance, it is either the protagonist or other minor characters whose speech is modified by these interjections. Narratologically speaking, only intradiegetic narrator-characters use English, French, Welsh and/or Czech. This is important because the (frame) narrator in *Austerlitz*, for example, admits to having only a passing understanding of French, some mastery of English, but gives no indication as to his knowledge of Welsh or Czech. How, then, is it possible for him to report all of these foreign language quotes with such precision? This serves as an irritation for the reader,

**25** | Note that here, as throughout the text, (proper) names of places and objects (art, films and books) are indicated using italics.

**26** | This particular feat of eidetic memory would include the ability to remember an entirely different phonological pattern such as Slavic languages. Furthermore, in a typically postmodern manner, the novel thematizes and plays with notions/models/theories of memory.

casting further doubt about the reliability of the narrator and, by extension, the text as presented him/her.

Moreover, it turns out that the narrator is more comfortable speaking English than Austerlitz, despite the latter's having lived in England since the age of five – the narrator mentions Austerlitz's »bis dahin ganz verborgen gebliebene Unsicherheit [...] die sich in einem leichten Sprachfehler äußerte und in gelegentlichen Stotteranfällen« (Sebald 2003: 50) when he switches to English. The narrator, as we learn, is a student residing in England, though what he is studying at the time of their initial 1967 encounter in Antwerp is unclear – perhaps he is learning English and, therefore, is more skilled and comfortable using the language. Thus, we are uncertain – at least, initially – as to what exactly Austerlitz's native language – and therefore, his identity – is: is he not a fluent speaker of English? I suggest that the apparent nervousness exhibited by Austerlitz when speaking in English (the mistakes and stuttering, »bei denen er das abgewetzte Brillenfutteral ... so fest umklammerte, daß man das Weiße sehen konnte unter der Haut seiner Knöchel« [ibid.]<sup>27</sup>), clues us in to a reason for his discomfort: his traumatic past.

## LANGUAGE, MEMORY AND IDENTITY

Austerlitz begins his studies in England, but continues his education in France, studying architectural history. His fluency in French after a period of less than ten years appears remarkable, especially considering the degree of difficulty of acquiring academic jargon in a foreign language and the narrator's mistaking him for a native speaker. That he was able to excel at the language almost certainly stems from his childhood interaction with the language *but also* because it is tied to a notion of escape and freedom (I refer here to his father's escape to France and hope that he survived the Holocaust,<sup>28</sup> as well as his nanny's profession as an academic [*Romanistin*], symbolized by her complete set of Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*). In a way, then, French serves as a safe haven for the protagonist, one which does not require him to confront the reality of his family's persecution in Prague at the hands of Germans – his graduate studies in Paris led to an unfinished dissertation project that attempted to map the tendency in capitalism towards order and monumentalism onto European architectural history, which became a compensation strategy for his inability to consciously deal with his trauma (Sebald 2003: 52).

**27** | There is a reference at the end of the novel to »einem abgewetzten Brillenfutteral«, as the narrator reflects upon another character in Dan Jacobson's novel (1998), who, like Austerlitz, is seeking traces of a family member who might have perished in the Holocaust, thus creating a recurring motif (Sebald 2003: 419).

**28** | This is the reason behind Austerlitz's stay in Paris at the end of the novel: his search to discover his father's whereabouts or fate.

Even when Austerlitz learns his true name and identity from Director Penrith-Smith at Stower Grange in England, he is unable to grasp its full significance. However, he does take a sudden interest in history, which leads to his graduate studies, archival research, and later discovery of his roots, though this is not without its consequences. Austerlitz cannot access memory of his childhood in Prague – to wit, the scene in Véra's apartment, with her showing him a photo of himself as a child (ibid: 266f.) – but he does experience traumatic flashbacks that leave him hospitalized (ibid: 200–203, 207–209, 330–332 a. 380–382). Importantly, all of the mental breakdowns suffered by the protagonist occur in contexts outside of his native Prague: England and France.

In *Austerlitz*, language is unavoidably tied to recollection of the past, particularly in the absence, or, rather, *repression* of a specific language, Czech. Austerlitz clearly suffers from a traumatic past: he was sent away by his mother on a *Kindertransport* in a desperate gambit to save his life. Although his father, Maximilian, already fled to France, Agáta,<sup>29</sup> his mother, was unable to escape deportations from Prague to Terezín. The traumatic separation from his family and arrival in a country whose language he did not speak or understand left Austerlitz feeling disoriented, alone and scared. Given that he was subsequently raised in the Welsh countryside, having arrived before the age of five, Austerlitz may have forgotten – though I would suggest *repressed* – his mother tongue.<sup>30</sup> The fact that he is later able to suddenly understand Czech when speaking with Véra discounts the notion of simply forgetting.

A curious example of indirectly reported speech, one which relates to trauma and memory, occurs when Austerlitz narrates the episode in which he learns his true identity. In this passage, Austerlitz quotes from his school director (Penrith-Smith) using a combination of special subjunctive, declarative markers and direct quotations in English, ostensibly repeating verbatim what the director says (Sebald 2003: 100–104). Austerlitz's use of English when discussing his name is alienating and calls attention to the ironic fact that he learns his true identity through a foreign language, which is mediated through the narrator's German text. The apparently direct quotes from Penrith-Smith in *English* are prefaced with the marker, »sagte Penrith-Smith«. When Austerlitz paraphrases him in German, there is a doubling up of markers (»sagte Penrith-Smith, sagte Austerlitz« as well as the use of special subjunctive (»gesprochen habe«, »hätten ...gehabt«, »sei ... ausgeschlossen«), indicating a quotation, but in contradistinction to the preceding English (ibid.). Later, this occurs again when André Hilary, Austerlitz's history teacher, speaks to him:

**29** | Agáta's name means »good«, and, significantly, is also the name of a Christian martyr (Agatha of Sicily), whose hagiographic literature is housed in the Bibliothèque National in Paris, France. This is a good example of the kinds of allusions ubiquitous in Sebald's œuvre.

**30** | There are numerous references and allusions throughout the novel to iconic imagery of the Holocaust, including trains and train stations, fortresses/camps, biblical and historical calamities, and fire (as a symbol derived from the word, »Holocaust«), which suggests an unconscious or subconscious connection of the atrocities to his native language.

»so sagte er mir einmal, sagte Austerlitz«, followed either by Austerlitz's commentary in German preterite tense, or the indirectly reported speech using the special subjunctive (ibid.: 105). The sentences in English are not set off by quotation marks – though some *are* preceded by colons – and catch the reader off guard, interrupting the flow of the text.

Of particular interest is the nearly singular occurrence of text set off by German quotation marks, marking the end of the conversation between Austerlitz and the director: »Thank you, Sir«, sagte Austerlitz« (Sebald 2003: 102).<sup>31</sup> This construction is rather problematic – why add quotation marks here, and not for any of the other spoken English?<sup>32</sup> And why should it be in the present tense instead of preterite indicative, like the rest of Austerlitz's story? I contend that it has to do with this moment being the initial revelation of Austerlitz's identity: a transformative moment that changes his entire self-understanding and life. It is a contemporaneous moment for Austerlitz, as the imparting of his identity to him and its associations with his childhood trauma continue to impact and define his life in the present.<sup>33</sup> The fact that he responds to Penrith-Smith in English and that it is uniquely set aside by (German) quotation marks indicates the splitting of the protagonist's subjectivity and the utter loss of his identity vis-à-vis the Holocaust. That is to say, this reminder of his use of English as his adopted mother-tongue is at once a signal of repression of his early childhood in Prague and traumatic departure from there, as well as an irritation for Austerlitz, which eventually drives him to discover his roots. This quote stands out in both the German and English versions of the novel, emphasizing its centrality for the theme of identity. It is more striking to the German reader, who, encountering the English in stark contrast to the surrounding German text, might especially note the subtext of eradicated culture represented in the apparent loss of Austerlitz's native language. After all, up until this point in the novel, the protagonist appeared unable to confront the reality of this loss.<sup>34</sup> Contrary to reader expectations, language, in this novel, does not impart identity, nor is it a marker of belonging to a particular cultural context – Austerlitz never fits in any-

**31** | The only other such occurrences in *Austerlitz* are on pp. 73–75, when Elias asks his wife about Dafydd's (i.e. Austerlitz's) welfare, and then Austerlitz proceeds to cite various biblical quotes Elias used in his preaching. These quotes are a mixture of passages from Psalms and from the prophets Isaiah and Zephaniah, the latter of which warned of God's divine vengeance upon Israel for straying from the path of righteousness, an altogether common theme for many survivors (as well as those who perished) of the Holocaust (e.g. abandoning God led to God abandoning them or »purifying« them through divine justice/fire).

**32** | That is, excepting the dates and passages marked by Elias in his Bible that served as inspiration for his sermons (see Sebald 2003: 74f.).

**33** | According to trauma theory, the trauma victim's inability to resolve the temporal caesura caused by the traumatic experience results in a tendency to perceive time as a contingent present.

**34** | In the novel, Austerlitz mentions as a foreshadowing of his meeting with Penrith-Smith, that it was not until he was fifteen years old that he knew who he really was (Sebald 2003: 68).

where he lives (»daß ich in Wahrheit weder Gedächtnis noch Denkvermögen, noch eigentlich eine Existenz besaß«; Sebald 2003: 182). Moreover, in terms of reader identification with the Jewish protagonist, the fact that Austerlitz is not German and did not speak in German to the narrator underscores his *otherness*, thus increasing distance between the reader and Austerlitz implying the need for an ethics of alterity in conjunction with a non-politicized deconstructionist approach to interpreting the novel.

In summation, I argue that the use of foreign language in Sebald's novel serves several purposes. First, it ruptures the reading process in a self-reflexive manner, particularly in its problematic mediation of experience, which the narrator cannot *know*, through multiple languages, as well as undermines its own appeals to authenticity.<sup>35</sup> Second, it sets the *implied reader* or *authorial audience*<sup>36</sup> (multi-literate, fluent speaker of German) apart from the *actual* rather monolingual German audience, which signals a duality of reading the text – mono- and multi-lingual – and, therefore, warrants a multiplicity of readings as favored by cognitivist/constructionist and reader-response (e.g., *Rezeptionsästhetik*) approaches. As I have argued, however, this kind of narratological analysis would not be sufficient in the case of Sebald in translation, but also would not account for the textual feature of slippage in narrative levels that are a fundamental aspect of unreliable and unstable narrative in *Austerlitz*. Yet the control exercised by the text on its reading (as per a rhetorical narratological analysis) is undermined by the extradiegetic narrator, whose unreliable narrative destabilizes the novel, effectively short-circuiting the notion of a closed or one-way reading experience. This leads to a third point: the text's multilingual, postmodernist play is an invitation to critically consider the limited perspective of a specifically and strictly German point-of-view regarding the problematic Nazi past. This kind of rhetorical gesture is very important within a national literature, which, for decades after 1945, provided little to no forum in German for the expression of Jewish voices.<sup>37</sup> Finally, I contend that a hybrid narratological approach – incorporating both rhetorical and cognitive methods – can provide a more incisive analysis of both a text and its effects on a reader, particularly when the text's use of multilingualism does not fit into established critical approaches like post-colonialism.

**35** | Although not discussed in the purview of this essay, the visual components of the narrative (photographs, drawings and other images), which have been extensively written about in scholarship on Sebald, also create tension in their divergence from the text.

**36** | The »authorial audience« is one which author specifically addresses, whereas the »actual audience« is that which actually reads the text (see Rabinowitz 1977).

**37** | As Bos (2005) has rightly pointed out, there was resistance in the German and Austrian literary establishment to Jewish writers publishing works about the Holocaust, though there were notable exceptions (Grete Weil, Ruth Klüger; see also Braese 2002).

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