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‘immer weiter ostwärts und immer weiter zurück in der Zeit’: Exploring the extended kith and kin of W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*

At least two real lives inform W. G. Sebald’s story of Austerlitz’s search for an identity lost in the flight from the Holocaust, which ends when he traces an old neighbour in Prague. Exploring even a few of Sebald’s other sources yields rewarding insights, while juxtaposing some of the less obvious allows us to suggest that a coherent view of knowledge and the continuities of life and death underpins this further exploration of European history in Sebald’s work. This essay discusses Sebald’s extensive circle of intertextual and intellectual neighbours in *Austerlitz*, including, among others, Stephen Hawking, Dan Jacobson, R. S. Thomas, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

1. Neighbours

Since W. G. Sebald’s tragic death on 14 December 2001 many people have become aware of the broad features of his life: a German intellectual who could not relate happily to the land of his birth, who preferred to live in Switzerland and, for most of his life, in England, and whose principal academic focus was not German, but Austrian literature. Within this latter context, a factor common to all of the figures he wrote about is the loss or abandonment of an original home. He thus appears an obvious candidate for inclusion in any discussion of the theme of ‘Neighbours and Strangers’ in contemporary German-language literature.

As with so much of that literature, the Holocaust is present throughout Sebald’s work, but it is not its exclusive focus. It is often subliminally, rather than explicitly, present: the greater part of the œuvre for which he has become internationally known explores the lives of cultural and political exiles with non-Jewish backgrounds. These are individuals cast beyond the pale of society for some apparent abnormality, incompatibility, or unaccountability. Mental illness and the way society approaches it is one of Sebald’s real concerns, as is similarly death.

Critics and commentators rarely miss an opportunity to mention his own ‘duality’: his deliberate choice to be ‘W. G.’ for his formal writing and ‘Max’ among friends and colleagues. They have often been fascinated also by his preoccupation with death, the dead, and their role in life. The relevance of this is also clear from a short letter to me (1 July 1998), written when he was already working on *Austerlitz*: ‘The presence of the Dead is something that preoccupies me more and more’. It is one of
the keys to *Austerlitz*, the work I intend to concentrate on here, for Sebald uses Austerlitz’s voyage of self-discovery deliberately to blur the boundaries between time and space: ‘Freilich [...] hat das Verhältnis von Raum und Zeit, so wie man es beim Reisen erfährt, [...] etwas Illusionistisches und Illusionäres’ (p. 18); the journey can also take us across the divide between life and death: ‘die Grenze zwischen dem Tod und dem Leben [ist durchlässiger], als wir gemeinhin glauben’ (p. 397).

While aspects of Sebald’s own life are an important motivation for and an overt component of his work, to overemphasise them is to assume a naiveté his work does not possess. I shall refer sparingly to details of his biography, drawing mainly on the evidence of his published œuvre, his directly cited sources, and those he used to impart a potent intertextual charge to his literary world, the intellectual neighbours he cherished.

The ambivalence of the ‘neighbourly’ relationship in Sebald’s work can be summed up by reference to two figures: Jean Améry and Paul Bereyter. Améry is the subject of a 1988 essay. Bereyter is the eponymous teacher of the second story in *Die Ausgewanderten* (39–93) and, since we know that the photographs in that volume are ‘genuine’, we can assume that Bereyter’s story has been fictionalised only to the extent that the context and Sebald’s literary objectives require.

Sebald cites Améry in *Austerlitz* when he brings home to us the dreadful torture Améry endured in Breendonk as his shoulder joints are slowly dislocated under his own weight (p. 38). The torture chamber is a small room that reminds the narrator of the butcher’s shop back in the village of his childhood: the hooks, the table and the drain (p. 37). There is a terrible intimacy here in the bodily closeness of torturers and tortured. In the essay Sebald had outlined how Hanns Mayer had become aware of the significance of his middle name, Israel, and fled the Nazis only at the last moment — in his provincial home people had drifted along, comfortably oblivious of the significance of political events. He acquired a new name and a new language. In the resistance in Brussels, a detail that all but undid him was the accent of the SS man who suddenly knocked at his door; it was the vernacular of his youth. In 1978, Sebald reminds us, Améry deliberately returned to Austria to commit suicide in a specific Salzburg hotel: the ‘Österreichischer Hof’.

Paul Bereyter, whose suicide the narrator of *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992) is seeking to understand, had been a wonderful teacher. He had committed suicide in the village where he had made his home because he could not shake off the shadow of the past. He was a ‘Dreiviertelarier’, he