

Ivan Megela

Doctor of Sciences in Philology, Professor at the Department of Foreign Literatures Institute of Philology, Institute of Philology of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1315-6472>
imegela@ukr.net

MEANS OF REPRODUCING THE INDIVIDUAL PAST IN W. SEBALD'S NOVEL AUSTERLITZ

Summary: The article is devoted to the coverage of the problem of bricolage as a method of memory reconstruction in the novel "Austerlitz" by the greatest German writer Winfried Sebald. The article notes that "Austerlitz" marks the transition from trauma to conscious identity as part of the historical memory of the Holocaust. It shows how the hero of the work, Jacques Austerlitz, acquires his identity by assembling from scattered information his personal history, reflecting a significant part of the collective tragedy. The genre feature of the work as a travelogue, memoir, investigation, as literature bordering on documentary and artistic experience, where the real is combined with the fictional, is highlighted. The article describes in detail the content of the technique of bricolage as a form of "wild", "pre-rational" way of thinking, as a technique of fitting auxiliary materials (old photographs, newspaper clippings), a montage of disparate episodes, the technique of collage. The structure of the work's storytelling is analyzed when the narrator does not tell the story but describes what he hears from Jacques Austerlitz. It is as if it is not a text, but the story itself, which someone tells, and also shows pictures for authenticity. The functions of the hero in the novel gradually shift from people to things, documents, bearers of the memory of individual and collective civilizational catastrophe. These indescribable witnesses break the blockade of traumatic silence around the childhood of Austerlitz, embodied in images of blindness, dumbness, oblivion.

Before the protagonist of the work, the "man without a past," the history of his family, the ghostly happy childhood that was rudely cut short by the separation from his biological parents, is suddenly revealed. Sebald demonstrates a contemporary form of novel narrative in which the truthfulness of the Holocaust narrative is revealed by incorporating the exile's personal authorial biography, pain, and guilt into the memory of this tragedy. The role of photographs and descriptions of architectural structures in revealing the immanent semantic content of the subject, not manifested verbally, is analyzed. The latter is the key document that unites and structures the important for the writer themes of memories, memory, indifference, oblivion, return to the ghostly past, overcoming of the psychological trauma. Based on the analysis the author concludes that the attitude to the reader as a co-author brings Sebald's novel closer to the tradition of the European intellectual novel and post-modern hypertexts, in which meaningful units are not presented in a traditional linear sequence, but as a multiplicity of links and transitions. The author notes that the acute experience of humanitarian catastrophe, the multilayered text, the density of meaningful meanings make this work a notable phenomenon in the context of artistic comprehension of traumatic memory.

Key words: bricolage, photography, memory, trauma, storytelling, history, documentary, fiction, verbal, visual

1. Introduction

The novel "Austerlitz" by the German writer Winfried Georg Sebald critics put on a par with the works of V. Nabokov and M. Proust, showing in the main character features of the "new seeker of lost time," and the newspaper "New York Times" called "Austerlitz" "the 'first' great novel of the twenty-first century" (Straus, 2009). Austerlitz ends the latent period of trauma in German literature and begins the transition to the conscious part of the historical memory of the Holocaust. For Sebald, literature is a way of preserving the past, "writing to him is an opportunity to create little lagoons separated from time" (Sebald, 2011). Sebald's latest novel is a book about the past, a book of remembrance, and a book of investigation. Its author embodies it in "Austerlitz", hence the universal human search for identity, the struggle to impose the coherence of memory.

The representation of the memory of the painful past, the traumatic experience of World War II, the use of symbols as the support of cultural memory, contribute accordingly to the representation of the historical past the dominant factor of self-identification. The presentation of events of the past here is not impersonal, but as a testimony of the protagonist, as a reconstruction of his childhood and the return of personal memories displaced from consciousness.

The American researcher M. Hirsch introduced the term "post-memory", coined the term "post-memory" to describe the influence of tragic events from the historical past on the personal formation of the next generations (Prager, 2015). She questions the notion of "individual memories" concerning the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century. In concurrence with A. Assmann, M. Hirsch argues that the verbalization of memories enables them to be shared, discussed, affirmed, and, in the end, written down (Malikova, 2020). And she singles out photographs as a special form of "recording" memories that have become collective. Referring to Sebald's artistic experience, M. Hirsch argues that all the images of history have already been "imprinted" on our memories and that "our interest in history...is little more than looking through a series of 'patterns' stored in our memory storerooms" (Prager, 2015).

Sebald W. uses a new form of novel narrative in which the truthfulness of the story of the past, par-

ticularly the Holocaust, is created by investing the exile's personal biography, his pain and guilt, and aesthetic visualization, which, according to the writer, coincides with the moral truth.

2. Literature review

Among the significant body of scholarly and critical literature devoted to the problem of the poetics of W. Sebald's works, we can single out the publications of the last few years that are closest to our theme.

The complex polyphony of genre ambiguity in the novel *Austerlitz*: autofictional writing Hansen (2012), traveler's notes (traveling), Lobo (2019), historical studies Gawollek (2012), and intellectual collages are usually demonstrated in relation to the consequences of the Second World War, for example, as refraction of aesthetics and ethics in the narrative structure of *Austerlitz* Michaud (2014), Tischel (2006), the verbal and the visual, Landwehr (2018) the connection of architecture, the object world, and visual inlays with the problem of memory Lee (2017), the search for self, the origins of one's own existence, self-identity Botez (2013), and bricolage as a game of words and imagination, imagination and text, fact and fiction in connection with narrative (Ning, 2020).

This approach is based on the lessons of Henri Bergson that any event of human memory is inevitably real. For Sebald, the question is not how to prove genuine, the real intertwined with fiction to the point of complete indistinction, or to distinguish the fictional from the actual, but how to make the psychological individual experience not just part of a giant archive, but something actual "here and now".

The purpose of this article is to depart from Sebald's definition of the novel *Austerlitz* as a book of "uncertain genre" Eshel (2003), documentary fiction, as literature, the latter described as a documentary and artistic experience, where the real combines with fiction, to reveal the technique of bricolage as a form of "wild, "pre-rational way of thinking, as a technique of fitting together improvised materials (accounts of witnesses of the hero's childhood, old photographs, archival materials, newspaper clippings, as a certain scheme of installation of disparate episodes by Claude Simon, the collage technique of Alfred Deblin, stylistic traditions of the "new novel", etc.

The relevance of the study of intermediality, in particular the photographic component in Sebald's work, is confirmed by a significant number of works devoted to this problem, particularly in Western literary studies.

The scientific novelty is defined by the very object of the study, which is the analysis of the functioning of the various components of the bricolage, conjointly contributing to the realization of the goal - the clarification (illumination) of the moral problems related to the individual sense of guilt for the events of history, courageously thought out by Sebald. The personal contribution consists in illuminating how intermedial beginning combined with the multilingualism of the text actualizes the multilingual Crownshaw (2004) approach on the stylistic level, revealing the interaction of different verbal and visual languages: photography, architecture, history, and, respectively, the place of action - French, English, Welsh, Dutch, Czech and the semantic plane of the fiction text.

Being based on the actual interdisciplinary achievements of modern humanitarian studies, we suggest applying a promising vector - a polylingual approach, the logic of which allows us to unite the existing directions of studying Sebald's works and to consider his multi-component poetics as something integral.

The use of the proposed method allows us to conclude that photographs, architectural constructions, objects, things, archival documents, newspaper clippings (improvised materials) embody the collective memory of the past, induce to create one's own history of the event, generate individual memories, complete the narrative and reveal parallels between the fragments of the narrative, which are not united textually.

A comprehensive analysis of the functionality of the bricolage method in the novel *Austerlitz* has not yet been undertaken. Understanding the function of the visual and the logic of its interaction with the verbal text, in particular with the theme of memory and motifs of reference in the novel *Austerlitz* allows us to clarify the idea of the place of bricolage in the work of Sebald and clarify its specificity in the late narrative of the writer.

According to Sebald, memories are "jump-like," they appear and disappear spontaneously, not obeying the linear course of events, and so the writer's last novel is a complex structure, without a clear plotline, united by the bricolage method. In particular, archi-

tecture is presented in a game of associations, concrete architectural impressions with philosophical reflections, lyrical digressions, etc.

3. Main text

The work begins with a double exposition that arises in the melancholic mind of the unnamed narrator when he observes the Antwerp noctuaries, wherein the semi-darkness of the amazing pseudo-light are nocturnal animals with big eyes and inquisitive gazes, "which one can see and pure thinking try to pierce the surrounding darkness" (Bere, 2002, p.8) and the Antwerp Central Station waiting room with the Proustian title *Salle des pas perdus*. The people seated in semi-darkness under the high dome has the same sad faces as the residents of the noctuaries, and as the narrator states, "I suppose that is why I was hooked by this actually meaningless opinion, as if they were the last representatives of a half-extinct, exiled from their country, or an extinct people, the only survivors, for they all had the same mournful faces as the animals in the zoo" (Bere, 2002, p.11). The hero of the work, Jacques Austerlitz, escaped the German occupation as a child in Great Britain, where he was adopted by the childless family of a noble clergyman. Only after the death of his adoptive parents did the young man learn his real name - his family name was David Elias. In the mid-1960s, already as an architectural historian, Austerlitz returns to the continent ostensibly to write a scholarly work, but in fact to investigate the history of his past. The narrative time moves unevenly forward - the narrator meets Austerlitz in 1967 and then until 1975 each time by chance crosses paths with him in Antwerp, London, Brussels, Prague, where they have conversations about architecture, reflecting on the passage of time. Then fate takes them apart for twenty years and brings them together again at the end of 1996, in Paris. In the opposite direction moves the time of history, a time of trauma and reference, taking Austerlitz deeper and deeper into the past, to the extreme limit of the melancholic closure in himself, which he describes as a long-standing sickness somewhere deep within him. A reconstruction of memory takes place as Austerlitz tries to recall what no one has told him about. Subsequently, after finding a friend of his biological parents in Prague, the

hero, exploring his family's past, experiences an existential crisis: he destroys all of his research work and even loses the power of speech.

The recollection that he is deprived of any memory or ability to think or exist leads to a total desemantization of the world and its destruction, culminating in a Parisian hospital for the mentally ill in 1992. The very structure of the story in this work is unusual: the narrator does not tell the story but describes what he hears from the rambling monologues of Austerlitz. It is as if it were not a text, but the story itself, which someone tells and also shows photographs for authenticity. Austerlitz is the narrator, and the function of the unnamed narrator is reduced to recounting his monologues, devoid of any pretensions to "literariness," confined to linguistic constructions like "thus said Austerlitz," and so on. Gradually, the function of the hero shifts from people to objects, documents, bearers of the memory of personal and collective civilizational catastrophe. Antique objects, ancient photographs lead, according to Sebald, a wandering way of life and are only waiting for the moment when someone saves them (Bart et.al., (2011). Old photographs are a real core around which there is a void, an undeveloped context in which people and things are found. Silent witnesses break the blockade of traumatic silence around Austerlitz, embodied in images of blindness, dumbness, oblivion. Sebald accumulates metaphors of darkness, originating in the past, and constructs his world after the Holocaust. Before him, a "man without a past," the history of his family is unexpectedly revealed, a ghostly happy childhood, which, however, he did not really experience.

Sebald develops a project of a morally motivated concept of reference. He brings memories out of the corners of memory, using the device of Walter Benjamin's aesthetic creation of analogies (McCulloh, 2003).

The novel is saturated with allegories, full of metaphors, symbolic images, transitions from theme to theme, from one temporal plane to another. This recollection is reminiscent of a phantom hunt, a communication of the rational and the illusory.

The central participant in the novel is not the text itself, but the pictures in frames. Hidden from readers until a certain time the origins of depression, a sense of loneliness, and homelessness that govern the hero and narrator find manifestation in the prefiguration of architecture and nature, symbolizing the incom-

pleteness of the creative process, making possible access to the underlying foundations not only of art but also of personality itself (Gantner, 1960).

Temporary salvation from melancholy is provided at first by nature - the estate of the Austerlitz foster parents is constituted as a paradise with butterflies, exotic birds, children's amusements in harmony with the environment and is reproduced by ekphrasis paintings by English artist Turner. A passionate naturalist, Alfonso's grandfather invents a special optical device to perceive reality as a flowing, spilled glow: instead of glass he inserts thin gray silk into his glasses to perceive nature as if in a light haze. However, nature, and the people associated with it, are also subject to destruction, death, destruction.

Butterflies and moths symbolize the fragility, randomness, and ephemerality of life in the novel. Austerlitz speaks with great fascination about their life and death and ponders what their dreams might be like, what their pain and despair might be like. He imagines himself as a defenseless butterfly whose life can be cut short at any moment.

The only reliable way to describe the past is a scholarly study of Austerlitz on architecture as a stable element of European civilization by World War II.

London's Liverpool Street Station, which is the central location of the novel (where Austerlitz first met his adoptive parents), appears to the protagonist as a mysterious and frightening world where past and present coexist, namely the station premises are perceived simultaneously as ruins and as new buildings. Spatiality in the perception of time implies a special type of reference, and the text itself acquires not chronological, but simultaneous character.

Hence Sebald's melancholy, the realization that in today's world the past and historical consciousness are becoming less and less important. After all, for today's commercialized world, the past is interesting only through antiques. Sebald notes with regret around him the destruction of the old man, the decay of ancient castles, the rebuilding of streets, the demolition of old neighborhoods, the redevelopment of cities. For him, this is a symptom of the indifference of historical memory to all the officious attempts to memorialize the past. The Saturnic world of melancholy, manifested in the architectonic language of the work, correlates with the sphere of Austerlitz's profes-

sional activity: with its clearly structured and expressive orderliness, it opposes entropy and destruction.

By changing locations, by moving the hero in search of traces of his past, Sebald is close to Walter Benjamin, who sees difference as the only possible state of existence of the individual (Taberner, 2004).

But what for Benjamin is a point of reference and escape from the suffocating petty-bourgeois world, for Sebald turns out to be a lost paradise that he is now reassembling. Jacques Austerlitz, who has devoted his life to the study of fortifications, forts, palaces, and castles, suddenly realizes that he knows nothing of his personal history except that he was taken as a young boy to England. And now, a decade later, he travels around Europe, working in archives and libraries, collecting scattered information, building in himself a personal “museum of lost things,” a “personal history of catastrophes”. The most frightening thing about Austerlitz is the images of architectural structures that refer to the Holocaust: the Belgian fortress Breendonk interests him at first as a monstrous fortification, but later he learns from a newspaper article that the Nazis set up a concentration camp there. Or another remarkable place, the Palace of Justice in Brussels has “corridors and stairs leading to nowhere, as well as rooms and whole halls without doors where no one has ever entered. And their walled-up emptiness represents the deepest mystery of any authorized violence” (Kawashima, 2014, p. 36).

Sebald skillfully combines research data from different spheres of human existence with the line of the hero's personal journey; his self-consciousness, frustration, and recovery objectify a universal search for identity, a struggle for the coherence of memory, complicated by the protection of consciousness from oblivion and understatement. The writer demonstrates a new form of novel narrative, constructing his artistic cosmos on which lies the shadow of Shoah, requiring literally “new eyes”.

An important tool for constructing artistic discourse is the theme of memory, oblivion, which is revealed through photography as “the materialization of a ghostly phenomenon” (Kawashima, 2014).

The absence of subtexts under the photographs is a conscious writer's technique, giving the reader the freedom to determine the importance of this or that documentary evidence.

At the end of the work, it turns out that the photograph of the blond boy in the prop costume of the “henchman of the queen of roses” on the dust jacket is a childhood photograph of Austerlitz himself, who has spent a lifetime trying to find traces of his phantom past.

The new vision, acquired through the experience of mental illness and immersion in pathological melancholy, is given a new meaning. Visual allegories of the past are, in particular, the objects Austerlitz sees in the window of an antique store in Terezin, the Jewish ghetto where Austerlitz's mother, who later died in Auschwitz, was deported.

Under Austerlitz's careful gaze, unfamiliar things become almost family: he sees a moth-eaten stuffed squirrel: “it was sitting on a stump, looking at him inexorably with its glass eyes, and he suddenly remembered that its Czech name was veverka as if the name of a long-forgotten friend had finally come to his mind” (Bere, 2002). Objects from the Jewish ghetto in a broader, universal sense are allegories of death. Related to the theme of death, the fixation of the momentary and the ghostly is another theme: the salvation of things for eternity through the incredible efforts of human consciousness, by quoting the past. Sebald's visual allegories are resolved by the effect of the reflection of the human point of view, its peculiar “inverse”. Looking at antique objects, Austerlitz sees his own shadow in the window, as if he himself were the ghost of postwar Europe. To Barthes' Cartesian notion of the “reality effect” (Bart et. al., 2011) as an assertion of the exclusively discursive nature of literary verisimilitude, Sebald contrasts Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach (Merleau-Ponty & Smith, 1993), which is based on the interaction of the seeing with the seeing, that is the artist and the thing. What, then, connects Jacques Austerlitz with the philosopher Wittgenstein, whose eyes, along with those of the Czech photographer Tripp (Tripp, 1984), and the nocturnal animals, stare at readers from the first pages of the work? It is “an expression of horror, the seal of which marks their faces.” This is how the past looks at us, as “a solid catastrophe, piling ruin upon ruin,” and for Austerlitz offers a disheartening prospect of a vision of endless misery and suffering. The backward gaze of the past changes the beholder, constituting him anew and confronting him with the painful necessity of an answer. Reflecting on the gaze of the boy in the old photograph, Austerlitz states

that “he waited in the deserted field until I lifted the gauntlet and turned away from him the trouble already coming” (Bere, 2002, p.198).

4. Conclusions

The attitude towards the reader as a co-author, even as a psychoanalyst, connects Sebald’s novel with the tradition of the intellectual novel, with postmodern hypertexts, in which semantic units are presented not in the traditional linear sequence, but as a multiplicity of connections and semantic transitions. Consequently, Sebald’s artistic search is aimed at developing a peculiar style of presentation of the text, the latter, in turn, returned the archival experience of the past to the actual life of the current reader, distanced from the events of past years by a significant amount of literature, cinema. The poignancy of the experience of humanitarian catastrophe makes this work by Sebald a notable phenomenon in the context of artistic comprehension of traumatic memory.

References:

1. Straus, N. P. (2009). Sebald, Wittgenstein, and the Ethics of Memory. *Comparative literature*, 61(1), 439–53.
2. Sebald, W. G. (2011). *The emergence of memory: conversations with WG Sebald*. Seven Stories Press.
3. Prager, B. (2015). The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust by Marianne Hirsch. *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 33(3), 1499–151.
4. Oesmann, A. (2014). Sebald’s Melancholic Method: Writing as Ethical Memory in Austerlitz. *Monatshefte*, 106(3), 4529–471.
5. Malikova, M. (2020). Witnessing the Past in the Work of WG Sebald. *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture*, 47(3), 1779–184.
6. Hansen, D. T. (2012). WG Sebald and the tasks of ethical and moral remembrance. *Philosophy of Education Archive*, 1259–133.
7. Lobo, T. (2019). *A Picture Held Us Captive: On Aisthesis and Interiority in Ludwig Wittgenstein, Fyodor M. Dostoevsky and WG Sebald* (Vol. 6). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.
8. Gawollek, T. (2012). *Verschiedene Weisen die Vergangenheit literarisch aufzuarbeiten: WG Sebald und Jonathan Littell im Vergleich*. GRIN Verlag.
9. Michaud, J. (2014). *The Aesthetics and Ethics of Refraction: Narrative Structure, Imagery, and Temporality in WG Sebald’s Austerlitz* (Doctoral dissertation).
10. Tischel, A. (2006). *Aus der Dunkelkammer der Geschichte: zum Zusammenhang von Photographie und Erinnerung in WG Sebalds’ Austerlitz’*. na.
11. Landwehr, M. J. (2018). Schreibweisen der Unschärfe: Zur Ästhetik und Poetik der visuellen Unschärfe bei Robert Musil und WG Sebald by Philipp Alexander Ostrowicz. *Journal of Austrian Studies*, 51(3), 969–98.
12. Lee, Y. (2017). *Erinnerungspraktiken in der neuen Erinnerungsliteratur: ”Erfundene Erinnerung” in den Werken Im Krebsgang von Günter Grass und Austerlitz von WG Sebald* (Doctoral dissertation).
13. Botez, C. (2013). *Exploring the Edge of Trauma in WG Sebald’s Novel’Austerlitz’* (pp. 1499–156).
14. Ning, H. (2020). The Bricolage of Words and Images: WG Sebald’s Austerlitz. *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture*, 47(3), 1859–192.
15. Eshel, A. (2003). Against the Power of Time: The Poetics of Suspension in WG Sebald’s ”Austerlitz”. *New German Critique*, (88), 719–96.
16. Crownshaw, R. (2004). Reconsidering Postmemory: Photography, the Archive, and Post-Holocaust Memory in WG Sebald’s ”Austerlitz”. *Mosaic: A journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature*, 2159–236.
17. Bere, C. (2002). The book of memory: WG Sebald’s The Emigrants and Austerlitz. *The Literary Review*, 46(1), 1849–194.
18. Wilson, M. G. (2013). Sheets of Past: Reading the Image in WG Sebald’s Austerlitz. *Contemporary Literature*, 54(1), 499–76.
19. McCulloh, M. R. (2003). *Understanding WG Sebald*. Univ of South Carolina Press.
20. Gantner, J. (1960). *Formen des Unvollendeten in der neueren Kunst*. Francke.
21. Taberner, S. (2004). German Nostalgia? Remembering German-Jewish Life in WG Sebald’s Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz. *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 79(3), 1819–202.
22. Kawashima, K. (2014). *Autobiographie und Photographie nach 1900*. transcript-Verlag.
23. Bart, O., Agam, T., Weiss, P. L., & Kizony, R. (2011). Using video-capture virtual reality for children with acquired brain injury. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 33(179–18), 15799–1586.
24. Merleau-Ponty, M., & Smith, M. B. (1993). *The Merleau-Ponty aesthetics reader: Philosophy and painting*. Northwestern University Press.
25. Tripp, Jan P. (1984). *Die Kehrseite der Dinge*. Weingarten: Drumlin Verlag.