Reparation in W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz and Patrick Modiano's Dora Bruder

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Epigraph:

"By compassion we make others' misery our own, and so, by relieving them, we relieve ourselves also." Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*.

Introduction

W. G. Sebald and Patrick Modiano are two contemporary authors who share similar themes and literary practices. They are both fastidiously or even obsessively historical in their narrative development. And they seem preoccupied with the sins of World War II. Critics have divided feelings about their accomplishments. Skeptics say their trauma narratives induce despair, are complicated for complication's sake, and overstate trauma's imperviousness to healing. Advocates say their fictions bring to the present with emotional immediacy historical injustices that have yet to be fully reckoned with. This essay argues that Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) and Modiano's *Dora Bruder* (1997) do important political work in their fastidious historical narratives. In recreating the suffering of the past, these authors pull their readers into participating in acts of historical reparation, which are critical to social progress.

In using the term "reparation," I am adapting an argument made by Karl Figlio, who argues in his analysis of reparation as one form of memory responding to Holocaust atrocities that some forms of memory respond to political traumas of the past and seek to repair the violence of those experiences. One of the main critiques of psychoanalytic theory has been that its methods are not suited to scholarship pertaining to large-scale

objects, such as society and history. Figlio in *Remembering as Reparation: Psychoanalysis and historical memory* (2017) argues persuasively that psychoanalysis, an inquiry into the thinking and feeling of individuals, can be extrapolated to social groups. For Figlio, reparation is rooted in an internal world of experience and can be expressed and developed through identification. It is an urge to make things better. Reparation requires genuinely recognizing suffering and identifying with it through an experience of emotional intensity. It is recognizing the reality of an injury, accepting responsibility, and bearing the guilt for it. It is acknowledging a debt that can never be paid in full, and it is wishing for something better despite an injustice's indelibility. Reparation is sad and remorseful, but it also expresses hope and optimism for the future.

Memorials and national monuments too often result in distanced, ritualistic complacency, rather than genuine recognition of suffering. Reparation is more like witnessing: Its participants pay attention to the suffering of others. The three main components to reparation are: first, a wish to make things better, which is driven by guilt—reparation is taking responsibility. Second, identification with suffering through emotional immediacy rather than a distancing ritual. Third, it is an ongoing process rather than a finite goal. *Dora Bruder* and *Austerlitz* engage readers in these three key aspects of reparation. Modiano (born in 1945) and Sebald (born in 1944) were born too late to have any first-hand memory of the Holocaust but rather remembered the event through their parents and grandparents. Marianne Hirsch in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (2012) elegantly called those only half-removed from the Holocaust the "1.5 generation." Their relationship to the collective trauma comes through second hand memory or "postmemory." The archive is a privileged site of

memory for members of Modiano and Sebald's generation. As Sven-Erik Rose says in his essay in *Postmodern Culture*, "Remembering Dora Bruder: Patrick Modiano's Surrealist Encounter with the Postmemorial Archive" (2008), the postmemorial subject attempts to forge a relationship between interiority and exteriority. "It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences—and thus also the memories—of others as one's own, or, more precisely, as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story" (Rose). Modiano and Sebald typify what Rose calls a postmemorial literature, in which characters search, interrogate, and experience sites, traces, and clues as archives.

Memory buttresses identity, both in individuals and in society. Similar to Caruth's notion that recovery from trauma involves a reconciliation of the self with previously disconnected memory, Figlio claims that remembering is necessary to make a re-unified identity. For Caruth, survivors—and societies—carry "unclaimed experience" within themselves as split off parts that can potentially become a part of their consciousness. Using the example of German reconciliation, Figlio states that reunification brought the aim to establish a reflective identity. Figlio argues that "remembering true" is reparative. And "truthful memory is the backbone of successful collective identity" (179). Deciding to recognize the truth is a political act that is essential to social progress.

The Sebald and Modiano Generation

To generate the deep and complex emotional knowing of reparation, both authors have to uncover a traumatic past that has been disavowed by their contemporary culture. Children of the 1.5 generation in both Germany and France have parents who were complicit in the most horrific crime of history, the attempted extermination of a race. Modiano and Sebald are two of those children, but, unlike other children, they seem driven to know what their parents did. They want to know and make reparations, rather than the easy work of forgetting. Many of those parents communicated their experiences indirectly, in their personalities and emotions, rather than in storytelling. For some, the past may have been too difficult to talk about. Either retelling the trauma was unbearable or the memories were dissociated and unavailable to recall. Would-be narrators felt that recounting their experiences might trivialize and cheapen them, failing to do them justice and communicate what it was really like to those who were not there. They were also ashamed of admitting what they did to survive.

Sebald's father served in the German army and was a prisoner of war in France until 1947. Modiano's father was a black-market criminal in Paris who was picked up by police in February 1942. In her essay in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, "Trauma and Transmission: Echoes of the Missing Past in Dora Bruder" (2007), Judith Greenberg says: "The Sebald-Modiano generation is raised by parents who instead of nourishing and shaping their children's life narratives instead create gaps, absences and uncertainties. The children then are left trying to build a life narrative

from a place of origin full of missing pieces" (363). Modiano won the Nobel prize in 2014, and Sebald, who died in 2001, was most active in the 1990s. Their bodies of work reflect deep commitments to historical reparation. Modiano's father was largely silent about his time hiding during the Occupation. Although he was Jewish, he did not wear the yellow star, as he did not show up for the October 1940 census. He used a false identity and lived a clandestine life, staying in Paris until it was over. Modiano was troubled by what he imagined his father doing to survive: « Mon père a pu préserver sa vie grâce à une attitude trouble, grâce à des multiples concessions » (Rencontre avec un jeune romancier 128). His father told Modiano about being rescued from a detention camp, from which he might have been deported to a concentration camp. Modiano recalls the conversation he had with his father as a fifteen-year-old: « Un soir de mes quinze ans où jetais seul avec lui et où il se laissait aller jusqu'au bord des confidences» (*Remise de peine* 117). Modiano felt that his father would have transmitted his painful experiences had he found the right words: « J'ai senti, ce soir-là, qu'il aurait voulu me transmettre son expérience des choses troubles et douloureuses de la vie, mais qu'il n'y avait pas de mots pour cela » (*Remise de peine* 117). This may have been the closest his father ever came to unburdening himself to Modiano. The two did not see each other the last ten years of his father's life (Patrick Modiano s'explique).

Both writers struggle with a warped sense of inherited guilt. Sebald's father, Georg Sebald, joined the army at 18, in 1929, and stayed when the National Socialist party took power in 1933 (Recovered Memories). After the war, he worked away from home six days a week (*Campo Santo* 197). "He was a detached figure for [Sebald]"

(Recovered Memories). Sebald grew up with the feeling something was being kept from him. Sebald was puzzled by the inadequacy of teaching about the war. As a young student, he was shown a film of the liberation of a concentration camp. "There was no discussion afterwards; you didn't know what to do with it" (Recovered Memories). The Germany of Sebald's childhood was "remote and with something not quite right about it" (*Campo Santo* 200). Sebald left Germany at twenty-one without knowing much about what happened in his homeland. "It was a long, drawn-out process to find out, which [he's] done persistently ever since" (Recovered Memories). Unlike other children who chose to forget, he felt a responsibility to learn about his father's crimes: "It's difficult to say you haven't anything to do with it. I've always felt I had to know what happened in detail, and to try to understand why" (Recovered Memories).

Modiano's inherited guilt drives his project. "Ce qui alimente mon obsession [c'est] le fait que, dans ce climat, pour sauver sa peau, certaines personnes ont pactisé avec leurs bourreaux» (Rencontre avec un jeune romancier 128). Like Sebald, Modiano also would not have been born were it not for his father's survival, however dubious and nefarious. In Modiano's fiction, the son takes on the shortcomings and the cowardice of the father: «Le fils se charge des faiblesses et de la lâcheté du père. Il y a une culpabilisation du fils qui endosse la veulerie du père» (Rencontre avec un jeune romancier 130). Paternal guilt weighs heavily on Modiano and Sebald; in fiction, they do the work of reparation.

Imagination and Reparation

Modiano fills the gap left by his father's silence using fiction, starting with his first book, *La Place de l'étoile* (1968). The silence and eventual death of the father creates a need for the son to make up a paternal history using his imagination. Struggling to separate himself from his father, the narrator in *Dora Bruder* says he is able to feel truly like himself, in his words, only when he runs away. The narrator pivots his attention from his father to Dora. Without his listening and investigating, "There would be no trace of this unidentified girl's presence, nor that of [his] father's" (*Dora Bruder* 53). The father disappears from the narrative, which begins and ends with a focus on Dora. To borrow from Cathy Caruth's image of literature in the ashes of history, one might say that rather than finding his father's story, Modiano uses his father's ashes as material to write his own life story. In Caruth's *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013), trauma survivors are said to take the remains of the past as the material from which to inscribe the future. Caruth demonstrates her theory with the example of Balzac's Colonel Chabert, who also shows up in *Austerlitz*. Chabert can be said to be writing his story from the ashes of history. Chabert was thought to have died in battle, but he returns only to find his wife remarried. He ultimately renounces his legal rights, abandoning his former self while allowing for a new self to emerge. In a similar way, Modiano's narrator renounces his claim to his father's memory, freeing himself up to become a writer and researcher focused on the fate of Dora Bruder and others who disappeared in Paris in the early forties.

Both narrators, serving as stand-ins for their authors, experience crippling anxieties. Sebald's narrator says that after returning to Germany in 1975, he "went through a difficult period which dulled my sense of other people's existence, and from which I only very gradually emerged by turning back to the writing I had long neglected" (*Austerlitz* 34). In December 1996, when he met Austerlitz again, the narrator "was in some anxiety" over his partial loss of eyesight (34). The narrator was "considerably alarmed" by the decline of his eyesight, which "filled [him] with concern" (35). On his way to London to see an ophthalmologist, "a kind of dull despair stirred within" him (36).

Austerlitz also manifests the feeling of not being real, which is characteristic of dissociation: "I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all … I could not imagine who or what I was" (*Austerlitz* 185). He manifests feeling outside of his own body: "I saw myself wandering around a maze … I had seen myself standing, filled with a painful sense that something within me was trying to surface from oblivion" (*Austerlitz* 269-270). The *Dora Bruder* narrator also exhibits a sometime tenuous grasp on reality. He has visions, just as Austerlitz's narrator sees ghosts, goblins, hunchbacks, dwarves and the like. These narrators are haunted by their memories in a way that impairs their ability to function in daily life.

Modiano's narrator lives in a constant state of unease. "[He] was seized with panic, with that sense of vertigo you have in bad dreams when you can't get to the station, time is running out and you are going to miss your train" (*Dora Bruder* 12). He remembers "experiencing for the first time that sense of emptiness that comes with

the knowledge of what has been destroyed, razed to the ground" (29). Identifying with Dora's urge to run away, he describes "one of those cold, gray days that makes you more than ever aware of your solitude and intensifies your feeling that a trap is about to close" (47).

Silence in these narratives is not only individual but also social. Postwar silence served the interests of many of the officials who bore responsibility for what went on. Sebald was appalled by what he perceived as a "concerted attempt in the first years after the war not to remember anything, for the obvious reason that those in office were implicated" (Recovered Memories). Sebald dramatizes the power of the status quo to impose a regime of silence. His novel, *The Rings of Saturn,* about a walking tour of the shores near Suffolk, England, suggests that the illustrious careers of some of the most prominent historical figures of the second half of the twentieth century were made possible by this pact of silence. The United Nations general secretary was forced to resign when it surfaced that he was responsible for the deportation of thousands of Jewish prisoners. If Modiano and Sebald trace their obsessions to their family links as members of the 1.5 generation, their writing maps out a missing story at a larger scale. "Of all the many searches performed by the Jewish Affairs police, not a single trace remains" (*Dora Bruder* 54). These novels perform a political act, inciting its readers to treat amnesia with suspicion. "From time to time, beneath this thick layer of amnesia, you can certainly sense something" (*Dora Bruder* 110).

Sebald and Modiano in these novels impugn those responsible who remain silent. They do so most palpably in their descriptions place. The silent facades of Terezín and

Paris are secretive and concealing. In the Paris of *Dora Bruder*, "the facades are rectangular, the windows square, the concrete the color of amnesia." Modiano suggests a deliberate attempt on the part of postwar officials to conceal their guilt and proclaim their neutrality. "They have obliterated everything … in order that nobody, ever again, would question [the city's] neutrality" (*Dora Bruder* 113). In *Austerlitz*, the narrator describes the streets of Terezín in similar terms. Tens of thousands of Jews were killed there, many of them from Prague, including the mother of Austerlitz.

The narrator in *Austerlitz* imagines that the pain and suffering accumulated over centuries at the Bedlam insane asylum can still be felt by travelers passing through Liverpool Street Station, on the site of the former hospital (129-130). The return of memory repairs Austerlitz, who long denied his past. Upon entering the train station at Liverpool Street, in London, he says:

> I felt, said Austerlitz, like an actor who, upon making his entrance, has completely and irrevocably forgotten not only the lines he knew by heart but the very part he has so often played. Minutes or even hours may have passed while I stood [. . .] unable to move [. . .] I saw huge halls open up [. . .] I felt as if the room where I stood were expanding [. . .] the crucial point was [. . .] the scraps of memory beginning to drift through the outlying regions of my mind: images, for instance, like the recollection of a late November afternoon in 1968 when I stood with Marie de Verneuil. [. . .] Memories like this came back to me [. . .] I felt, said Austerlitz, that the waiting room where I stood as if dazzled contained all the hours of my past life. (134-136)

For Austerlitz, Liverpool Street awakens memory and triggers cognition: This was the station at which his four-year-old self arrived on the Kindertransport, from Wilsonova Station in Prague. Austerlitz then remembers being greeted by his adoptive parents.

> I felt something rending within me, and a sense of shame and sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, something inexpressible because we have no words for

> it, just as I had no words all those years ago when the two strangers came over to me speaking a language I did not understand. All I do know is that when I saw the boy sitting on the bench I became aware, through my dull bemusement, of the destructive effect on me of my desolation through all those past years, and a terrible weariness overcame me that I had never really been alive, or was only now being born, almost on the eve of my death. (137)

Equating memory with life, Austerlitz states, "I had never really been alive, or was only now being born." For nearly sixty years, Austerlitz lived without access to this memory. And vice versa, the absence of memory through dissociation is a kind of dying. Toward the beginning of the novel, Austerlitz wanders around zombielike. With his return of memory comes a renewed vigor in his disposition. Overcome by emotion at "being born," Austerlitz "fell into a deep, uneasy sleep from which, as [he] discovered afterwards by making the calculation several times, [he] did not wake until the middle of the night the next day" (138). The magnitude of the fatigue speaks to the depth of the emotional work involved in reparation.

As a result of a childhood marked by chronic traumas, including fleeing the Nazis on the Kindertransport, the loss of his mother, and the witnessing of death and insanity, Austerlitz suffers from traumatic dissociation. Trauma can be established in Austerlitz not only by using the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder laid out by the American Psychiatric Association, but also by using the definition of developmental trauma provided by Van der Kolk. He was exposed to death, witnessing dead bodies lying in the grass on the day of a bombing (*Austerlitz* 50). He suffers from intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and flashbacks, and exhibits avoidance of trauma-related stimuli. These manifestations and experiences meet the APA criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD; Austerlitz also meets the criteria for the dissociative subtype of PTSD, which is defined by feelings

that the world and one's self are not real. To feel out of one's body is a marker of dissociation, as Joshua Pederson says in a 2014 essay in *Narrative*, "Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory" (349). But as a child who grew up not knowing his real parents—who did not even learn his real name until his mid-teens, and who grew up with adoptive parents who were cold and seemingly uncaring, in a house that was emotionally and literally freezing—he also fits the bill for developmental trauma, which is caused not by a single shattering event but by chronic distress, including distress caused by parents. Developmental trauma breaks down children's capacity to process, integrate, and categorize what is happening, leading to dissociation (Developmental Trauma Disorder 3). The distressing memories create "a kind of parallel life," according to Dori Laub and Nanette C. Auerhahn in their *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* essay "Knowing and Not Knowing Massive Psychic Trauma: Forms of Traumatic Memory" (1993), especially when there is no immediate treatment (296). In Austerlitz's case, there was no immediate treatment because he had no one to talk to about what happened to him. Austerlitz did not receive attention from his adoptive parents, or any recognition or explanation of his traumatic past, which might have helped him form a life narrative and establish a secure sense of self. More than that, he had the feeling "that something very obvious, very manifest in itself was hidden from me" (*Austerlitz* 54). The same feeling was expressed by Sebald in interviews and essays.

More than the many causes of Austerlitz's childhood trauma, the way that trauma impairs him as an adult confirms his dissociation. As Carolin Duttlinger says in "Traumatic Photographs" (2004): "The concept of trauma, and in particular its relation to

childhood, are central to Austerlitz's own disposition" (159). Dissociation leaves Austerlitz less than fully alive. In the first half of the narrative, he wanders zombielike, without much liveliness. He manifests the feeling of not being real, which is characteristic of dissociation: "I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all … I could not imagine who or what I was" (*Austerlitz* 185). He manifests feeling outside of his own body: "I saw myself wandering around a maze" (*Austerlitz* 269); "I had seen myself standing, filled with a painful sense that something within me was trying to surface from oblivion" (*Austerlitz* 270). Dissociation protects him from trauma, as Frank Putnam explains, "allowing [the survivor] to continue to function, though often in an automaton-like state" (qtd. in Luckhurst 42). Austerlitz appears to be going through the motions and his affect is given representation in Sebald's lyrical, digressive writing style. When Austerlitz recovers his dissociated memories, he feels newly alive. Austerlitz says, "a terrible weariness overcame me at the idea that I had never really been alive" (*Austerlitz* 137). He has an "awareness of a depleted self and of an intense experience that is disconnected and 'forgotten' but nonetheless affectively permeates and compromises life strategies and adaptation" (Laub and Auerhahn 291). Austerlitz feels as if some memory were trying to surface from oblivion.

In *Austerlitz*, two passages in particular—one in a train station and another on board a train—explore how dissociated memories are recorded as images and recovered following visual stimuli. Psychiatrists such as Breuer, Freud, and Janet hold that patients can integrate a dissociated memory into current meaning schemas by being brought back "to the state in which the memory was first laid down" (Trauma, Neuroscience, and the Etiology of Hysteria 246). When Austerlitz is on board the train, the image of a landscape

is recalled to his consciousness, which in turn links to another image, of his twin brother. If dissociated memories are state-dependent, they can only be retrieved in the emotional state in which they were acquired (Trauma, Neuroscience, and the Etiology of Hysteria 246). Being on the train and seeing the unchanged landscape helps to create that emotional state. Austerlitz says in the passage on the train:

> As I gazed out, a distant memory came to me of a dream I often had … and it dawned upon me, said Austerlitz, that what I now saw going past outside the train was the original of the images that had haunted me for so many years. Then I recollected another idea which had obsessed me over a long period: the image of a twin brother … I knew nothing about him, not even his name. (*Austerlitz* 224-5)

Dissociated fragments cannot associate with conscious memory but they do associate with one another. Above, one dissociated memory returns, followed by a cognition (this was the image in his dreams), followed by the return of another image-memory. Austerlitz has tapped into a memory chain, one in which dissociated memories have built a life of their own, independent of normal memory. In a pivotal scene that illustrates the concept of state-dependent memory retrieval, Austerlitz enters a train station, which puts him in an emotional state that allows memories to return, followed by the cognition of the meaning of these memories. This new feeling of being alive is a turning point, sending Austerlitz on a pilgrimage to recover his childhood memories. If his memory is state-dependent, it follows that he has a choice to seek out the places where that memory can be reactivated. He sets off in pursuit of those places, that memory, and that feeling of aliveness.

These novels demonstrate the healing that takes place after a victim of trauma is listened to by others. While Austerlitz lay in semi-consciousness for days at the

Salpêtrière hospital, which is located between the library and the Austerlitz station, he had visions of "armies of these unredeemed souls" (269). In this moment of guilt resulting from the felt responsibility to remember those "unredeemed souls," he goes on to say he saw himself standing, "filled with a painful sense that something within me was trying to surface from oblivion" (270). There are limits to redeeming victims who are dead and gone, but these narratives illustrate the healing and redemption that is possible for witnesses and narrators. Austerlitz attributes his physical recovery to his listeners. "Who knows what would have become of me had it not been for one of the nursing staff," Austerlitz says, referring to the hospital attendant who reads his notebook, finds the address for his friend Marie de Verneuil, and tracks her down. Marie comes to sit with Austerlitz "for hours and days on end"; on one of her visits, she brings him a medical book the front page of which reads: "pour toutes sortes de maladies, internes et externes" (270). The book's preface reminds its readership, "the pious and charitable ladies of the upper classes," that by showing mercy to their charges, "the abandoned and the afflicted," they would bring upon themselves and their families "the heavenly rewards of grace, prosperity, and happiness" (271). This is a kind of listening that benefits the listener while also making things better for the sufferer. This hope for redemption from suffering grounded in listening mirrors the experience of the friend, Marie, who patiently sits with and listens to Austerlitz. Reading this book, Austerlitz "regained [his] lost sense of [himself] and [his] memory" and "could soon walk on Marie's arm" (*Austerlitz* 271). Her listening, and his reading about the suffering of others, restored him.

In as much as these are novels about piecing together the gaps in the main characters' life story, they are also novels about narrators listening and witnessing. Sebald places the focalization of the narrative on Austerlitz, who looks for his father, Maximilian, who was last seen in Paris. His mother, Agáta, likely died in Terezín. The narrative confronts the limits of what can be known about Maximilian and Agáta. The narrator listens to Austerlitz's tragic life story, but the narrative begins and ends with a focus on the narrator. Readers might posit that the novel is not about the trauma of Jacques Austerlitz, but the narrator's response to his story. Readers' understanding of the novel reflects the effort they bring to understanding the novel's narrator's response to the story he is told. Trauma narratives like these foreground confrontations with barriers to knowledge and understanding. Speakers work at the limits of their ability to speak, and listeners work at the limits of their ability to make sense of a fragmented, often elliptical message. Austerlitz detects that "something or other unknown wrenched at [his] heart … like an ordinary name or a term which one cannot remember for the sake of anyone or anything in the world" (213). The narrator of *Dora Bruder* hears "something, an echo, distant, muted, but of what, precisely, it is impossible to say" (109).

Sebald's readers are pulled into the narrator's powerful identification with the book's central character, Austerlitz, who grows up thinking he is English, only to discover that in fact he is an orphan adopted by a devout English family. The narrator shows an almost obsessive interest in Austerlitz's own discovery of who he really is, a survivor of Nazi-occupied Prague. In a highly complex layering of human connections, the reader responds to the narrator's response to Austerlitz's response to his recovered memory of a precious childhood caretaker, Vera Ryšanová. In one passage this beloved

caretaker, once totally absent to his memory, becomes recovered with a powerfully impactful emotional memory. Giving expression to this fragile connection between listener and testimony, between a narrator straining to listen and a memory whispering softly, Austerlitz says: "Sometimes it seemed as if the veil would part; I thought, for one fleeting instant, that I could feel the touch of Agáta's [his mother's] shoulder or see the picture on the front of the Charlie Chaplin comic which Vera had bought me for the journey [his evacuation on the Kindertransport]" (219). He longs to know his mother's experience. He hopes to find her image in a Nazi propaganda film made to deceive Red Cross inspectors at Terezín, where his mother was interned. "If only the film could be found I might perhaps be able to see or gain some inkling of what it was really like" (245). What it was like for his mother, but also what it was really like, as in what truly happened, not just to his mother but to millions of others. "But as soon as [he] tried to hold one of these fragments fast, or get it into better focus, as it were, it disappeared into the emptiness revolving over [his] head" (219). He laments his failure to get his memory of his mother into better focus.

The narrator's failed search for his mother is followed by his failed search for his father. In frustration, Austerlitz gives up on the endeavor and turns to reading Balzac: "I instead began reading the novels of Balzac, hitherto unknown to me, starting with the story of *Colonel Chabert*" (282; emphasis mine). As Austerlitz related his discovery of Balzac to the narrator, he slipped into French.

> *J'entendis, ou crus entendre*, Austerlitz quoted from memory, […] *des gémissements poussés par le monde des cadavres au milieu duquel je gisais. Et quoique la mémoire de ces moments soit bien ténébreuse, quoique mes souvenirs soient bien confus, malgré les impressions de souffrances encore plus profondes*

> *que je devais éprouver et qui ont brouillé mes idées, il y a des nuits où je crois encore entendre ces soupires étouffés*. (283; emphasis Sebald's)

Austerlitz's total recall of Balzac after reading him for the first time suggests, as does his sudden ability to speak French, that Austerlitz identified strongly with Chabert, who was haunted by "*ces soupires étouffés*" in the same way that Austerlitz felt guilty for not responding to the prisoners crying out from the files of Terezín. But just as Chabert had to crawl out of that pile of corpses to survive, Austerlitz went as far as he could in bringing himself to the site of his mother's murder in Terezín, putting himself through hallucinations and other symptoms before leaving. Austerlitz's uncanny ability to quote Chabert suggests the Balzac novel made a strong impression on him, stemming from his emotional investment in the novel. At the end of *Austerlitz*, the narrator renounces his right to pursue his past. He turns around and goes back to the village. Similarly, the Balzac story opens the possibility that Chabert can make himself anew, by failing to reclaim his former identity. "The self that emerges," Caruth says, "is not the self from the past" but a new self (*Literature in the Ashes of History*, 33-34).

The self in these novels aligns with Hirsch's concept of postmemory as a negotiation between interior and exterior. *Dora Bruder's* narrator situates his feelings of guilt in the streets of Paris, through what Pierre Nora in *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984-1992) called sites of memory. "In a different part of Paris, when I was twenty, I remember having the same sensation of emptiness as I had had when confronted by the Tourelles wall, without knowing the reason why" (109, 110). Readers might infer that the narrator's feeling of emptiness, when "confronted by the Tourelles wall," was driven by the guilt he felt as an inheritor of the legacy of Dora's detainment, June 19,

1942, at the internment center of Tourelles. The precise location of the camp, 11 Boulevard Mortier at the Porte des Lilas, adds to the novel's emotional immediacy. The narrator identifies further with the experience of internees such as Dora by reading their testimony. One of them, Francoise Siefridt, who was interned for several weeks with Dora, wrote *J'ai voulu porter l'étoile jaune* (2010). *Dora Bruder's* narrator refers to prisoners like Siefridt who the Germans labeled as friends of the Jews. The narrator also says that Jean Genet's *Miracle de la Rose* (1946), about his experiences as an adolescent detainee, "evokes Dora Bruder for me so well that I feel I knew her" (114). These are the archival materials from which Modiano works and to which he contributes.

According to Rose, Modiano insists that "an encounter with the archive can alter ethical subjectivity. *Dora Bruder* is the account of such an encounter and such a mutation." In his enlightening discussion, Rose shows that Modiano's novels evinces a commitment to "remaining open to an idiosyncratic, murmuring archive" that allows for a relationship between subjectivity and exterior archival traces, postmemorial subjectivity. In a letter, Modiano thanked Serge Klarsfeld for his updated 1995 edition of the *Mémorial des enfants*, which included a photograph of Bruder and her parents, as well as Bruder's date and place of birth, last known address, and the fact that she was deported from Drancy, saying the book was "the most important in my life" (La Shoah 538; cited in Rose).

The narratives combine the authenticity of an archive with the imagination required of fiction. Sebald provides photographs of his archives: the library at Terezín

and the French national library. He cites first-hand accounts of the Holocaust by the Frenchman Claude Simon and the Belgian Jean Améry. The work of Améry, who survived the Holocaust, wrote about it, and many decades later, killed himself, "brought home to [Sebald] how long these things [traumatic memories] last in people's minds, and become more virulent as time goes on" (Book Report 15). On this understanding of true memory, Sebald rejects narratives of uplift as false and fantastical. A narrative of uplift, for example, can be found in *The History of Bees* (2017), a bestselling work of world literature from Sweden. In the novel by Maja Lunde, a young boy vanishes, leaving his mother traumatized by the sudden loss. By the end of the novel, however, it is revealed that the young boy was stung by bees that were believed to be extinct. The reappearance of bees augurs well in a world deprived of pollinators and the food they provide. The son's disappearance is redeemed as it portends a new hope for a civilization seemingly on its last legs.

These writers work at the limit of the intelligible and communicable, rather than staying within well-defined genre formats. The suffering they are interested in is "something inexpressible because we have no words for it" (*Austerlitz* 137). Trauma escapes intelligibility and traumatic suffering is not able to be communicated and understood partly because the human mind defends against devastation. In self-defense, the mind shuts off. As Modiano says, "J'ai senti, ce soir-là, qu'il [son père] aurait voulu me transmettre son expérience des choses troubles et douloureuses de la vie, mais qu'il n'y avait pas de mots pour cela » (Remise de peine 117). Trauma's transmission to the next generation can also fail because of its unintelligibility. What is intelligible to a society of listeners is the uplifting narrative of a happy ending. It is easier to find an

audience for an anecdote about a reunion after the war than a tale of moral corruption during the Occupation. The Allies prevailed, the camps were liberated, friends returned home. A powerful official narrative overshadows counter-narratives about guilt, betrayal, and cowardice. Sebald rejected narratives of uplift and felt writers have an obligation to air what others cannot bear to remember. Writing may even be a small step toward reparation. "It would be presumptuous to say writing a book would be a sufficient gesture," he said. Sebald suggests a further benefit to reparation: its effect on the future: "If people were more preoccupied with the past, maybe the events that overwhelm us would be fewer" (Recovered Memories). Knowing the past might establish a self-understanding sturdy enough to withstand life's uncertainties.

Both novels move readers past mere awareness to what Figlio calls a "genuine recognition" of suffering (218). Emotional intensity helps readers recognize the suffering of the characters and to dwell with those feelings rather than seeking closure. Reading these narratives that reject paradigms of uplift, one might conclude, as does Jeffrey C. Alexander, in *Trauma: A Social Theory* (2012), that there is no "getting beyond" the tragedy of the Holocaust (60). Narratives like these focus readers' attention on the nature of the catastrophe rather than some future effort at reversal or amelioration. "We do not get over it," Alexander states. "Rather, to achieve redemption we are compelled to dramatize and redramatize" (61). Alexander speaks to the unending work of reparation, placing him in a camp opposite critics such as Roger Luckhurst, who in *The Trauma Question* (2008) categorizes Sebald as a "traumatophile" whose portrayal of trauma overstated trauma's resistance to healing (111). Reparation builds on the work of foundational trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, whose *Unclaimed Experience:*

Trauma, Narrative, and History (1996) theorized traumatic events as akin to lost luggage waiting to be found. Caruth stated that trauma survivors are forever returning to the experience in an effort to know it (*Unclaimed Experience* 9). In Caruth's model, the trauma survivor looks to reintegrate memory that was blocked off at the moment of trauma. Part of the healing available to survivors is coming to know what happened and weaving it into their life story. For Caruth, an intelligible life story with a coherent identity is a marker of a victim's healing from trauma. Listening, trauma theory also tells us, is a way of recognizing the truth of suffering, and making that suffering knowable. Without a listener to record it, as Modiano's narrator says, there would be no trace of what happened. Modiano and Sebald, by shifting the focus from the narrator of trauma to its witness, gesture toward the future. Even skeptics of the importance attributed to listeners of traumatic narratives, such as C. Fred Alford, concede that a listener's curiosity can have a positive effect on the storyteller's ability to testify.

Trauma narratives can be uplifting, for example, in superhero movie franchises. Like Superman, who grew up not knowing where he really came from, many superheroes feature life stories in which trauma defines an early moment and goes toward whatever superpowers they enjoy. A prime example is the X-Men franchise, in which a school for unusual children is the front for a training camp for mutant superheroes who learn to control their unique powers and use them for good. In most of these stories, an early experience that can be described as traumatic is redeemed by the character's superhuman gifts being put to good use. To name one more, Batman was traumatized by the loss of his parents, who were shot and killed in an armed robbery in front of him. He turns this

into his motivation for fighting crime and preventing this from happening to others in his city of Gotham.

Readers Respond to Affect of Trauma

Emotional engagement, which can be taxing, is part of the work of reading Modiano and Sebald. Narrative events give readers an experience of emotional intensity, mourning, and wanting to make things better. Reparation requires the same emotional intensity that the novels of Modiano and Sebald ask of their readers. Literary critics are disturbed by the emotional intensity in these stories. In his essay for *New Literary History,* "Critical Solace" (2016), David James says these narratives are "most disquieting" (486). And in her essay for *The New Republic*, "The Posthumous Sublime" (1996), Cynthia Ozick admits to being "disconcerted" by them (34). Austerlitz is discomforted by the initial return of memory: "No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open" (*Austerlitz* 25). Visiting train stations in Paris, "he had quite often found himself in the grip of dangerous and entirely incomprehensible currents of emotion" (*Austerlitz* 33-34).

At the end of *Austerlitz*, the narrator makes a very modest statement: "Sitting by the moat of the [Breendonk] fortress," he says, referring to his object of investigation "I read to the end of the fifteenth chapter of *Heshel's Kingdom*, and then set out on my way back" (298). Such a statement is so slight readers must strain their capacities for identification to grasp what this might mean, for the narrator to read "to the end of the fifteenth chapter of *Heshel's Kingdom*," and then to "set out on [his] way back." At the very least, the language is one of conclusions, the end of a novel, the end of a journey. *Heshel's Kingdom* (1988) is an account of an endeavor much like Austerlitz's fruitless search for his father. A South African Jew, Dan Jacobson, fails to find traces of his

grandfather in Eastern Europe. Breendonk is a significant site in that not only does the novel end there but it also begins there. The narrator's 1967 visit to the former fortress turned concentration camp reminded him that his father was a perpetrator, giving him a panic attack. The narrator's guilt rears its head at the Lucerne train station, which he visits days before it goes up in flames in 1971. His guilt feelings indicate he feels responsible for the violence he recounts. The narrator returns to Breendonk at the end of the novel. "Yet again, [he] could not bring [himself] to pass even after long hesitation." He is paralyzed by fear. "The thought passed through [his] mind that the hair on [his] head might catch fire" (296). In the closing passage, the narrator finds a message left by a former internee, Max Steiner, who etched his name in the wall along with the date, 18 May, 1944. Sebald, who shared the same initials, MS, was born on that day. This coded reference, highlighted in the 2002 French translation, links Sebald's birth obliquely to the deaths of the Breendonk detainees. Sebald says he would not have been born without the rise of the National Socialist party in Germany. "Had Hitler turned up a couple of years later, [his mother] would have probably followed her brothers and sisters to New York and [Sebald] would probably never have been born, certainly not in that size, shape or form" (Sebald [1998] 22). His uncles and aunts emigrated during the Great Depression, but his mother was not old enough to go before the Fascists took over (Sebald [1998] 22).

The determination to listen to testimony occurs despite its elusiveness. Like *Austerlitz*, whose plot is driven by the protagonist's drive to retrace his parents' disappearance, *Dora Bruder* opens with Dora pleading to be heard. How to bear witness and how to testify are urgent questions outlined by Caruth and taken up by Sebald and Modiano. If Sebald represents trauma as immune to closure, Luckhurst is

skeptical of any claim that *Austerlitz*, when read in conjunction with theorists such as Caruth, suggests that trauma narratives do have healing power, if not for survivors directly then for readers and listeners, with an indirect comfort to narrators. Austerlitz remains haunted by his memories. But while Sebald leaves the protagonist impaired by his trauma, the listener changes in the course of the narrative. Moreover, while Sebald claiming that trauma is irreversible may be disconcerting, as Katie Fry says in her essay in *Mosaic*, "Lost Time and the Heterotopic Image in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*" (2018), Sebald invites readers to follow their desire to reverse this nihilistic claim, resulting in a more redemptive reading of the text (140). Modiano bears witness to Dora Bruder, and Sebald to his characters. Their readers bear witness too. Modiano activates and enlarges his readers' empathic witnessing by telling them Dora's story. Modiano was seized by Dora's voice crying out to him through the notice in *Paris-Soir*. By reproducing that notice for his readers, he hopes to draw them in to the act of witnessing, so that the notice represents not only her disappearance but also the narrator's witnessing. He extends that witnessing and awakened sensitivity to the suffering of thousands of others like her. Modiano combines biographical material with imagination to create visceral works of fiction. In a passage from *Dora Bruder,* the narrator wishes to ask his father about his arrest. "I was tempted to ask him if he'd been thinking of that time he was taken away," when he was carted off by the Jewish Affairs police and escaped deportation. The son is too afraid to ask; instead, "[they] set off home side by side, in silence … [they] didn't exchange a single word, not even when [they] parted on the stairs" (56-59). The chilling passage creates an emotional intensity for the novel's readers, pulling them into Modiano's reparative project.

These contemporary writers are indebted to earlier artistic representations of witnessing the Holocaust. Sebald and Modiano share an affinity for the filmography of Alain Resnais. The end of Resnais's classic 1955 Holocaust film, *Nuit et Brouillard*, makes this request of its viewers: "Nous [. . .] qui ne pensons pas à regarder autour de nous, et qui n'entendons pas qu'on crie sans fin" (Resnais). In a similar passage from *Dora Bruder*, the narrator urges his readers to join him in the act of reparation: "There remain, in the archives, hundreds and hundreds of letters," he says. "Now we can read them" (69). The letters, excerpts of which Modiano produces throughout the second half of the novel, were written by family members who've lost someone and are desperately looking for them, at the risk of being discovered themselves. By using the pronoun "we," Modiano is asking his readers to join him and answer the call for help from others like Dora: "It is we, who were not even born at the time, who are the recipients and guardians" (70). Guardianship entails responsibility. To be a recipient also implies an obligation, at the minimum, to acknowledge the person whose gift or message you are receiving.

Sebald also invokes Resnais: Austerlitz states that Resnais's 1956 short film, *Toute la mémoire du monde*, about the inner workings of the French national library and the fragility of human memory, assumed "monstrous and fantastic dimensions" in his imagination (261). The monstrous gap between history and memory can also be found in Sebald's photographs, which leave readers of *Austerlitz* in a curious state. As Samuel Pane states in his *Mosaic* essay, "Trauma Obscura: Photographic Media in W.G. Sebald's Austerlitz" (2005): "Sebaldian photographs disturb. They manifest the disparity between the catastrophic events of history and the ability of human memory and archival

technology to accurately recall them" (38). Sebald uses his skill as a photographer to destabilize his readers and get them asking questions about what is true and what isn't. After Austerlitz fails to find any trace of his father, who was last seen in Paris, he comes across a "photograph showing the room filled with open shelves up to the ceiling where the files on the prisoners in the little fortress of Terezín, as it is called, are kept today" (283). Sebald reproduces a double-page spread of the photograph described by the narrator. The oversized image emphasizes the vastness of the files in the Terezín room filled with open shelves. It depicts files from floor to ceiling in a large room occupied by nothing but a desk and chair, both tiny by comparison. The impression is one of historical memory on a much larger scale than what could ever be hoped to be worked through by any one person.

Sebald maps out for readers not only a trauma narrative, but a listener's response to it, and this response asks the novel's readers to imagine what a fitting conclusion to an act of witnessing trauma might look like. In Figlio's terms, readers might ask what work might be needed to achieve "an appropriate relationship to the past" (152). In Sebaldian fictions, the narrator's anonymity foregrounds his primary narrative function: to listen and bear witness. Throughout Sebald's four major prose works—as Ben Hutchinson says in his essay for the *Journal of European Studies*, "The Shadow of Resistance: W.G. Sebald and the Frankfurt School" (2011) —the narrator "is a listener and chronicler" (279). The narrator's listening makes possible Austerlitz's reparative storytelling. Toward the beginning of the novel, in a passage at the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel, where the two meet for the first time in decades, Austerlitz tells the narrator "he must find someone to whom he could relate his own story, a story he had learned only in the last few years

and for which he needed the kind of listener I had once been" in their previous meetings (*Austerlitz* 43). It's "the narrator's restless urge to gather and tell" Sebald's grim stories that makes them "bearable and beautiful," says Dennis Drabelle in his 1996 review of *The Emigrants* for *The Washington Post,* "What They Left Behind" (6).

Sebald's characters also invite readers to take more responsibility for historical suffering. Austerlitz's father, Maximilian, states that he did not "in any way believe that the German people had been driven into their misfortune; rather, in his view, they had entirely re-created themselves in this perverse form." He recalled the widespread availability of such delicacies as raspberry-colored swastikas. "At the sight of these Nazi treats, Maximilian had said, he suddenly realized that the Germans had wholly reorganized their production lines, from heavy industry down to the manufacturing of items such as these vulgar sweets, not because they had been ordered to do so but *each of his own accord, out of enthusiasm for the national resurgence*" (167-168; emphasis mine). Readers might be tempted to assign Maximilian's views to Sebald, who went by Max and whose full middle name was Maximilian. Sebald creates Austerlitz and names his father Max. The novel is about a narrator, a stand in for Sebald, listening to Austerlitz's search for his father, also a stand in for Max Sebald. One might conclude that Sebald is using fiction to do the work of reparation and to search for his true self. Similarly, Modiano is using the intermediary of his narrator to search for a character, Dora, with whom he identifies, sharing experiences with her and feeling as if he knew her. Modiano's narrator's search for Dora is also a work of reparation and a search for his true self.

Readers who care about these characters may come to care about the historical suffering they help to portray. Identification is at the core of what motivates the narrators to listen to the protagonists in *Dora Bruder* and *Austerlitz*. Modiano's narrator says that he knows how Dora Bruder felt and why she ran away; he did the same thing when he was her age: "It was probably one of the few times in my life when I was truly myself" (64). Both narratives exercise readers' capacity for identification: Readers identify with Sebald's narrator, who identifies with Austerlitz, just as Modiano's narrator identifies with Dora. She is fully realized: Readers know what she wore, where she went to school, what metro stop she took. And readers experience her through a narrator who came to realize he shared similar experiences with her, making him feel a stronger connection. The way the novel is structured, Modiano first activates and enlarges his readers' internal capacity for identification by telling Dora's story. He follows this by extending his readers' attention and sympathy to the suffering of others like Dora. The amount of suffering caused by the Holocaust is impossible to imagine. But these narratives help readers begin to identify with some of its victims. Sebald's novel follows a similar structure, starting with a relatable character before expanding to records of collective suffering.

Sebald's unique texts are marked by lyrical digressions and punctuated by unqualified images. Sebald uses images and a lyrical style to create an affect of dissociation for the reader. The lyrical style and the stream of consciousness form, including paragraphs that often go on for more than 10 pages, represent the affect of trauma by lulling the reader into a sleepwalking haze. *Austerlitz* deals with developmental trauma and Sebald conceives of dissociation as an important part of that

trauma. According to Bessel Van der Kolk, "dissociation is the essence of trauma" (*The Body Keeps the Score* 66). The images intrude and overwhelm the reader's comprehension, while the writing style induces a sleepwalking trance, which is characteristic of dissociation. After a pivotal scene in which Austerlitz recovers dissociated memories, he feels newly alive and is propelled on his pilgrimage to recover his dissociated past. In *Austerlitz*, traumatic memories are dissociated—inaccessible and decontextualized like a photograph without a caption—yet they can be recovered and understood under special conditions, through what Van der Kolk calls state-dependent retrieval.

The representation of traumatic memories as inaccessible and too overwhelming to be comprehended by a linear narrative fits the concept of dissociation in *Austerlitz*. "Clearly, Sebald shares the observation that the traumatic event causes a rupture or block, that it dislocates the modes and boundaries of our understanding" (Wilms 182). In *Austerlitz*, Sebald is "explicitly embracing the organizing notion of traumatic dissociation and recovered memory" (Luckhurst 87). Traumatic memories are not encoded like ordinary memories, in a verbal linear narrative that is integrated into the survivor's life story (Herman). There is a "failure to organize what happens on a linguistic level" (Trauma, Neuroscience, and the Etiology of Hysteria 245). "[Traumatic memories] are dissociated: The different sensations that entered the brain at the time of the trauma are not properly assembled into a story, a piece of autobiography" (*The Body Keeps the Score* 194). In a polemic essay on the Allies' bombing raids over Germany, Sebald "echoes Caruth's notion of trauma"—that survivors "could not have access to their experiences and that they could not be integrated into narrative memory, because a

collapse of witnessing had taken place" (Long and Whitehead 14). In *The Rings of Saturn*, which is, like *Austerlitz,* a blend of fiction, autobiography, and travelogue, Sebald echoes this notion of trauma as something that "defeats our powers of comprehension" (78). The experience is too painful for the mind to comprehend; as Caruth says, trauma "scrambles the brain's function, and the victim is unable to process the experience in a normal way" (qtd. in Pederson 335). Traumatic memories are not worked through in the usual way but they do not disappear completely: "These unintegrable memories endure as a split-off part" (Laub and Auerhahn 294). The memories, which may not be apprehended by the conscious mind and recorded verbally, still register as images and other sensory inputs: "The videographer leaves, but the tape keeps running" (Pederson 335). These recordings are stored separately from and not associated with normal memories, although according to Freud they may associate with one another (qtd. in Luckhurst 46). Sebald uses pictures to represent this fragmentation and collapse of witnessing in *Austerlitz.* "The overwhelming experience is split off and fragmented, so that the emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical sensations related to the trauma take on a life of their own" (*The Body Keeps the Score* 66).

Sebald uses unqualified images in *Austerlitz* to create an affect of dissociation: His photographs intrude on the text like flashbacks, challenging the reader's ability to comprehend them and place them within the context of the story. The sensory fragments of memory intrude into the present (*The Body Keeps the Score* 67). Photography works like traumatic memory. Similar to the imprinting on the mind of trauma, Ulrich Baer says, photography provides a "mechanically recorded instant that was not necessarily registered by the subject's own consciousness" (qtd. in Duttlinger 160). Like

photographs, dissociated memories "persist for a long time with astonishing freshness" as they are "denied the normal wearing-away process" (Trauma, Neuroscience, and the Etiology of Hysteria 238). Dissociated memories remain "astonishingly intact," according to Freud (qtd. in Luckhurst 8). The images are disconnected from and disruptive of the narrative, as they do not come with captions and are not given formal introductions but rather appear out of nowhere and without explanation.

In their disruptiveness, the pictures help create the affect of trauma in the reader, producing a shock that breaks the sleepwalking trance of the digressiveness, the lyricism, and the stream of consciousness. As Janet says, "Traumatic memories are preserved in an abnormal state, set apart from ordinary consciousness" (qtd. in Herman 34). And the images, like dissociated memory, elude comprehension and integration into the life story. Dissociation keeps the traumatic experience walled off from ordinary consciousness, preventing the integration necessary for healing (Herman 45). The photographs with which Austerlitz engages remain, despite detailed scrutiny, fragmentary, decontextualized, and opaque (Duttlinger 157). "Hard as I tried both that evening and later, I could not recollect myself … I have studied the photograph many times since … I examined every detail under a magnifying glass without once finding the slightest clue" (*Austerlitz* 184).

The photographs create an affect of inaccessibility and failure to integrate: "The individual has an image, sensation, or isolated thought, but does not know with what it is connected, what it means, or what to do with it" (Laub and Auerhahn 291). Sebald recreates in the reader the affect of a survivor who struggles to make sense of his

dissociated memories when they return as intrusions or flashbacks: "The memory of his parents, especially of his mother, remains elusive. It is in this context that photography gains its full significance as a substitute for experiences that are inaccessible to conscious memory" (Duttlinger 161). Nor could his memories be recalled by sheer will: "Sometimes it seemed as if the veil would part … but as soon as I tried to hold one of these fragments, or get it into better focus, as it were, it disappeared into the emptiness" (*Austerlitz* 219). The images represent the disruption, intrusion, and inaccessibility of dissociated memories.

The narrator reconstructs the story of Austerlitz, using the hundreds of photographs that Austerlitz entrusted him with, including photos of his mother. Austerlitz also left the keys to his London home to the narrator, inviting him to come stay there and study more photographs. The narrator followed Austerlitz's invitation, continuing to study the photographs and passing them on to his readers. The photos urge viewers to continue to search for the past. Under this reading—elegantly performed by Katja Garloff in "The Task of the Narrator: Moments of Symbolic Investiture in W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz" (2006)—the novel was composed after Austerlitz died and the narrator visited his home and studied the photographs. Austerlitz routinely spent hours looking at old photographs:

> Austerlitz told [the narrator] that he sometimes sat there for hours, laying out these photographs or others from his collection … pushing the pictures back and forth and over each other, arranging them … until he felt exhausted by the constant effort of thinking and remembering and had to rest on the ottoman. I often lie here until late in the evening, feeling time roll back, said Austerlitz. (*Austerlitz* 119)

The unnamable quality or *punctum* of Sebald's photographs require readers to think. In homage to Roland Barthes, Sebald has one of his narrators say, "And so they are ever returning to us, the dead" (*The Emigrants* 23). Barthes uses the phrase "the return of the dead" in *Camera Lucida: Reflections of photography* (2010) to mean "that terrible thing which is there in every photograph" (9).

And photographs in Sebald are also a metaphor for memory's potential return in the present. At a time when his memories still elude him, Austerlitz describes his passion for photography, one he shared with Sebald, saying he was always entranced "by the moment when the shadows of reality, 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 to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long" (*Austerlitz* 77). By employing the Proustian metaphor of memory as photography—Sebald was re-reading Proust as he wrote *Austerlitz* (Loquai 213; cited in Fry)—Sebald suggests the past could return to the present. Proust's narrator likens the past to "a photographic darkroom encumbered with innumerable negatives which remain useless because the intellect has not developed them" (*Time Regained* 299). The hope is that the mind might be capable of rescuing these negatives from uselessness. This recovery occurs when Austerlitz, after suffering a complete loss of memory, states, "Only when I developed the photographs [he had taken on a recent trip] . . . was I able, with their aid and guided by Marie's patient questioning, to reconstruct my buried experiences" (*Austerlitz* 268). Thanks to the photographic memories, Austerlitz recovers his story. Sebald also shares with Proust the idea that material objects trigger a sensation of a past experience, which often happens to Austerlitz. Proust's narrator believes inanimate objects may contain the

spirits of his dear departed, and that one day, walking by a tree, "elles [the spirits] tressaillent, nous appellent" (*A la Recherche du temps perdu* 58). As soon as he recognizes that the spirit is speaking to him, the spirit is free from its bondage to that material object. Proust uses the word "enchantement" meaning spell: "Et sitôt que nous les avons reconnues, l'enchantement est brisé." The spell is broken and the dead is liberated from being enslaved in this object. "Delivrées par nous, elles ont vaincu la mort et reviennent vivre avec nous" (*A la Recherche du temps perdu* 58). The ability of the listener to set free those voices calling out is consistent with the plea made by Modiano, echoing Resnais, entrusting readers with a responsibility to listen to this testimony. Complementing this reading is the psychoanalytic explanation of the return of dissociated memory. Patients need to be brought back to "the state in which the memory was first laid down" for the dissociated memory to be integrated, as Van der Kolk says, because traumatic memories are state-dependent (Trauma, Neuroscience, and the Etiology of Hysteria 246).

Shifting the Cultural Discourse

Modiano and Sebald document a moment in the history of Nazi violence at the same time that they also form part of that history and shape that history. *Austerlitz* brought fragments of historical memory into the mainstream and spurred the production of further accounts of Parisian responsibility, as rigorous research by James Cowan showed in a two-part *Monatshefte* essay, "W. G. Sebald's 'Austerlitz' and the Great Library: History, Fiction, Memory" (2010). These cultural products—a radio program, exhibits, films, lectures, articles, and books—perform an important political task in a progressive society. In a passage from *Austerlitz*, the librarian Henri Lemoine relates to Austerlitz a history that was little known at the time of the novel's publication, and virtually unknown at the time Lemoine was supposed to have reported it, in fall 1997. Lemoine tells Austerlitz that the French national library is on the site of a former hangar where Germans stored goods pillaged from Parisian Jewish households. "I believe they cleared some forty thousand apartments at that time, said Lemoine" (*Austerlitz* 288). Lemoine's story about the location of the library, which opened in December 1996, was new not only to Austerlitz but to many of the novel's readers as well. Lemoine's story matches earlier accounts in a journal, a newspaper, and a magazine: "La Bibliothèque François Mitterrand a l'ombre d'un camp nazi" by Nicolas Weill in *Le Monde;* "Die Türme des Schweigens" by Alexander Smoltczyk in *ZeitMagazin*; and "Austerlitz—Lévitan—Bassano: trois camps annexes de Drancy, trois camps oubliés" by Lucien Steinberg in *Le Monde juif* (all cited in Cowan). The same passage from *Austerlitz* brought a second, related piece of historical memory to the surface: the pillaging of Jewish apartments in Paris. This story entered the official French record only in 2000,

when a national working group presented a report, “Le pillage des appartements et son indemnisation.” Cowan cites evidence supporting Lemoine’s account of the looting of household goods from Jewish apartments. The stolen goods were sorted by Jewish camp internees before being sent to Germany.

But even as these novels contribute to public consciousness of a historical event, they remain literature rather than works of history or even nonfiction. An early account of Parisian camps, “Les Camps de Juifs à Paris,” including testimony from internees, appeared in 1947 but did not become a part of the public consciousness (cited in Cowan). Two earlier sources mentioned the household pillaging and the camps: Raul Hilberg’s 1961 study of the Holocaust, *The Destruction of the European Jews,* which appeared in French in 1988, and Lynn H. Nicholas’s 1995 history, *The Rape of Europa*. But the episode was not a part of the public consciousness before the publication of *Austerlitz*. Sebald’s writing did something that historians could not do. “There are many forms of writing,” Sebald said. “Only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship” (*Campo Santo* 205). Sebald said metaphor enables readers to feel empathy for historical suffering (Wildes Denken 133).

Sebald dramatizes the pillaging that took place in Jewish homes. In a passage set in Prague, Austerlitz’s mother, Agáta Austerlizová, was ordered to “take her wireless, her gramophone and the records she loved so much, her binoculars and opera glasses, musical instrument, jewelry, furs, and the clothes Maximilian [her husband and Austerlitz’s father] had left behind to the so-called Compulsory Collection Center”

(*Austerlitz* 176). The extent of the elimination sought by the Nazis, down to the glasses and instruments, is breath-taking. When new internees were brought in, they had their bags searched and had to hand over money, watches, and other valuables. "A great mound of silver cutlery lay on a table, along with fox furs and Persian lamb capes" (*Austerlitz* 179). Vera told Austerlitz what happened there after Agáta was forced to leave her apartment:

> A troop of very shady characters arrived to clear away everything that had been left behind, the furniture, the lamps and candelabra, the carpets and curtains, the books and musical scores, the clothes from the wardrobes and drawers, the bed linen, pillows, eiderdowns, blankets, china and kitchen utensils, the pot plants and umbrellas, even the bottled pears and cherries which had been standing forgotten in the cellar for years, and the remaining potatoes. They took everything, down to the last spoon, off to one of the over fifty depots, where these abandoned objects were itemized separately with that thoroughness peculiar to the Germans, were valued, then washed, cleaned or mended as necessary, and finally stored, row upon row, on specially made shelves. (*Austerlitz* 180)

These details, although related by the fictional character Vera, are based on archival material from Sebald's research, who visited libraries throughout Europe. Sebald's novels include train tickets and other memorabilia that document his research. Details help the novel's readers imaginatively create a caring relationship with the characters. Sebald and Modiano's characters are imaginary, but their experiences closely match those recorded first-hand. Tuning into their readers' powers of identification and imagination, these writers engage readers in acts of reparation that bring the past into the present. Emotional immediacy attracts readers through these authors' use of compelling details. *Austerlitz* goes into greater detail in its portrayal of the pillaging of Jewish homes in Prague than *Dora Bruder* does in its portrayal of the fate of deported Jews in Paris. One reason for

this difference could be that Sebald had greater sources available to him while researching the book.

Publication of these novels coincided with an important reckoning with national memory: The first time that a French president publicly acknowledged guilt over the Holocaust. President Jacques Chirac officially recognized France's responsibility for the deportation of Jews during the Occupation in 1995; Modiano's novel, *Dora Bruder,* written from 1996 to 1997, amplifies that act of reparation. It spells out some of the ways in which French police helped to identify and round up Jews. Modiano's narrator indicates thousands of "police files designed to facilitate the roundups" (*Dora Bruder* 19). In France in the 1990s, new information about the Occupation was surfacing after decades of silence. A file of some 150,000 names and addresses compiled during the Occupation and used by Parisian police to round up Jews was discovered in 1991. In 1993, the head of French police during the peak years of deportation, 1942-1943, René Bousquet, was murdered while awaiting trial. In 1994, Paul Touvier, an intelligence officer in the pro-Nazi paramilitary Vichy police force, the Milice, was put on trial for crimes against humanity. When Modiano writes *Dora Bruder*, and later wins the Nobel prize, he is fanning the flames of reparation, turning isolated news stories into a cultural moment.

In a similar way, Sebald began writing *Austerlitz* in 1997, the year that *Dora Bruder* was published in France (Sven Meyer, vii). Sebald's novel, published in Germany in 2001, portrayed the little-known pillaging of Jewish homes and imprisoning of Jews in camps in Paris. The novel's French translation preceded an authoritative history,

commissioned by former camp internees: *Des camps dans Paris: Austerlitz, Levitan, Bassano, juillet 1943 — aout 1944* (2003). Its co-authors, Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Sarah Gensburger, credited Sebald's novel for introducing the camps to public consciousness (290). But these novels also were published at a time when there was a substantial increase in rightwing violence in re-unified Germany as well as elsewhere in Europe. Historians clashed in Sebald's Germany as well as in Modiano's France. These fairly public debates took place in the media and included disagreements over how Nazism fit in a larger historical scale along with other forms of fascism and totalitarianism. In France, for example, *Le Livre noir du communisme* (1997) created a splash similar to that of the German "Historikerstreit." In the introduction, for example, the collection of essays established a comparison between Communism and Nazism, likening the deaths caused by starvation under communist agrarian planning to deaths that occurred in concentration camps.

In many parts of the world, stories were being told that were depressing and found resistance from deniers. Because of the "craving for success without memory," there was no room in a future of economic success for depressive memory; during the Cold War, the two Germanies projected responsibility for what happened on each other (Figlio 169). Those who needed a narrative of renewal and uplift had little use for the reparative work of confronting the truth about the Holocaust. According to Jeffrey Herf in *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanies* (1997), it was "a tragedy without redemption. It did not fit into any optimistic theory of history or post-war policy of reconstruction ... those who focused only on a bright future saw no place for an evil past" (Herf 392; cited in Figlio 168). In both Germanies, national identities were formed

around the myth that the people were innocent at the hands of the Nazis, according to Mary Fulbrook's 1999 history, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Fulbrook 113-114; cited in Figlio 169). This view is skewered by Sebald's character Maximilian when he critiques the manufacturing of bonbons in the shape of swastikas, illustrating his point that the German people willingly went along.

As works of world literature, both of these novels were translated into English and celebrated in the Anglophone press. They are also cultural products of a historical juncture in which genocide is experiencing a renewal in the sphere of current events. From Rwanda to the former Yugoslavia, ethnic cleansing was on the rise in the 1990s. War criminals from countries such as Serbia and Cambodia were being tried at the Hague. In this context of renewed attention to suffering, historians found controversy in Germany and in France. Members of ethnic groups that were targeted for genocide, such as the Armenian exiles living in California, called for public recognition of the atrocities committed against their people. Also, in the United States, there were increasing calls for reparations for the harms done to American Indians and African Americans.

At a time when the international order was focused on crimes against humanity committed by third world countries, these novels point to the unresolved atrocities committed in the first world. Going along with this reckoning within countries with leadership roles on the world stage, the United States has since moved toward removing Andrew Jackson, a president known for his role in the trail of tears and the suffering his presidency caused American Indians, from the twenty-dollar bill, replacing him with Harriet Tubman. There've also been widespread protests against monuments that honor

historical figures whose symbolism no longer sits well with contemporary social values, for example confederate monuments in some cities in the Southern United States. Now some U.S. state legislatures, such as New Jersey, Atlanta, and Florida, are considering measures that would make reparations for specific atrocities. In Florida, for example, lawmakers in September 2019 introduced a bill to award millions of dollars to the descendants of the 1920 massacre at Ocoee. Meanwhile, in places from the newly reconciled Germany to post-Apartheid South Africa and countries newly independent from the Soviet Union, there are discussions about what happened and stayed secret, often since the end of World War II.

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