

An Analysis of How History is Presented in W.G. Sebald's Novel *Austerlitz*

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When one says that something is a historical event, one is saying that it is important and therefore worthy to be included in history. But what happens to all of the events that are deemed unworthy of such consideration? Do they lie outside history? Or is it our conception of history that is to blame? Author W.G. Sebald deeply considers these questions in his tragic novel *Austerlitz*. Throughout the novel, it is reiterated by different characters that humanity's conventional conception of history – that it is a linear progression of events that can be objectively known – is incorrect, and that history is rather an accumulation of interpretations and subjective experiences. By means of a stylistic choice, Sebald himself also demonstrates how unreliable our conception of history can be by regularly projecting the false history of his characters onto the photographs of real people, muddling the line between fiction and historical fact. Furthermore, while characters in the novel believe that they can obtain the knowledge of what happened to them and their relatives in the past, the circumstances that they are left with at the end of the novel say otherwise. In *Austerlitz*, Sebald shows how the truths regarding the past often remain beyond our grasp.

Austerlitz focuses on the history of its main character, Jacques Austerlitz, as told by him and as passed on through the perspective of an unnamed and seemingly translucent narrator. During one of his many self-reflective conversations with the novel's narrator, Austerlitz recalls the influence that a teacher had on him in his youth. The teacher had explained to Austerlitz the likely origin of his name during a history lesson about the Battle of Austerlitz. In that lesson, the teacher delves into the question

of whether or not there is accuracy in our conception of history. Regarding the Battle of Austerlitz, the teacher states that “it would take an endless length of time to describe the events of such a day properly” and that “[a]ll of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us” (71). Essentially, the teacher argues that our conception of what occurred in the past is heavily guided by the popular interpretations of the present, and that these popular interpretations are not entirely accurate. Their lack of accuracy is due to the fact that they could not possibly translate all of the subjective experiences of what it felt like to exist in that moment; because of this, we can only ever have a dim, altered sense of what took place in the past, instead of a realistic one. The narrator also addresses this notion that subjective experiences live frail and often short lives: “How little we can hold in the mind,” he thinks to himself, “how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on” (24). The narrator thus states that some histories that people create with “places and objects” will perish along with the people who held them. In other words, there is an inevitable loss of subjective experiences, and these lost experiences are chunks of our history. This belief that we have a skewed sense of our past, one which can never be rectified, is echoed by Sebald’s use of photographs in the novel.

In the modern era, perhaps the most popular way to make an experience tangible and thereby more enduring is to take a photograph of it. However, photographs, like

memories and history in general, are vulnerable to misinterpretation. Sebald acknowledges and emphasizes this vulnerability throughout his novel by taking actual photographs of people from the past and weaving them into the fictional past of his novel. One such photograph is of a young Austerlitz with his rugger team. Austerlitz describes the photograph while talking to the narrator about a good friend that he had made during his time spent at private school. "From the first day," Austerlitz says, "when he asked me for one of the new photographs of the rugger team where I featured to the extreme right of the front row, I realized that Gerald felt as isolated as I did" (74-75). Sebald takes this photograph, which out of its original context would otherwise appear to be simply a group of young, mostly happy rugger players, and heavily colors it with meaning, altering the reader's interpretation of it. The reader is forced to interpret it as a snapshot of a very lonely period in the life of the man whom the reader believes to be Austerlitz. However, this interpretation is very likely to be far from the reality this photograph is capturing. By constantly forcing his reader to form an insufficient perspective on photographs of the past, Sebald shows how easy it is to lose the reality of what took place in the past. While we may attempt to save the truths of our past through photographs or other means, Sebald expresses how this attempt will ultimately be futile through his main character Austerlitz.

The main focus of the novel is Austerlitz's self-imposed quest to unearth truths regarding his parents and experiences he had in the past. During moments throughout the novel it seems as though he will succeed; however, at the end of the novel, Austerlitz is left empty-handed and still searching. Some of Austerlitz's last words to the narrator are hopeful, but they seem to predict the outcome of his search. "I am going to continue looking for my father," Austerlitz says, "and for Marie de Verneuil as well" (292). Since

Austerlitz's story ends with him continuing on with his search, it suggests that any effort to obtain the truths of the past will, in the end, remain unsatisfied. Austerlitz's failure to discover the truth about what happened to his parents is echoed during the last moments that the reader has with the narrator, in which the narrator starts reading a book that was given to him by Austerlitz the day they met. The book is a personal account written by Dan Jacobson who, like Austerlitz, is searching for a distant relative but who, also like Austerlitz, does not succeed. "[I]t was truly terrifying," the man in the book writes regarding his failed search, "to realize that there was no transition, only this dividing line, with ordinary life on one side and its unimaginable opposite on the other. The chasm into which no ray of light could penetrate," the narrator reflects, "was Jacobson's image of the vanished past of his family and his people" (297). As the narrator acknowledges, Jacobson thus states that if there is no transition between life and death but only a dividing line, then there is no real bridge between what was and what is. The uncanny resemblance between Austerlitz's failed search and the failed search of this book's author supports the idea that what has passed away can never be fully resurrected by the people who exist in the present. Furthermore, the last encounter between the narrator and Austerlitz curiously takes place in a graveyard, as if hinting at the inevitable loss that we all must experience while alive, and how we are all destined to become a part of humanity's lost history.

Sebald struggles to answer the following questions: can the moments of the past truly be preserved by the people in the present? And if not, what happens to those moments? Is something still a part of history if it is not remembered? How should we define history? The novel refutes the idea that history is a chain of events, and asserts that instead history is a collection of subjective experiences, and that not all of these

experiences will be remembered correctly, if at all. As the photographs in the novel demonstrate, due to our lack of knowledge regarding the subjective experiences felt in the past, we will inevitably try to imbue the past with our own false meaning. Our inability to hold onto all of the subjective experiences of the past is emphasized by the failed attempts of Austerlitz and Jacobson to rekindle parts of their past. *Austerlitz* illustrates how some experiences will drift forever into the past, forever unknown by anyone in the present or future, and that these experiences, whether we're conscious of them or not, will remain a part of our history.

Works Cited

Sebald, Winfried Georg. *Austerlitz*. New York: Modern Library, 2011. Print.