



## Architectures of a fragmented memory: imprisonment and liberation in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

Camila Marchesan Cargnelutti\* and Anselmo Peres Alós

Programa de Pós-graduação em Letras, Centro de Educação, Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, Avenida Roraima, 1000, Camobi, 97105-900, Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. \*Author for correspondence. E-mail: [camila.m.cargnelutti@gmail.com](mailto:camila.m.cargnelutti@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT.** *Austerlitz* (2001), written by the German author Sebald, presents a fragmented narrative with various levels of relations and symbolic plans outlined by the story of Jacques Austerlitz. This form of literary construction is in perfect harmony with the fragmentation of the past and the oblivion that shape Austerlitz. As the character's investigations and self-discovery process advance, we find that he was one of the Jewish children brought to London by the Kindertransports on the eve of World War II. In this study, we investigate a kind of dividing line in Austerlitz's story, establishing itself as an 'in-between' that evokes two considerably distinct moments of the narrative. These moments sometimes evoke imprisonment and relate to imprisoned memories, and sometimes evoke liberation and relate to freed memory. First, we track images and descriptions that refer to imprisonment when Austerlitz feels trapped, isolated, without past or memories. Subsequently, we map descriptions of this kind of liberation that begins when the character starts to redraw his past, in a process of self-discovery and reconstruction of his story and his identity. In this work, both Austerlitz and Sebald evoke the need to remember the traumatic past and witness it, despite all the pain and incomprehension while facing it.

**Keywords:** holocaust, trauma, World War II, Kindertransports, memory.

### Arquiteturas de uma memória fragmentada: confinamento e libertação em *Austerlitz*, de W. G. Sebald

**RESUMO.** *Austerlitz* (2001), do escritor alemão Sebald, apresenta uma narrativa fragmentada, com vários níveis de relações e planos simbólicos, delineada a partir da história de Jacques Austerlitz. Essa forma de construção literária constitui-se em perfeita harmonia para abordar a fragmentação do passado e a 'desmemória' que configuram Austerlitz. Conforme avançam as investigações e o processo de autodescoberta do personagem, descobriremos que ele era uma das crianças judias levadas para Londres por meio dos Kindertransports às vésperas da II Guerra Mundial. Neste estudo, investigamos uma espécie de linha divisória na história de Austerlitz, constituindo-se como um 'entrelugar', que evoca dois momentos consideravelmente distintos na narrativa. Esses momentos ora evocam o confinamento e relacionam-se às memórias confinadas, ora evocam a libertação e relacionam-se às memórias libertas. Primeiramente, rastreamos imagens e descrições que remetem ao confinamento, quando Austerlitz sente-se preso, isolado, sem passado e sem memórias. Posteriormente, mapeamos descrições dessa espécie de libertação que tem início quando o personagem começa a redesenhar seu passado, em um processo de autodescoberta e de reconstrução de sua história e de sua identidade. Nessa obra, tanto Austerlitz quanto Sebald evocam a necessidade de rememorar o passado traumático e, apesar da dor e da incompreensão diante dele, testemunhá-lo.

**Palavras-chave:** holocausto, trauma, II Guerra Mundial, Kindertransports, memória.

### Introduction

First published in 2001, *Austerlitz*, by W. G. Sebald, can be regarded as an example of how the author, being German and living in a post-war period in which this is a core issue, assimilates

Auschwitz and the ethical challenge of post-Auschwitz writing. Raising questions on the theme and bravely facing the consequences of the questions he makes, the answers to which the author comes leads to a writing in which, though Auschwitz is not mentioned, its presence is always perceptible in an

oblique manner through its indirect story. The omnipresence of the memory of concentration and extermination camps – particularly of Auschwitz – in Sebald's writing occurs in spite of oblivion policies historically perpetuated in post-dictatorship or post-war periods that, added to the difficulty and oftentimes to the impossibility for the survivor to narrate traumatic memories and experiences (BENJAMIN, 1993), result in silence and erasure, whether express or not, of history.

In *Austerlitz*, we are before a fragmented narrative with several levels of relations, symbolic plans and continuous suggestions flowing inside the text, which often go beyond the literary work itself, outlined from some kind of central common thread represented by Jacques Austerlitz's story. The latter, however, is fragmented as well, and the character seeks, through tiny pieces of memories, to rebuild his origins and memories he judges lost. Sebald constructs a fragmented text marked by constant remembrances of the past, with narrative voices interspersed and incorporated with the report that the narrator does on the stories told by Austerlitz to him, resulting in a kind of 'mise en abyme'. This literary formula built in *Austerlitz* is able and in perfect harmony to speak of the fragmentation of the past and of the 'dismemory' that constitutes this character, who can also be considered a second narrator.

Throughout Sebald's work, we will find, as Austerlitz's investigations and self-discovery process advance, that the character was one of the Jewish kids separated from their families and brought to England by means of Kindertransports on the eve of World War II. Austerlitz was given a new identity, had his name changed to Dafydd Elias, forgot his mother tongue, his personal objects were hidden and his memories were gradually imprisoned. Despite this process of deletion of his memories and origins, the images of something the character believes not to know start to emerge, and the journey of his memory reconstitution begins, oftentimes against his will, since the character nurtures for a long time a huge fear of revelations about his story, rejecting people's approach and refusing to study the 20<sup>th</sup> century history for instance.

This reconstitution path created by the author permeates several historical references inscribed in the objects and, above all, in architecture – Austerlitz's great obsession. In Sebald's work, the silenced past, the erased story and the imprisoned memories expand every time in Austerlitz's speech and naturally appear in a variety of ways in the text, such as the descriptions of wars and battles, and

especially in historical descriptions of architecture. Austerlitz, architecture commentator and expert, more than describing buildings, objects and landscapes, sees in them some kind of reflection of his mood state and feels that somehow these spaces are marked and that fragments of his story are inscribed there.

In this way, it is possible to observe in the narrative a dividing line not so clear and constantly permeated by interferences, constituting somehow an 'in-between' that evokes two moments considerably distinct in the course of the text. These moments at times evoke the imprisonment and refer to imprisoned memories, at times evoke liberation and refer to freed memories. In the first moment, we seek to track images and descriptions that relate to imprisonment, when Austerlitz feels like a prisoner, limited, isolated, without a past and without memories, with a constant sensation that something is being hidden from him. In the second moment we seek to map, over the work, descriptions of this kind of liberation that begins when the character starts to discover himself, to draw his past and story again, in a process of reconstruction of his memories and of his identity, always developing, based on fragments of remembrances that were no longer present in him but in other spaces and places.

For this reason, Austerlitz's interest, which flirts with obsession, and the constant references in his speech when he tells his story to the narrator invariably turn to historical descriptions of architecture and of objects, because in them his memory and his story are inscribed, though not visible. Thus, we can say that this line that divides the text into moments that evoke imprisonment or liberation relate to Austerlitz's state of mind and memory, being the latter initially imprisoned and in a process of liberation along the narrative. These moments, in their turn, are evoked in the course of the work through descriptions of architecture, of train stations and of fortresses, of abandoned country houses and of psychiatric hospitals, of libraries and of concentration and extermination camps, of museums and of underwater cities, of cemeteries and of palaces. These descriptions, it is worth highlighting, are done not only by Austerlitz along his testimony, but by the narrator as well, who by no means leaves these encounters and long conversations/monologues with Austerlitz unscathed, "[...] the first teacher I could listen to since my time in primary school" (SEBALD, 2001, p. 36-37)<sup>1</sup>. We also stress that the present analysis

<sup>1</sup>The next references to Sebald's work bring only the page number, which refers to the version translated into Portuguese by José Marcos Macedo and edited by Companhia das Letras in 2008, used for the conduction of this research.

approaches specific aspects of this work by Sebald, seeking a more comprehensive understanding of these elements and of the work as a whole. Additionally, we dialogue with other questions that are part of *Austerlitz* and are the focus of this study, aiming at broadening the critical views on it, and, in a way, we intend to go through all the multiple possibilities of interpretation of a so fertile work.

### Locked doors and imprisoned memories

The references to a state of imprisonment, often physical – observed in the locked doors and windows of the house in which he was raised, for instance –, but also psychological, related to Austerlitz's imprisoned memory – meaning repressed, captive, frustrated and associated to traumatic events, – are many in the course of Sebald's text. Said imprisonment is assimilated by Austerlitz and is visible in his speeches through the descriptions of objects, of buildings, of train stations and of landscapes. In addition, by the way that these places present themselves to the character, Austerlitz sees in them, in a way, a reflection of his inner state, also limited, captive and isolated, with a constant sensation of incompleteness, of absence and of something being hidden – which he does not know exactly what may be.

In the first encounter between the narrator and Austerlitz that takes place at Antwerp Central Station, in Belgium, in 1967, Austerlitz lectures on the origins of the station at which they were, a personal desire of King Leopold in the time of the Belgian progress and ascension as a means to make the country internationally renowned. In this first meeting, Austerlitz also talks about the construction and the architecture of fortresses – one of his great interests – and, touched by the character's speech, the next day the narrator visits the Fort Breendonk, used as a concentration camp during World War II. In the speech of the narrator about this visit, we can see how the description of the fortress is associated to images of violence and imprisonment:

[...] a low-built concrete mass, rounded at all its outer edges and giving the gruesome impression of something hunched and misshapen: the broad back of a monster, I thought, risen from this Flemish soil [...] (SEBALD, 2001, p. 24).

Subsequently, the narrator defines the place as follows: “[...] the fort was a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence [...]” (SEBALD, 2001, p. 25), and one of the pictures of the inside of the fortress, where one can see a dark

corridor, barely lighted by sparse lamps, reinforces the sensation of imprisonment that the narrator feels and describes. Additionally to this sensation there is shortness of breath and a weight on him that he felt during the visit:

I also recollect now that as I went on down the tunnel which could be said to form the backbone of the fort, I had to resist the feeling taking root in my heart [...] a sense that with every forward step the air was growing thinner and the weight above me heavier (SEBALD, 2001, p. 28).

Moreover, the sensation of imprisonment is reiterated by the absence of any other visitor on that day and by the description that the narrator does of the casemate, which reminds one of a prison:

[...] this casemate, in which you sense immediately that there is a layer of concrete several meters thick overhead, is a narrow room with walls converging at a sharp angle on one side, rounded on the other (SEBALD, 2001, p. 28-29).

Although some times the narrator's speech brings descriptions that relate to imprisonment, Austerlitz's narrative holds the majority of these references. Descriptions of imprisonment can be also observed where the encounter between the narrator and Austerlitz takes place, by mere chance again, at the stairway of the Law Courts of Brussels. The encounter happens in this very same building, constructed in a hurry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which resulted, according to Austerlitz's explanations, in several

[...] corridors and stairways leading nowhere [and...] doorless rooms and halls where no one would ever set foot, empty spaces surrounded by walls and representing the innermost secret of all sanctioned authority (SEBALD, 2001, p. 33).

This place, whose gardens and inner patios have never been and will never be penetrated by the sunlight, and which is full of corridors that lead nowhere – or lead to nowhere –, evokes again the idea of imprisonment:

He had gone on and on down the corridors, said Austerlitz, sometimes turning left and then right again, then walking straight ahead and passing through many tall doorways [...] only to end in dark cul-de-sacs (SEBALD, 2001, p. 34).

In December 1996, after a separation of nearly two decades, the narrator and Austerlitz meet by chance at a bar in the Great Eastern Hotel, in London, where they resume the conversation as if it had never been interrupted. These unscheduled, totally casual meetings are important agents of the strangeness along the plot, an element of literary

However, the translation to English is the one made by Anthea Bell in 2001, according to the reference below.

works, capable of causing a break with the normal flow of our thinking. In *Austerlitz*, in a special way, the strange and disturbing matter is built, by the quality of Sebald's writing, as to create scenes and situations that do not immediately fit that which is fantastic or absurd. In the course of the work, there is also an intellectualized central consciousness and the author does not ever propose the absurd, as what can be seen in Kafka, for instance, causing us not to tune ourselves with this other level.

At this meeting in London, Austerlitz starts the narration of his story – unveiled in the few last years only – with his childhood, which was constantly disturbed by a sensation of incompleteness and failure to not knowing exactly who he was: “[...] since my childhood and youth, he finally began, looking at me again, I had never known who I really was” (SEBALD, 2001, p. 48). In spite of this present feeling, something inside of him has always prevented him from coming to the truth, from questioning and facing the consequences of the answers to his questions:

[...] an agency greater than or superior to my own capacity for thought [...] has always preserved me from my own secret, systematically preventing from drawing the obvious conclusions and embarking on the inquiries they would have suggested to me (SEBALD, 2001, p. 48).

Raised in a town called Bala, in Wales, by a Calvinist pastor and former missionary, Emyr Elias, and his wife of English family, Austerlitz – then named Dafydd Elias – lived isolated, feeling frequently like a prisoner in his own house, a sensation reinforced by the bedrooms that were eternally kept locked, by the windows and curtains that were always closed and by the dim light that filled even the unlocked rooms of the residence. Austerlitz's descriptions of that time clearly evoke this kind of imprisonment he experienced for all his childhood in the preacher's house:

I have never liked looking back at the time I spent in that 'unhappy' house, which stood 'in isolation' on a hill just outside the town and was much too large for two people and an only child. Several 'rooms' on the top floor 'were kept shut up', year in, year out. Even today I still sometimes dream that one of those locked doors opens and I step through it, into a friendlier, more familiar world. Several of the rooms that were not locked were unused too. Furnished sparsely with a bed or a chest of drawers, curtains drawn even during the day, they drowsed in a twilight that soon extinguished every sense of self-awareness in me. (SEBALD, 2001, p. 48, our italics).

In Austerlitz's narrative, we also notice the association of Pastor Elias's house to a captivity –

[...] all the worse to wake up early in the morning and have to face the knowledge, new every day, that I was not at home now but very far away, in some kind of captivity (SEBALD, 2001, p. 49).

In that place where he spent his childhood, the windows that were never open oppressed him especially, which reinforces the idea of imprisonment:

Only recently have I recalled how oppressed I felt, in all the time I spent with the Eliases, by the fact that they never opened a window, and perhaps that is why when I was out and about somewhere on a summer's day years later, and passed a house with all its windows thrown open, I felt an extraordinary sense of being carried away and out of myself. It was only a few days ago that, thinking over that experience of liberation, I remembered how one of the two windows of my bedroom was walled up on the inside while it remained unchanged on the outside, a circumstance which, as one is never both outside and inside a house at the same time, I did not register until I was thirteen or fourteen, although it must have been troubling me throughout my childhood in Bala (SEBALD, 2001, p. 49).

In addition to these situations in which Austerlitz's speech about that time suggests in a very clear manner this kind of imprisonment, in more subtle ways this relation can be noticed as well, as in the excerpt in which the character speaks of the permanent cold and silence of the house – “And just as cold reigned in the house in Bala, so did silence [...]” (SEBALD, 2001, p. 49) – and of the absence of affection in the relationship of the couple and the boy, a treatment that bordered indifference –

When she saw me standing in the doorway she rose and said it was nothing, she had only caught a cold, and as she went out she ran her fingers through my hair, the one time, as far as I remember, she ever did such a thing [...] Elias never told me anything else about his own life either before or afterwards (SEBALD, 2001, p. 50).

Austerlitz's speeches referring to imprisonment are also connected to his imprisoned memories and to the permanent sensation of incompleteness and of something being hidden from him, as it can be seen in the excerpts:

[...] it is fact that through all the years I spent at the manse in Bala I never shook off the feeling that something very obvious, very manifest in itself was hidden from me [...] sometimes it was as if I were in a dream and trying to perceive reality; then again I felt as if an invisible twin brother were walking beside me, the reverse of a shadow, so to speak (SEBALD, 2001, p. 58).

This lack of remembrances manifests, for instance, before his failure to react to the discovery of his real name and the disorientation that hits him when his memory does not associate it to any memory: Austerlitz cannot (or does not want to) remember his past, so great is the state of imprisonment in which his memory is.

As the plot develops, we see some moments when Austerlitz's imprisoned memory is awakened, especially through its relation with objects, places, buildings or even reads. Both his interest in architecture and his fascination with network structures and, particularly, with train tracks and stations come from drives whose origins he does not know:

But then again, it was also true that he was still obeying an impulse which he himself, to this day, did not really understand, but which was somehow linked his early fascination with the idea of a network such as that of the entire railway system (SEBALD, 2001, p. 37).

Although the character is not aware of the reason behind such impulses, we, as readers, know that these places relate to his past and to his story.

Still in the beginning of his architecture studies in France, by the end of the 1950s, Austerlitz used to visit train stations, like the Gare du Nord and the Gare de L'Est and

[...] he had quite often found himself in the grip of dangerous and entirely incomprehensible currents of emotion in the Parisian railway stations, which, he said, he regarded as places marked by both blissful and happiness and profound misfortune (SEBALD, 2001, p. 37-38).

Although the character does not remember exactly what happened or what his relationship with train stations and railways is, he feels something – emotion, distress, happiness, sadness, melancholy –, not necessarily with his mind but with his own body. Before being psychological his memory is physical. Austerlitz's imprisoned, repressed and erased memory awakes by fragmented and dispersed means, especially with constructions like stations, and triggers emotions and sensations that, before being remembered, are felt by the character's body. In this sense, Austerlitz, as a survivor of traumatic events, presents what can be understood as "body memory" or "a bodily-encapsulated experience":

To speak of memories of repression means, thus, to refer not only to a mental memory since ever associated to awareness, to the retrospective character of remembrances and the voluntary awareness of the event; it implies above all to refer to a body memory, which comprehends, in the

formulation by Aleida Assmann (1999), those remembrances that are not available to the free will and, for this reason, cannot be manipulated according to one's own will. The body emerges, then, as a metaphor, as the memory's repository of traumatic experiences. Trauma takes place when a remembrance stored by the body is totally disconnected from awareness: it would be a bodily-encapsulated experience, which manifests through symptoms and reduces itself to a recovering evocation (UMBACH, 2008, p. 18).

Along Austerlitz's narrative, we find again descriptions that suggest states of imprisonment. One of these cases can be observed in his speech about the tours done in the company of his history teacher to abandoned country houses. A room in one of them, Iver Grove, owned by the Ashman family, for having kept locked for so long, attracts him particularly. Austerlitz describes the pool room as follows: "[...] the inside shutters had always been kept closed, and the light of day never entered the room" (SEBALD, 2001, p. 107).

This place had always remained so secluded from the rest of the house that for a century and a half scarcely so much as gossamer-thin layer of dust had been able to settle on the cornices, the black and white square stone flags of the floor, and the green baize cloth stretched over the table, which seemed like a self-contained universe (SEBALD, 2001, p. 110).

At the time of the tours in abandoned country properties, Austerlitz already knew his name, but nothing but this about his past, and avoided at all costs questions or remembrances that could evoke it. Knowing almost nothing about his story, and with the intention to keep his past away and his memories imprisoned, Austerlitz's narrative about this period constantly reinforces the sensation of imprisonment in which he permanently lived: "[...] it all arouses in me a sense of disjunction, of having no ground beneath my feet" (SEBALD, 2001, p. 111).

Besides the history teacher that accompanied him in those tours, Austerlitz had another partner too, Gerarld Fitzpatrick, with whom he lives some moments that can be understood as a kind of liberation from the enclosure in which he lived. In this way, when his school friend suffers a fatal plane accident, Austerlitz believes this to be the beginning of his decay, seeking shelter in an inner imprisonment that only grew worse as time went by:

It was a bad day when I heard that he had crashed in the Savoy Alps, and perhaps that was the beginning of my own decline, a withdrawal into myself which

became increasingly morbid and intractable with the passage of time (SEBALD, 2001, p. 118).

This inner imprisonment into which the character locks himself, resulting in an ever greater social isolation and loneliness, can be observed in several extracts:

It was impossible for me then to go and see any of my friends, who were not numerous in any case, or mix with other people in any normal way [...] The mere idea of listening to anyone brought on a wave of revulsion, while the thought of talking myself, said Austerlitz, was perhaps worse still [...] I came to realize how isolated I was and always have been [...] nor did I ever feel that I belonged to a certain social class, professional group, or religious confession. I was as ill at ease among artists and intellectuals as in bourgeois life [...] it was a very long time since I had felt able to make personal friendships [...] No sooner did I become acquainted with someone than I feared I had come too close, no sooner did someone turn towards me than I began to retreat (SEBALD, 2001, p. 127).

At that time, beginning of the 1990s, Austerlitz had just retired and nurtured the desire to write a book about his researches on history of architecture and of civilization. However, Austerlitz is afflicted by the panic and despair before the failure to perform this task:

If language may be regarded as an old city full of streets and squares [...] I was like a man who has been abroad a long time and cannot find his way through this urban sprawl anymore (SEBALD, 2001, p. 125).

In face of this situation, the character starts his walks through London, defined by him as “[...] nocturnal wanderings through London, to escape the insomnia which increasingly tormented [...]” him (SEBALD, 2001, p. 127). In his wanderings, Austerlitz, who until then had never stopped to think about his truth origins, was always irretrievably attracted to the Liverpool Street Station. The station had been rebuilt in the late 1980s and before, according to the character, “[...] was one of the darkest and most sinister places in London, a kind of entrance to the underworld” (SEBALD, 2001, p. 129). The description of the Liverpool station, built on the place where there used to be a hospital for lunatics and indigents, corroborates this darkness that filled the place, suggesting again images of imprisonment:

Even on sunny days only a ‘faint grayness’, ‘scarcely illuminated’ at all by the globes of the station lights, came through the glass roof over the main hall, and in this ‘eternal dusk’, which was full of a ‘muffled

babble’ of voices, a quiet scraping and trampling of feet, innumerable people passed in great tides, disembarking from the trains or boarding them, coming together, moving apart, and ‘being held up at barriers and bottlenecks like water against a weir’ (SEBALD, 2001, p. 129, our italics).

In a Sunday morning, in that exact place, which had a strong power of attraction over Austerlitz without him knowing the reasons, the character discovers a room virtually untouched by time, the Ladies’ Waiting Room, unused for years. This space can be regarded as a representative of this kind of ‘in-between’ or of diving line between the moments that refer to the imprisonment and those that refer to the liberation process in the life of Austerlitz. These moments, as we have seen, do not exist in complete isolation; on the contrary, they are inter-related and suffer interferences frequently. In that waiting room at the Liverpool station, the character is taken by mixed, simultaneous feelings, and this confusion of emotions and sensations can be perceived in his descriptive speech about the place:

Just for a split second, ‘I saw huge halls open up’, with rows of pillars and ‘colonnades leading far into the distance’, with vaults and brickwork arches bearing on them many-storied structures, with flights of stone steps, wooden stairways and ladders, ‘all leading the eye on and on’. I saw ‘viaducts and footbridges crossing deep chasms’ thronged with tiny figures who looked to me, said Austerlitz, like ‘prisoners in search of some way of escape’ from their ‘dungeon’, and the longer I stared upwards with my head wrenched painfully back, the more I felt as if the room where I stood were ‘expanding’, ‘going on for ever and ever’ in an improbably foreshortened perspective, at the same time turning back into itself in a way possible only in such a deranged universe (SEBALD, 2001, p. 136, our italics).

In the above excerpt, we can observe that Austerlitz uses, at the same time, terms that relate to imprisonment – like ‘prisoners’, ‘in search of some way of escape’, ‘dungeon’ and ‘I felt as if the room [...] [was] turning back into itself’ – and terms that evoke the beginning of a liberation process – like ‘I saw huge halls open up’, ‘colonnades leading far into the distance’, ‘all leading the eye on and on’, ‘footbridges crossing deep chasms’ and ‘I felt as if the room [...] were expanding, going on for ever and ever’. Continuing with this speech, Austerlitz himself uses the terms ‘imprisonment and liberation’ to refer to this view of the inside of the waiting room at The Liverpool station:

I remember, said Austerlitz, that in the middle of this 'vision of imprisonment and liberation' I could not stop wondering whether it was a ruin or a building in the process of construction that I had entered (SEBALD, 2001, p. 137, *our italics*).

Thus, the character uses these terms when describing that place and talking about what he feels there. In this sense, the scene in the waiting room at The Liverpool station is representative of this kind of 'in-between' or of dividing line between both moments in Austerlitz's narrative that we seek to map. We stress again that neither Austerlitz nor his memories leave the imprisonment in which they are immediately, after over fifty years, but that, somehow, the situation at the Liverpool Street Station represents a milestone because his process of liberation initiates there, which relates directly to the appearance of some fragments of memories, awakened by the place.

### With open windows and freed memories

We can take the Ladies' Waiting Room as the starting point of Austerlitz's process of liberation, since it is in this space, virtually untouched by time, that some of his first fragments of remembrances start to appear – "[...] the scraps of memory beginning to drift through the outlying regions of my mind" (SEBALD, 2001, p. 137). There, the character has the sensation that "[...] the scraps of memory beginning to drift through the outlying regions of my mind" (SEBALD, 2001, p. 137). One of the first remembrances that return to his mind is that of the moment of his arrival to London, when the preacher and his wife come to take him in that exact place:

And I not only saw the minister and his wife, said Austerlitz, I also saw the boy they had come to meet. He was sitting by himself on a bench over to one side. His legs, [...] did not reach the floor, and but for the small rucksack he was holding on his lap I don't think I would have known him (SEBALD, 2001, p. 138).

In this way, memories that up to then were imprisoned and repressed begin to be freed.

As it was, I recognized him by that rucksack of his, and for the first time in as far back as I can remember I recollected myself as a small child, at the moment when I realized that it must have been to this same waiting room I had come on my arrival in England over half a century ago. As so often, said Austerlitz, I cannot give any precise description of the state of mind this realization induced; 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 [...] (SEBALD, 2001, p. 138).

These remembrances, which the character judges not to possess anymore, are awakened – through objects, like the backpack, and places, like the waiting room – and overflow. This place, which irretrievably attracted him in his wanderings through London, is now endowed with meanings – his memory and his story are inscribed there:

And certainly the words I had forgotten in a short space of time, and all that went with them, would have remained buried in the depths of my mind had I not, through a series of coincidences, entered the old waiting room [...] (SEBALD, 2001, p. 139).

When reconstituting these fragments of memory, Austerlitz realizes the destructive effect on him of his desolation (SEBALD, 2001, p. 138) for all that time – his arrival to London had occurred in the summer of 1939, when he was only four years and a half old – and the sensation that seizes him is a terrible exhaustion when thinking that he "[...] had never really been alive, or was only now being born" (SEBALD, 2001, p. 138). From this excerpt, we can see how Austerlitz himself relates these small fragments of memories, finally freed, to the beginning of a new life, herein comprehended as the starting point of his process of self-discovery and liberation from the previous imprisonment.

Prior to the scene at The Liverpool station, however, this process of liberation was already manifesting some small clues, showing that these two distinct moments over the narrative possess inter-relations. These clues refer mainly to some liberation from the suffocating imprisonment in which Austerlitz lived in the house of the preacher, in Wales, represented, for instance, in the discovery of cinema in the town. This only happens with the end of World War II, and the sensation of this time to the character was that "[...] a new epoch seemed to dawn" (SEBALD, 2001, p. 62). To him, who knew nothing about war, this time is related to the violation of the ban on going to the movies, a little experience of liberation, when he starts to discover something beyond Wales through the images on the screen:

For me, it [the new epoch] began when I first broke the ban on going to the cinema, and after that I used to watch the newsreel from the cubbyhole occupied by the film projectionist Owen, one of the three sons of the visionary Evan (SEBALD, 2001, p. 62).

Around this very same period, October of 1946, with the sickening of preacher Elias' wife, Austerlitz is sent to a private school, at the age of twelve. In his

speech, we can notice that the time when he goes to the school is associated to the liberation from the kind of imprisonment in which he had lived until then:

However, unlike poor Robinson, said Austerlitz, I myself found my years at Stower Grange a time not of imprisonment but of liberation [...] While most of us, even those who tormented their contemporaries, crossed off the days on the calendar until they could go home, I would have preferred never to return to Bala at all (SEBALD, 2001, p. 64).

Austerlitz sees in the school his only chance to escape from the imprisonment, a way out to freedom:

From the very first week I realized that for all the adversities of the school it was my only escape route, and I immediately did all I could to find my way around its strange jumble of countless unwritten rules, and the often almost carnivalesque lawlessness that prevailed (SEBALD, 2001, p. 64).

Through studies and reads in the school's library, Austerlitz also feels himself being set free – until then, he could only read biblical texts, so all the other books represented this freedom, this opening of new doors:

Another crucial factor in my good progress at school was the fact that I never found reading and studying a burden. Far from it, for imprisoned as I had been until now to the Bible in Welsh and homiletic literature, it seemed as if a new door were opening whenever I turned a page (SEBALD, 2001, p. 64).

From the literary and historical reads he does, he also finds refuge in the creation of an imaginary world – “[...] a kind of ideal landscape [...]” (SEBALD, 2001, p. 65) – representative of a land of freedom in the routine of the school. In Austerlitz's speech, the studies are directly related to a possibility of liberation:

I owe it to him [history teacher Hilary] first and foremost, said Austerlitz, that I far outstripped the rest of my year in our final examinations in history, Latin, German, and French, and could go on my own way into freedom, as I confidently thought at the time, provided with a generous scholarship (SEBALD, 2001, p. 76).

The friendship of Gerald, who studied at the same school, is also related to an attempt of liberation from the imprisonment in which Austerlitz lived. When the character is on his way to visit Gerald's family – which always welcomed him kindly and, after finding out he did not have parents nor alive relatives, used to invite him to their country house – he feels his heart opening up:

At the very beginning of the school holidays, when we traveled westward up the Dee valley in the little steam train from Wrexham, I would feel ‘my heart begin to lift’ (SEBALD, 2001, p. 81, our italics).

In addition to these words, the description that Austerlitz does of the landscapes seen from the wagon window evokes a kind of liberation and – which rarely is seen in the speech of this character – a sensation of wellbeing and joy:

Bend after bend, our train followed the winding of the river, the green meadows looked in through the open carriage window, and so did the houses, stony gray or whitewashed, the gleaming slate roofs, the silver shades of the willows [...]. Scraps of steam vapor flew past outside; you could hear the engine whistling and feel the air cool on your forehead. ‘Never have I traveled better’, said Austerlitz, than on this journey (SEBALD, 2001, p. 81, our italics).

This short way, in which Austerlitz “[...] felt so joyful [that he ...] often scarcely knew where to look first [...]” (SEBALD, 2001, p. 82), led to the vacation refuge of his friend's house. Located in Barmouth, the place had an exceptionally mild weather and the temperatures were higher, in contrast with the cold that reigned in the isolated house of the Eliases. Moreover, in that house, several birds were bred, and the descriptions that Austerlitz does refer to freedom, to flight, to movement and, again, to open windows:

It was wonderful, said Austerlitz, to see the dexterity with which the birds clambered around the trelliswork, hanging on by their beaks, and performing all kinds of acrobatic feats as they came down; to watch them flying in and out of the open windows [...] (SEBALD, 2001, p. 84).

During his childhood, youth and even adulthood, there are few moments in Austerlitz's speeches that show moments evoking liberation. In the narrative that the character develops, this time is mainly marked by descriptions that suggest moments and sensations of imprisonment. In the rare times in which this kind of liberation is made perceptible in Austerlitz's speeches referring to the time prior to the event at The Liverpool station, they are mostly related to the exit from the imprisonment in which he lived in the house of the Eliases and, it is worth noticing, do not come with a corresponding liberation in his repressed memories. On the contrary, since he found out his real name at school, Austerlitz not only makes no effort to remember his past but also, for almost his entire life, refuses people's approach and avoids studies regarding the 20<sup>th</sup> century that could somehow interfere with the fragile dome within which he lived:



I realized then, he said, how little practice I had in using my memory, and conversely 'how hard I must always have tried to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to my unknown past'. Inconceivable as it seems to me today, 'I knew nothing about the conquest of Europe by the Germans and the slave state they set up, and nothing about the persecution I had escaped' [...] (SEBALD, 2001, p. 140, *our italics*).

This denial of the past, in its turn, relates to a nearly-childish terror of revelations about his true story and origin – a fear of remembering and suffering with the pains of traumatic memories. Austerlitz defines this attitude as a “[...] self-censorship of my mind, the constant suppression of the memories surfacing in me [...]” (SEBALD, 2001, p. 141). In this way, for over fifty years, the character vehemently seeks to run away from remembrances of the trauma, in an attempt to immunize himself against any bond or suffering caused by memories of his past:

I did not read newspapers because, as I now know, I feared unwelcome revelations, I turned on the radio only at certain hours of the day, I was always refining my defensive reactions, creating a kind of quarantine or immune system which, as I maintained my existence in a smaller and smaller space (SEBALD, 2001, p. 140).

In contrast with the fear of recalling what marked his entire life, from the first fragments of memory emerged in the waiting room of The Liverpool station, a desire and a need to remember his past and to learn his story awakes in Austerlitz. This longing is re-nurtured when, in a visit to an antiquarian, Austerlitz hears on the radio two women talking: “[...] about the summer of 1939, when they were children and had been sent to England on a special transport” (SEBALD, 2001, p. 142). Against his will, this causes the reconstitution of new fragments of remembrances about his origin: “[...] only then did I know beyond any doubt that these fragments of memory were part of my own life as well” (SEBALD, 2001, p. 142). After hearing the testimony of the women on the radio, he manages to reformulate memories of his trip to London, which he judged not to possess anymore – “I merely saw myself waiting on a quay in a long crocodile of children lined up two by two, most of them carrying rucksacks or small leather cases” (SEBALD, 2001, p. 142).

From then on, Austerlitz decides to no longer run away from his past, initiating a search for more information about his origin. First, he resorts to Czech Republic's embassy in England, and obtain the addresses of Czech competent authorities. Then,

he travels to said country, where he visits the State's archive and, for the first time, verbalizes briefly his journey to another person, a female employee, in a mix of confusion, panic and comprehension of the absurd of his own story. At the archive he obtains the addresses of people with the same surnames as his who lived there in the late 1930s and, choosing at random one of them for the first visit, he is sure that he recognizes the place. Such recognition, which occurs from sensorial remembrances of his childhood related to irregular stones of the pave on which he steps, happens through his body rather than his mind, and is associated to the bodily memory of survivors of traumatic events:

And so, said Austerlitz, no sooner had I arrived in Prague than I found myself back among the scenes of my early childhood, every trace of which had been expunged from my memory for as long as I could recollect. As I walked through the labyrinth of alleyways, thoroughfares, and courtyards between the Vlasska and Nerudova, and still more so when I felt the uneven paving of the sporkova underfoot as step by step I climbed uphill, it was as if I had already been this way before and memories were revealing themselves to me not by means of any mental effort but through my senses, so long numbed and now coming back to life (SEBALD, 2001, p. 150).

When he arrives at the searched address, Austerlitz keeps 'recognizing' certain objects, the detail of a window grid, the iron handle, the almond tree branches, the watch's metal box, the mosaic flower with eight petals, the smell of lime. These things, according to him, are “[...] signs and characters from the type case of forgotten things” (SEBALD, 2001, p. 151). In face of these fragments of recognition and of sensorial memory, which Austerlitz deemed to be forever forgotten, his reaction displays confusion:

[...] and [I] was overcome by such a state of blissful yet anxious confusion that more than once I had to sit down on the steps in the quiet stairwell and lean my head against the wall (SEBALD, 2001, p. 151).

Austerlitz finally gathers courage to ring the bell of the apartment for which he was searching and, after being received by a lady and babbling that he was looking for Agáta Austerlitzová, is immediately recognized by the woman, Vera Rysanová, who had been his mother's neighbor and his governess, as she will tell him next.

While attentively listening to Vera's stories about his parents and revisiting his bedroom, where everything remained just as it was sixty years ago, Austerlitz feels that life was bursting inside him, just

as he had felt as well in that watershed moment in the waiting room at The Liverpool station, with the sensation that he had come to the world in that exact moment. As Vera continues to tell him about his childhood, Austerlitz manages to reconstitute parts of his story and advance in his path of self-discovery and in his process of liberation. It is important to highlight that, as Vera recalls his past, in the descriptions that Austerlitz does regarding the apartment, the open windows and doors stand out above all else. These situations evoke again the ongoing process of liberation in the character and also relate to the fact that Austerlitz sees his state of mind through the way that the objects and the places presented themselves before him. To reinforce even more this kind of developing liberation, Austerlitz's narrative focused on the descriptions of open windows and doors contrasts also with his previous speech that, for over fifty years, was constantly connected to locked doors and closed windows, evoking imprisonment:

As she told me about my curious love of such observation, Vera had risen and 'opened both the inner and the outer windows' to let me look down into the garden next door, where the lilac happened to be in flower, its blossoms so thick and white that in the gathering dusk it looked as if there had been a snowstorm in the middle of spring.

These and other images, said Austerlitz, ranged themselves side by side, so that deeply buried and locked away within me as they had been, they now came luminously back to my mind 'as I looked out of the window'. It was the same when Vera, without a word, 'opened the door to the room' where the little couch [...] still stood in its place [...] (SEBALD, 2001, p. 156, our italics).

After the conversations with Vera, who also tells him about the Terezin concentration camp to which Agáta was taken after the German invasion, Austerlitz continues with his search for more information, feeling a need to remember and learn more of his story. In this search, he decides to go to 'Theresienstadt', a fortress built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and used as a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. This fort, for its architecture, its gates and its locked windows that prohibited the access to it, its emptiness and silence – although it was being inhabited again, no one was found on the streets of the commune –, its state of abandonment and its impenetrable darkness evoke images of imprisonment, as if time had not passed there and it was still a concentration camp rigorously controlled by the Nazis. In that place, where the Ghetto Museum was recently installed, Austerlitz actually forms, for the first time, an idea of the story of

persecution of the Jewish people. This process of rediscovery and of recognition of his past is essential to the way towards Austerlitz's liberation, as well as the reconstruction of his memories and of his identity.

Following his way to this kind of liberation, Austerlitz feels an urge to travel from Prague to London again, the same path he had gone through in 1939 on a special convoy crowded with Jewish children. One more time the character reveals, in this desire, his need to remember, despite the pain, in a process of reconstruction of his story and of his identity, always incomplete, always indebted. When effectively going on this trip, Austerlitz reveals that he confuses the first one, in the 1930s, and the second one, in the 1990s:

[...] even today, Austerlitz continued, when I think of my Rhine journeys [...] everything becomes confused in my head: my experiences of that time, what I have read, memories surfacing and then sinking out of site again, consecutive images and distressing blank spots where nothing at all is left (SEBALD, 2001, p. 221).

In this way, we perceive that, in spite of the attempt of liberation of the fragments of his memories, a good part has been forgotten, forever lost.

Austerlitz also reports that, despite the discovery of the sources to his restlessness and of being capable, after so many years, to see "[...] with the utmost clarity as that child suddenly cast out of his familiar surroundings [...]" (SEBALD, 2001, p. 224), he was still unable to set himself completely free from the "[...] sense of rejection and annihilation [...]" (SEBALD, 2001, p. 224) that he had always repressed and that constantly distressed him:

I felt like screaming but could not utter a sound, I wanted to walk into the street but was unable to move from the spot; once, after a long and painful contraction, I actually visualized myself being broken up from within, so that parts of my body were scattered over a dark and distant terrain (SEBALD, 2001, p. 224).

This excerpt is quite meaningful to show how this kind of liberation that started in the waiting room at The Liverpool station is a process and, therefore, ongoing. It is not enough that Austerlitz only discovers his origins and manages to liberate part of his memories and then to see himself completely free from the imprisonment and the trauma that afflicted him for all his life. After recalling certain fragments and reconstituting some parts of his past, Austerlitz initiates this process of liberation, as we have sought to show in some extracts of his narrative

in the course of this study. However, this process of liberation and, inherently to it, the (re)constitution of Austerlitz's identity, is not finished, but developing, which is reinforced also by the need that the character feels to carry on his search for his father in France, at the end of the plot.

## Conclusion

Austerlitz's process of learning about himself and about his own story, this process of self-discovery that permeates the entire narrative and, more evidently, after the scene in the waiting room at the Liverpool Street Station, is not a new theme in the literature, dating back to Oedipus the King, by Sophocles. However, the manner that this theme is developed in *Austerlitz* is completely different, having absolutely nothing of traditional, with an esthetic construction that plays with several symbolic levels and innumerable connections on the inside and even on the outside of the narrative. Additionally, it is interesting to notice how, after the start of the process of reconstitution of Austerlitz's story and of recovery of part of his memories, his desire and need to narrate them intensify, as well as to find an attentive interlocutor to listen to them. According to Schmidt (1998), just as memory is inherent to the process of identity (re)construction, the discourse produced by human beings is the instrument of (self)knowledge by means of which they become subjects.

In this sense, both the process of self-discovery and the narration of his story carried out by Austerlitz to his listener – the narrator that gives the floor –, play fundamental roles in the process of reconstitution of this character's identity. The search for his past and for the recovery of his memory does not cease to be a search for his own identity. In this specific case, however, the search for identity is marked by the fact that there is an intense opacity concerning that which he once was and to which he still feels connected somehow, although he does not know the content of this connection. Thus, this identity search that can be seen in *Austerlitz* should not be understood as a political attitude or a decision, but as something that urges, an urgency of the spirit searching for itself, which, however, cannot be definitively captured, as it is always lacking.

Furthermore, the need that Austerlitz feels to narrate his story can rise from his need to remember and, simultaneously, to forget the trauma. According to Seligmann-Silva (2013, p. 134), survivors of traumatic events "[...] need, at the same time, to narrate, to elaborate and to forget". In this way, with the testimony of Austerlitz to the narrator, we can

say that Austerlitz desires, in addition to generating memory, to generate forgetfulness, as to sooth part of the suffering caused by the trauma and to draw himself distant from the pain

[...] the victims want to forget because they are haunted by the suffering of these woes, and not to erase the atrocities and much less to deny a feeling of injustice (SELIGMANN-SILVA, 2013, p. 134).

Both Austerlitz, through his speech, and Sebald, by the careful construction of this work, evoke the importance to avoid forgetfulness and along with it the repetition of the violence. More than this, they evoke the need to remember the traumatic past and, despite the pain and the incomprehension before it, to provide his testimony. Jeanne Marie Gagnebin (2003), in article about the post-Auschwitz art, speaks exactly of this relation. According to Gagnebin (2003, p. 108), in this art, there is no longer representation nor identification,

[...] only an attentive approximation of that which does not fit neither the justifications of reason nor the figurations of art, but that should, however, be remembered and transmitted by them: the senseless death, anonymous and innumerable death that men have imposed to other men – and still impose.

Austerlitz's words when he talks about his visit to the Ghetto Museum at the Terezin concentration camp synthesize this important question, reinforcing the commitment with the past present in Sebald's composition and the need, despite the incomprehension, to remember it:

I understood it all now, yet I did not understand it, for every detail that was revealed to me as I went through the museum from room to room and back again [...] far exceeded my comprehension (SEBALD, 2001, p. 195).

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*Received on July 22, 2014.*

*Accepted on December 4, 2014.*

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