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## **Confronting the Medusa: Retrieving and representing traumatic postmemory in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz***

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**Abstract:** One of the major preoccupations of Holocaust literature is the problematics of its representation – the paradoxical impossibility of speaking and *not* speaking about the trauma. The problem of representation becomes more deep-seated for the postmemory generation which did not witness the Holocaust, but came after it. W.G. Sebald compares the Holocaust with Medusa which can only be approached from the sidelines and not confronted directly for the fear of being petrified. The paper would evaluate the novel in the light of this metaphor. Just as Austerlitz, who had been transported to London from Prague as a toddler to escape extermination, avoids confronting the truth of his origins for the major part of his life, the narrative too incorporates strategic elisions and circumlocutions. The paper aims to study Sebald's labyrinthine prose which mimics the very texture of traumatic experience. The narrative operates on three levels – photographs, landscape, and history – examining which would help to understand the various pathologies of traumatic postmemory diffused in the text. Another object of scrutiny would be the limits of transmissibility and retrieval of the 'aporia of Auschwitz'.

**Keywords:** trauma, postmemory, *Austerlitz*, photographs, history, recovery.

Georgio Agamben in his *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999) talks at length on the unbridgeable gap between copious factual details of the holocaust and the comprehension of the terrible reality which these facts are a pointer to. He says, “The aporia of Auschwitz is indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension” (12). This essential conflict between verifiable factual awareness of a traumatic event and its actual assimilation forms the foundation of traumatic theory of Cathy Caruth (1995) where she asserts, “the phenomenon of trauma...both urgently demands historical awareness and yet denies our usual modes of access to it” (151). The most striking feature of traumatic recollection is, as Caruth observes, “the fact that it is not a simple memory” (151) because it stands on the paradoxical foundation of “the vivid and precise return” (152) of the past event, through “intruding memories and unbidden repetitive images of traumatic events.” accompanied by “failures of recall” (152) at will, total “*amnesia* for the past” (152). This conflict between willful forgetting and unintentional remembering, between amnesia and anamnesis becomes more profound and complex in the postmemory generation. Marianne Hirsch (2008) identifies the post memory generation as the generation which came after the one which had encountered cultural or collective trauma, those who do not have any direct but memories of the trauma, but are affiliatively connected to it. After seventy years of the Holocaust, with the number of survivors shrinking, the burden and the legacy of the *Shoah* lie with the next generation. They have inherited the legacy of the holocaust indirectly – through photographs, through testimonies or through silence. The postmemory generation ‘remember’, transmit and preserve traumatic memories which are not their own, but which constitute a spectral presence in their lives. As Brett Ashley Kaplan (2011) says,

Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation...it is to be

shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue in the present. (5)

This paper would explore the difficulties of telling the tale of trauma, especially at a generation removed. The layered, oblique prose of Sebald which is an amalgamation of memoir, documentary, travelogue, with lengthy and uncaptioned grainy photographs provides new perspectives on trauma narrative which goes beyond the conventional schemata of representation. It also gives new perspective of traumatic testimony, not as a means of cure or integration but as a channel of procuring historical consciousness by resisting the forces which seek to erase it. It is this historical consciousness, the will to defy the abyss of oblivion into which the past continually recedes; it is what forms the crucial marker of the identity of the post memory generation.

W.G. Sebald belongs to the postmemory generation, as does the eponymous protagonist of his novel *Austerlitz* (2001). Their histories, however, are starkly different. While Austerlitz, son of Jewish parents in Prague, was transported to London in *kindertransport* as a seven year old child in 1938, Sebald, a toddler, when the war ended, was the son of a National Socialist party member, Max Sebald. Both of them personally had nothing to do with the war, but the parents of both were involved, albeit in starkly opposite capacities – one as a victim, the other as a perpetrator. Both the child of the victim and the child of the perpetrator are inheritors of the legacy of the *Shoah*. The legacy of Holocaust is the legacy of silence, of not remembering. Sebald recounts how, as he was growing up, he encountered “seas of silence” (Jaggi 2001), how his German neighbours would get offended if the silence was probed or threatened. Austerlitz too, brought up by Welsh parents, deals with another kind of muteness, the omission of the truth of his origins. But these gaps in knowledge, this incomprehensible and unassimilated nature of the past, are also an impetus to repetitive confrontation with it, for the sake of retrieval, comprehension and integration. Thus the traumatic locus of the post-holocaust generation is the trauma, not of death, but of having survived it. It encapsulates “a kind of double telling... between the story of the unbearable nature of

an event and the story of the un-bearable nature of its survival.” The experience of trauma demands, “the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*” (Caruth 1996, 7).

Sebald offers a spiraling, oblique perspective of history. According to him, one cannot really “focus on the horror of the Holocaust. It's like the head of the Medusa: you carry it with you in a sack, but if you looked at it you'd be petrified” (Jaggi 2001). Unlike the testimonial narratives of first hand survivors and witnesses, the generation who came after, can only approach holocaust from the sidelines, because as Sebald says, “I didn't see it; I only know things indirectly” (Jaggi 2001). Sebald, as Byatt says, “journeys in great circling spirals in order not to go home, to get away from his origins” (Jaggi 2001). The major part of the novel eddies around stories and reflections which do not have anything to do with the history of his displacement and exile. He unwittingly avoids all things German, with a neurotic persistence. He never delves headlong into exhuming the truth of his origin, until much later in the novel, but all the while gives the readers an uneasy feeling that there is more beneath the surface, that the verbose, ample reflection on a multitude of subjects like animals, museums, railway stations is actually an evasive technique. His circuitous, spiraling narrative encompasses an engagement with the history of landscapes and architectures of London, Paris and Prague. Landscapes do not stand isolated from history; they are in fact witnesses to and participants in the course of history. They are often the sites on which history plays itself. As Austerlitz moves from landmarks to landmarks, the reader realizes these are not impersonal sites, but stages on which acts of persecution have been carried out, but the visual evidence of which has suffered erasure due to passage of time. Walter Benjamin (1969) aptly says, “Every document of civilization which is also a document of barbarism” (256). Kaplan talks at length how spaces become reservoirs or activators of memory because of the violence they have suffered. “As the generation of survivors shrinks, the cultural weight of maintaining memory shifts not only to subsequent generations but also in some sense to the landscape itself” (1). Spaces bear the traces of past as do photographs, when human testifiers are lost to time. However these traces of the past are not readily available on the surface. Sebald

repeatedly shows us the similarity between the nature of traumatic psychological landscapes and geographical landscapes. Both offer resistances to the revelation of their history, both employ guises of normality and calmness, and both require active digging in order to discover the layers of the past. Sebald talks about the wall of silence not only on the part of the Jewish survivors, but also on the part of ordinary German civilians who never speak of their loss, of the experience of living through bombings during Second World War. Austerlitz embarks on an odyssey against himself to find himself. He mediates through mechanisms of erasure, both personal and historical, that seeks to oblivate the traces of the past. Austerlitz, upon coming to London, is given a new name, and granted a new set of parents, without so much as a mention of his real origin, as if they had never existed. He himself imposes on himself several defensive strategies to evade a collision with his past, “to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to my unknown past” (197), of which he is uncannily aware in the subconscious. In a similar manner, geographical spaces which have been sites of pain and persecution, through natural reclamation or human remodeling, give a deceiving pacific appearance, without betraying so much as an inkling of the violence they have suffered. It is as if Austerlitz peels off the layers of history from an architecture or landscape to reveal the actual truth of its past, just as he peels of the make-believe childhood and counterfeit identity he had believed to be real. Austerlitz’s engagement with the history of the various places in Europe which have been sites of atrocities serves as a correlative of the meandering process of recovering and reconstructing his almost extinguished memory. Austerlitz peels off the counterfeit exterior of the Belgian fortress of Breendonk, which today stands as a museum to commemorate Belgian resistance to Nazis and reveals that it used to be the persecution chamber of Nazis. The grim, deserted monument of today is sharply incongruous with what it had been, with what it had lived through. Similarly the present-day, grand, largely dysfunctional library in Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, once served as a crucial link for the Nazis to carry out their meticulously organized efforts to destroy the Jews of Europe. It served as a storehouse of all the Jewish material possessions where they were sorted and distributed among the Nazis, while the actual owners were sent to the camps in

Drancy. It is a largely suppressed history which reveals France's complicity with the Nazis in their monstrous scheme. Sebald's intention here is however not to sleuth in the muddy waters of European past. What he tries to say is that landscapes are not impassive but sentient spaces which bear the traces of the pain left in deserted places of torment. Austerlitz wonders as he is lost in vague memories at Liverpool Street Station, "whether the pain and suffering accumulated over the centuries had really ebbed away, or whether they might not still...be sensed as we passed through them" (Sebald 183). It is because when you go to a place with a history of atrocity, it is almost as if you are standing posthumous witness to the drama of pain that had occurred there. As Sebald says, "Places seem to me to have some kind of memory, in that they activate memory in those who look at them" (Jaggi 2001).

Photographs, like landscapes, too trigger memory. The main function of photographs is evidential; it preserves a slice of reality that has passed, giving incontrovertible proof that a certain thing existed, and a certain event happened. Austerlitz's encounter with the photograph of himself as a child in Prague when he had not been estranged from his parents and the photo of his mother are a witness to a memory which would have otherwise passed into oblivion. Austerlitz explains his fascination with photographs as they closely mimic the workings of memory – especially memory of a traumatic event. Initially it is nebulous, but once it is in the developing fluid, the real shapes and subject take shape in an epiphanic revelation. Similarly, traumatic memories do not surface, unless they are in the right contextual field, but disappear when you try too hard to grasp them. They come in "the form of intrusive thoughts, nightmares or flashbacks" (Caruth 1995, 152) but cannot be recalled at will. Austerlitz compares photographs to, "shadows of reality, arising . . . out of nothingness, as memories do that come in the middle of the night, the kind that darken again quickly if you try to possess them, like a print left too long in the developing fluid" (Sebald 109). Vera, the faithful friend of his parents from Prague and nanny to the child Austerlitz, talks of the "mysterious quality peculiar to such photographs when they surface from oblivion" (258), as if there was "something stirring in them...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” (258). A characteristic of traumatic experience is that it repetitively goes back to the event of the wound, in order to assimilate that which passed in a haze, that which passed before it being understood. Photographs satisfy to an extent the insuppressible urge to try to understand the understandable. The act of looking at a photograph which has been rescued from the shut lockers of the past provide “inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy” (Sontag 17) about the past. The act of looking is an act of asking oneself to wonder, to imagine, what might have happened to the subject of the photograph. Photographs like geographical spaces evoke what lies beneath and beyond its apparent surface. “What it shows invokes what is not shown” (Berger 20). Sebald’s use of photographs is not to document history. He uses them, as Mark R. McCulloh says, “to evoke that which cannot be documented” (9). Towards the end of the novel, Austerlitz manages to trace a photograph of his mother. After making spiral circles around the truth of his history, we finally know the facts at this point in the novel – that his mother was a theatre actress, the stories of the systematic degradation inflicted on the Jews of Prague, Agata’s deportation to the labour camp in Terezin, her probable inevitable death in Auschwitz, and the untraceable history of his father after he had left for Paris to get help for his family. The photograph which Austerlitz fishes out is from her days in the theatre – a young, beautiful woman, unaware of the misfortune to befall her. It is this painful ignorance of the future, a future that has already occurred in the past, for the person looking at the photograph, is what Barthes calls the “punctum” (96). One sees the photograph of Agata, as one sees the photograph of the child Austerlitz looking at us, and one is uncannily aware of the innocent eyes that don’t know what lies around the corner. Photographs thus evoke in their gazers the “horror of an anterior future” (96), of that which will be, but that which hasn’t yet come to pass, in the frozen slice of time depicted in the photograph. Similarly the photograph of child Austerlitz dressed in a theatrical costume, gazed at by his adult counterpart, evokes a feeling in him, of being called to accept the challenge of averting the “misfortune lying ahead of him” (Sebald 260). Photographs goad us to embark on a journey of comprehending the



misery, the suffering the subjects in it might have gone through. It not only remains as a testimony of a particular point in the continuum of time, but also triggers an imaginative reconstruction in our mind of what might have happened after the particular pose was captured. However, such a reconstruction is unstable, for one can only imagine, and never really fully grasp the traumatic experience actually undergone. The images “are always versions of history; the real thing we shall never grasp” (Jaggi 2001). As A. S. Byatt says about Sebald, “he connects with immense pain, only to say you can’t connect; he tries to make you imagine things that he then delicately says are unimaginable” (Jaggi 2001). It is the unbridgeable gap between knowledge and comprehension that lies at the heart of every traumatic testimony. The real nature of the traumatic experience defies representation or understanding, very much like the nature of the ‘Real’ in Lacanian theory. It is that which exists beyond the symbolic order – language. As Caruth points out, “the possibility of a speech that it is not simply the vehicle of understanding, but also the locus of what cannot yet be understood” (Caruth 1995, 155). Austerlitz thus continues to have nightmares and breakdowns even after going the full length to uncover his past. Austerlitz underlines the utter futility of capturing the traumatic past in language as, “a sentence only appears to mean something, but in truth is at best a makeshift expedient...” (Sebald 175). It is the force of an experience which is not yet owned” (Caruth 1995, 151) that makes it return again and again in forms of “nightmarish apparitions” (Zizek 19). Sebald underlines the failure of linguistic register to accommodate the experience of trauma, and thus rests the major part of his narrative on the evocative potential embedded in images and places.

However, the question arises on the possible futile project of representing the incomprehensible and bearing testimony for that which is inassimilable. The transmission of history is not located in positing a simple, lucid understanding of it. It is also located in the struggles that take place in communicating them, the gaps and the silences that are part of any historical crisis. “The attempt to gain access to a traumatic history, then, is also the project of listening beyond the pathology of individual suffering, to the reality of a history that in its crises can only

be perceived in unassimilable forms” (Caruth 1995, 156). Not understanding or filling up the gap, but acknowledging its existence as a crucial part of historical transmission. Sebald thus strews his novel with “tantalizing images of the past” (Jaggi 2001) not as a means to understand or embody the caesura of traumatic experience, not as a means of closure, because he knows there is never going to be one.

The end of the novel sees Austerlitz travelling from Paris to Mechelen, the place from where every shipment of Belgian Jews departed to their destined concentration camps in Europe. Sebald does not provide any concrete ending to the novel. It ends with yet another journey taken up by Austerlitz. He retraces the path to the point from which the Jews undertook to reach their final destination and perhaps suggests that Austerlitz is not only exhuming his individual past but the collective past of his generation. Austerlitz chooses to traverse through the gap, not fill it, because he knows the gap constitutes his history, his past, his vital link to his identity.

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