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Figures of Memory in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* – Reception of Young Readers

Abstract: The main purpose of the article is the comparison of the “professional” analysis of *Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald with the reading reactions of a group of thirteen and fourteen-year-old students. The paper was inspired by a project which the author carried out at the Szalom Alejchem Primary School in Wrocław, which functioned as a Jewish national minority school. The narration of *Austerlitz* does not fit into the traditional, conventional novel structure; it reflects upon the work of memory itself, unsettled, with gaps and chronology disorders. Analysis undertaken in volume *Practical Past* by Hayden White, an eminent theorist of the history and historiography, presents *Austerlitz* as a peculiar example of the postmodern version of the historical novel; White specifies certain elements of the construction which determine the post-modernist character. Students, despite their limited knowledge regarding the theory of literature, pointed out similar elements, such as the lack of a tangible plot or rapid action, the narrator's function, “eternal wanderer” as a metaphor of human fate or the recurrence of certain motifs and patterns. Those motifs and patterns – which during the joint work on *Austerlitz* were initially called “figures of memory” – have been defined in the same way as Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*. Work on the analysis of *Austerlitz* with teenagers proves that decoding the metaphorical layer of the novel often depends on the most primordial experiences. Young people are able to interpret “adult literature” and find themselves as full-fledged readers.

Keywords: figures of memory, W.G. Sebald, *lieux de mémoire*, young readers response

The world of W. G. Sebald's novels is inhabited by characters who seek their identity, try to reconstruct or rediscover their memories, and fight melancholy caused by a sense of eternal mismatch and uprooting. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the writer was one of the main candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature¹ but he is still described as one of the greatest contemporary German prose writers. While Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten* (*The Emigrants*, 1992),

¹ These hopes and dreams were cut short due to Sebald's sudden death in a car accident near Norfolk in 2001.

Die Ringe des Saturn. Eine englische Wallfahrt (Rings of Saturn. The English Pilgrimage: Novel, 1995) or *Austerlitz* (2001), openly raise the topic of the Holocaust, resettlement, migration and the evil caused by warfare, his prose is deprived of the accusatory tone. Sebald's characters are people coming from an eternal diaspora, struggling with oblivion and internal regret. They are aware of the destructive power of time and choose either to fight its linear current or unwittingly surrender to it. One of the characters of *The Emigrants*, Henry Selwyn, says: "I was counting the blades of grass. It's a sort of pastime of mine. Rather irritating, I am afraid" (Sebald 2001: 10)².

The issues discussed in the article are the reading reactions of a group of thirteen and fourteen-year-olds, attempting to decode and understand the figures appearing in the novel *Austerlitz* by Sebald. The observations are the result of a project that the author carried out at the Szalom Alejchem Primary School in Wrocław, which functioned as a Jewish national minority school. Due to the fact that the school cultivated the Jewish tradition, celebrated the holidays of the Jewish calendar and conducted compulsory learning of the Hebrew language; reading and working on *Austerlitz* suited the educational program of the institution. Szalom Alejchem was an unusual school, not only because of its cultural orientation, but also due to the openness and creativity of the entire school community, which allowed students to work with diverse literature, not necessarily just with mandatory works from the traditional canon. In this contexts, an effects of workshops on reading *Austerlitz* can be examined with the elements of reading response criticism which "suggests that text functions as a mirror instead of window" (Cahill 1996:93).

Austerlitz, one of Sebald's most famous novels, tells the story of Jacques Austerlitz/Dafydd Elias, who, as an adult man, discovers his true Jewish identity step by step. Four-and-a-half-year-old Jacques arrived in Great Britain by using one of the lifelines which saved Jewish children in Central Europe from the cruelty of Nazism. He was born in Prague which after the incorporation of Czechoslovakia by the Third Reich was subjected to the liquidation of the Jewish population. Austerlitz's mother, Agata, was sent in one of the first evacuations to Theresienstadt, his father managed to flee to Paris, where he vanished without a trace.

The character's neurotic personality, combined with the appearance of shapes, motifs and symbols haunting him throughout his life, often make him see himself "in a state of unconsciousness," he becomes "filled with the painful feeling that something [in him] wants to get out of oblivion," he cannot remember "neither [himself] nor [his] prehistory, or anything at all"³ (Sebald 2007: 327). Austerlitz's situation is perfectly described by the eminent French historian Pierre Nora:

² An original quotation; in the Polish edition of the novel this fragment has not been translated into Polish.

³ Translation from Polish by Justyna Kowal.

The task of remembering makes everyone his own historian. The demand for history has thus largely overflowed the circle of professional historians. Those who have long been marginalized in traditional history are not the only ones haunted by the need to recover their buried pasts. Following the example of ethnic groups and social minorities, every established group, intellectual or not, learned or not, has felt the need to go in search of its own origins and identity. (Nora 1989: 15)

Nora places great emphasis on the social, collective dimension of memory. In this context Austerlitz's situation is unique; in the collective dimension, understood as a Jewish community, he actually belongs to those "who have long been marginalized," doomed to annihilation and oblivion, even in a literal, physical sense. In the individual dimension, being his own historian is not based on ordinary reconstruction that is preceded by consciousness and a kind of "horizon of expectations" about his past. Austerlitz does not add absent pieces to his individual memory; he must create everything from scratch.

For an experienced scholar of literature and culture, *Austerlitz* is a prosaic exemplification not only for Pierre Nora's thesis, but also for other extensive memory theories, such as the works of Jan and Aleida Assmann (2009), Marianne Hirsh (2012), Henri Raczymow (2015), Frank Ankersmit (2002), Walter Benjamin (1969), and, above all, the modernized concept of Platonic anamnesis, the state of "forgetfulness," a return to the past, which may disappear in the human subconsciousness, but eventually returns to the sphere of consciousness. An experienced, adult reader will find in Sebald's novel a fascinating story told in an airtight way, filled with flashbacks and episodes, with a narration that reflects the work of memory itself, requiring deep concentration whilst reading.

How would teenagers handle reading Austerlitz's story? What interpretation method would they choose when faced with a novel that certainly does not fit into the current boundaries of the common youth literature and therefore creates a kind of challenge due to the complex narration and difficult, painful topic?

The main purpose of the article is to show how young people, who are deprived of professional theoretical tools, will read Sebald's novel and answer for the most primordial for reader response theory question: "What this book means to me?"

The interpretation of *Austerlitz* done by one of the greatest theoreticians of the history of the twentieth century, Hayden White, should be used for comparison as a point of reference in demonstrating convergence. It is significant that White, a historian known to the widest group of readers as a scholar who explores the boundaries between literary fiction and history, undertook the task of analysing this novel. He focused on Sebald's novel in one of his last books, *The Practical Past*, published in 2014. In a chapter bearing the same title

as the entire volume, White sees *Austerlitz* as a peculiar example of the post-modern version of the historical novel. Genre affiliation of the text is one of the most important issues raised by White:

If *Austerlitz* is, as the cover of the German edition informs us, a “Roman” (novel), it is one in which nothing very much happens, which lacks anything remotely resembling a plot or plot structure (the “failed quest” novel?), and in which everything would seem to turn, in Henry James fashion, on “character,” except that, in the cases of both *Austerlitz* and his narrator, the notion of “character” itself explodes into the shards and fragments of “men without properties.” And yet, the book is chock-full of interesting not to say fascinating historical information, lore, and knowledge. The narrator stages *Austerlitz*’s expertise in his professional field (art history) in a convincing manner, and his descriptions of the various historical monuments and sites (*lieux*) of famous historical events are utterly “realistic” in the common meaning of that term. (White 2014: 4–5)

The second most significant problem raised by White is space, understood both in the purely physical and metaphorical dimension. Places visited by *Austerlitz* are characterized by reproducible, repetitive patterns which have great importance in the context of starting the anamnesis process:

The novel relates the many accidental and planned encounters between the narrator and *Austerlitz* from that first meeting in the “Salle des pas perdus” in Antwerp’s Central Station down to a final meeting in Gare d’*Austerlitz* in Paris where Jacques *Austerlitz* relates to the narrator the ways by which the past is able to hide its secrets from the living, even to the point of destroying the monuments attesting the existence of a past (as in the newly built Bibliothèque nationale in Paris: “this gigantic new library, which, according to one of the loathsome phrases now current is supposed to serve as the treasure house of our entire literary heritage, proved useless in my search for any traces of my father who had disappeared from Paris more than fifty years ago.”) It is not clear whether *Austerlitz* objects to the inutility of the new Bibliothèque nationale or is simply lamenting the loss of the old one. In any event, Jacques *Austerlitz*’s quest for the identity and traces of his parents takes the form of a journey in space, from one “*lieu de memoir*” to another; each of them manifests another aspect of how what had once been presented as a “heritage” can be shown to be a kind of impediment to useful knowledge of the past. The ultimate destination (or rather the penultimate one) is Theresienstadt’s famous Potemkin village concentration camp where the transit point to the death camps was given the public face of a vacation spa like Marienbad. (White 2014: 3–4)

From the above fragment, another, quite important thought of White emerges: the past appears as a personified force, it seems to be quite “vicious,” trying to obliterate traces and prevent man from reaching the truth.

The project devoted to *Austerlitz* was addressed to students of older grades, with particular emphasis on the 7th grade consisting of 8 people. Two students

from 6th grade also expressed their willingness to face the reading. Out of a group of ten, three of them did not read the whole novel, they got discouraged very quickly, but nevertheless, encouraged by their colleagues, actively participated in the summarising discussion. No one was excluded; basing on information about the represented world heard from other readers, they were eager to comment on the general nature of memory and their own experiences.

The group participating in the project consisted of students with different individual interests and reading experiences. Some of them prefer film and comics over literature, some have identified themselves as "scientific minds", seeking knowledge about the world in physical reality, not in the fictional, literary world (one of my tasks as their educator was to show that interest in science does not exclude enjoying art and literature; in fact, the perfect combination could be, for example, science-fiction literature). There were also great "book lovers" among them, spending most of their breaks alone with a book on their lap or in pairs, discussing the books they were just holding in their hands. For both book lovers and students who occasionally read fiction for their own pleasure, the most popular genres were historical, crime and fantasy novels (in particular the series *Ranger's Apprentiace* by John Flannagan, *Harry Potter* by J.K Rowling, fiction by Terry Prachett, H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen King or J.R.R. Tolkien).

In the context of analyzing *Austerlitz*, there are two fields of experience that all students shared (the first – theoretical and literary, the second – dedicated more to the idea of identity and sensitivity). The first one covered the canon of compulsory school reading, on the basis of which students learn the most basic components of a literary work, narration, creation of the narrator and characters, plot, action slowing, the function of dialogue and description, etc. The second field is closely related to the Jewish profile of the school, the historical awareness of the tragic events of the Holocaust and the obligation to remember⁴. Students acquired knowledge and social sensitivity to the experiences like Jacques Austerlitz's as part of compulsory education (for example, excerpts of *The Island by Bird Street* by Uri Orlev are included in the official

⁴ The grassroot commitment in event of *Memorial Stones (Stolpersteine)* perfectly illustrates the involvement of Szalom Alejchem in commemorative practices devoted to the victims of the Holocaust. *Stolpersteine* are metal or concrete cubes placed in the space of European cities, commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, not only Jews, but also Roma people and Jehovah's witnesses. The action was initiated in Cologne in 1992 by the German artist Guenter Deming. The school is located in a former German villa designed by Paul Ehrlich, an outstanding architect of Jewish origin from Wrocław. The villa was also his private residence for many years. In 2019, four *Stolpersteine* were unveiled in front of the house, commemorating the entire Ehrlich family murdered in Theresienstadt (the same concentration camp where the mother of the protagonist of Sebald's novel was sent). The stones did not resemble the „official” ones established by authorities, they were not engraved brass plates, but ordinary gold-painted sidewalk slabs, decorated and engraved jointly by the students of the school and their parents.

reading programme) and an extra-curricular education based on the individual preferences of the teacher (like workshops conducted by the author on denialism, the character of Deborah Lipstadt and the film *Denial* by Mick Jackson).

The project was organized as workshops, during which we created a safe space where there were no wrong answers and misreadings of the text. We divided our work into two stages. During the first one, the teacher asked the students some written questions, they could take them home and ponder over them for a few days. The questions were of an open-ended nature, we did not determine any length and accuracy of the answers. Some of the questions concerned the structure and plot of the book (for example: "Are you able to divide the story of Austerlitz into certain periods?", "Who is the narrator?", "Are you able to reconstruct the sequence and places where Austerlitz meets the narrator?", "Why is Austerlitz so interested in the history of architecture?"). Some focused on elements of the reader-response and concerned private experiences and emotions ("Have you ever experienced a similar „reminder” like Austerlitz?", "What – according to your own opinion – is memory?"). The second part was organized as an open discussion, which developed towards sharing individual experiences about the process of forgetting and remembering, the importance of identity (among other, we raised the subject of whether suddenly gaining knowledge about our past could change us as a human being). During the discussion, we also tried to draw a timeline and reconstruct the chronology of events – our line turned out to be a „tree”, a „creeper” with many nodes and branches.⁵

Reading the novel posed a great challenge to the teenagers, not because of the subject matter, but primarily because of the style. Young people brought up on compulsory classic items from the school curriculum, adventure novels or science-fiction literature, had great difficulty in following the narrative: "Sometimes I regretfully admitted that after reading over thirty pages I could not remember too much," said one of them⁶. Another supposable difficulty was the large number of descriptions, especially those taken from the history of architecture. Having a suspensive character, the action of the novel is a variation on the topic of slow, blunt, and internal experiences, it is not based on action but on experience and "reminding": "It was difficult for me, I prefer novels with vivid action, and all in all, nothing happens in Austerlitz," one student argued. Students unconsciously pointed to the narrative structure, which is deprived of a swift action, a feature of the novel which White calls a focus on "character," "in Henry James fashion" as a one of manifestations of "post-modern version of historical novel." Students' opinion shows it is just a term,

⁵ The author must admit that if she had to organize a similar project one more time, she would organize it in a different way. The first written part of the workshop imposed a certain order of interpretation on the students and made them feel in advance that the novel was too difficult and incomprehensible, which caused some distance.

⁶ All quotations are original students' statements, translated from Polish by Justyna Kowal

professional, theoretical-literary word; they did not need to know anything about postmodernism to notice narrative differences from the novels that they have dealt with before.

The next stage, equally tedious, in working out Austerlitz's story was to look at the narrative and divide it into certain levels, as an attempt to "untangle" individual threads. The metaphor of a confusing network, full of nodes and blind endings seems particularly accurate here; in the novel we do not find a traditional division into chapters, the reader deals with one, but not necessarily consistent, narrative. This deliberate measure reflects upon the nature of memory itself and also thematically refers to Austerlitz's obsession: "But the truth is he still follows obscure (even for himself) impulses, in some way connected with unique fascination which he noticed a long time ago and which refers to a web idea, for example to whole system of railways" (Sebald 2007: 42).⁷

Sebald's book is deprived of all the elements that, in the eyes of the young reader, are typical for classic, realistic novel genre. In *Austerlitz* there are no conventional, familiar for students, graphically highlighted dialogues; all the statements of Austerlitz himself and other characters function as elements of reported speech in the first-person narrative. Sometimes the citations have two levels, they are narratives in the stylistic Chinese-box composition, for example: "I think – Vera has told me – said Austerlitz – that during this period of constant triumphs even the last disbelief among the Germans became intoxicated [...]" (Sebald 2007: 217). The students intuitively separated the level of the narrator's and the protagonist's expression or the presence of extensive episodes, but some of them noticed that it was actually pointless: "The narrator is like a 'third person': he only listens to Austerlitz and who tells his story," observed one student. The role of the narrator in Sebald's novel clashes with the essential function of the narrator as the highest transmitting instance in prose text. He is still a "great storyteller", but the reader does not know anything about him, his name, surname, profession; the remaining facts are implied rather than revealed. He plays the role of a mirror into which the title character is looking, his function is not to tell, but to convey what Austerlitz himself has to say.

The next task of the students was to put the character's meetings with the narrator and Austerlitz's biography into chronological order. In the first case, the teenagers were able to indicate the "borders of the acquaintanceship" of the two characters, the first meeting (in 1967) and the last (in 1986). During the last one, Austerlitz tells his story and, at the same time, tries to implement and accept it himself by presenting it to another individual. The memories of the students are unclear when it comes to sorting out the twenty years' worth of random or arranged meetings. A similar pattern applies to the chronology of Austerlitz's life – to put the structure of the story, at least partially, the

⁷ Translation from Polish here and in all subsequent quotes by the author of the article.

students tried to introduce some caesura, for example, the protagonist's childhood spent in Wales followed by a significant moment involving learning his real name and surname and finally, the events of subsequent adulthood. After numerous attempts to reconstruct the chronology of events in the novel, the students came to the joint conclusion that the ahistorical order determines the uniqueness of *Austerlitz* and should not be the primary point of focus when reading the novel. The group was aware that the complex and fragmentary structure of the story reflects upon the process of remembering: "Sometimes, when we are trying to tell someone what happened to us, we lose the right order and details in our stories, just like Austerlitz did", summarized one of the young readers.

Students were also asked to functionalize the presence of suspensive descriptions of the architectural space of many European cities in the novel. In addition to the evident story relationship, the young readers noticed a connection between the issues: "sometimes, when you visit a foreign city for the first time and find a place that is exceptional, it does not mean that you have already finished your journey. Like Austerlitz, every detail of the past that he was able to discover, forced him to do further research. Ironically, the more he knew, the less he knew," observed one student. Due to the fact that the main character is introduced to the reader during the journey, far from his homeland, which he does not actually have, or rather does not feel connected to, the students began to consider the essence of wandering as a certain interpretative key of the novel. We meet Austerlitz in Paris, Antwerp, London, a Welsh village, on a ferry crossing the La Manche Channel, at railway stations, and eventually in Prague and Nuremberg. The readers have noticed that when the character finally buys a house in London, he hardly decorates it, nor does he domesticate the space with his personal objects or furniture. He deprives himself of the opportunity to "gain a foothold." Since the young students of Szalom Alejchem have an impressive knowledge of Jewish history, they conducted a thorough comparative analysis of the fate of the eternal diaspora and Austerlitz's personal struggle: "After all, he is a Jew, it would be strange if he settled somewhere permanently. I mean living in a diaspora, right?," observed one of the students. The protagonist's physical journeys are, in fact, mental journeys through his own mind, as well as a mythical, even archetypal journeys to the Promised Land.

At the end of our work on reading *Austerlitz*, the students were asked to explain how they interpreted the term "figures of memory" in the context of the novel. The answer was straightforward and concerned physical objects, motifs, and symbols, for Austerlitz constituting a bridge connecting the past with the present, which triggered the process of anamnesis. Young readers easily pointed to the ambience of the train station, the dome's vault, the shape of a star, the vast space of the lake, in other words, objects the character often saw before leaving for Wales, ones which haunted him throughout his adult life.

Students with their own words characterised “figures of memory” as a newly discovered *lieux de mémoire*. To be precise, the French historian describes *lieux de mémoire* as a “simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are lieux in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional” (Nora 1989: 18–19). Three dimensions of *lieux* coincide with the significance of motifs recognised by students; a “material” star-shaped mosaic in Austerlitz’s first house in Prague leads to the “symbolic” Star of David and “functional” Jewish identity.

The project summary was a reflection on personal experience, probability/fiction of Austerlitz’s experiences: “it occurs to me that I remember situations, from a few days, months or years ago that I had forgotten something, and under the influence of an object or something else I remember it again. For example, when I look at my childhood toys, I am reminded of my specific games I used to play or other past events,” observed one student. To the list of items eliciting the process of anamnesis, the students added other sensual experiences, such as flavours and smells. This plot of *Austerlitz*, based on sensual and emotional perception of memories, seem to fit to the context of the text “as a mirror instead of a window”; young people found in the novel something extremely familiar and had the impression that “adult literature” is not too difficult for them.

Working on *Austerlitz* was a challenge to young readers. They agreed that the most accessible parts of the book concerned the protagonist’s childhood, because it was easier for them to comprehend his way of thinking and behaviour. It was not easy for teenagers to respond briefly to the following, the most significant for reader-response criticism question: “What does this text mean to you?”. Some of them declared to read *Austerlitz* – or other novels by Sebald – in a few years when they become – in their own eyes – more experienced and mature readers. This declaration sounds optimistic and pessimistic at the same time; it indicates that teenagers do not believe in their skills and would like to approach the idea of a “real,” “perfect,” “sophisticated” reader projected in every literary text. The task is to encourage students to find themselves as a *mock reader* described by Walker Gibson as a “fictitious reader [...] whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience of language” (Gibson 1980: 5). This type of a reader is a modification of ourselves hidden in the text, a role we decide to play in relation with literature. The author asked the students what it meant to be a „perfect reader” and when, at what age (or after reading how many books) you could become one. The students claimed that “the sophisticated reader” is one who „knows and understands everything in the book.” They did not know when they would become such, but will certainly recognize the moment. The honest (and unfortunately indicating a lack of self-confidence) students’ answer only confirms that the “perfect reader” does not really exist, and that he is only a potential project. After encountering

the analysis of W. G. Sebald's novel with young readers, the reader-response might be divided into two layers: emotional and intellectual one. It can be said that in general, the teenager's way of reading does not differ from the interpretation of an adult reader on the basis of emotions and feelings; both of them are able to discover the textual *mock reader*. *Austerlitz* pushes us all beyond the boundaries of our own comfort zones, both teenagers and experienced literature lovers. Last of them probably will define "mock interaction" with the novel in a different way; they put a mask of architecture historians, a costume of psychologists dealing with trauma from the past or playing the role of an expert of literary genres appreciating the intricacies of the "post-modern historical novel."

To conclude, *Austerlitz* is a book that strongly stimulates both the intellectual and emotional layers. It refers to the most natural experiences felt by adults and young readers alike. It denies the human desire to put reality in order and into a logical and chronological perception of events. The recipient's acceptance of this state of affairs is the greatest value of Sebald's novel. In the author's opinion the meeting of students with Sebald's literature was a success; challenging them to interpret texts other than those they would reach themselves from a shelf of the school libraries is the first step to the development of their internal *mock reader*.

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