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'Something Stirring in Them': An Object-Oriented Reading of W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

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‘Something Stirring in Them’:
An Object-Oriented Reading of W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2014

Dedication

For Sam See, who was and is a vital presence.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks to Ann Cvetkovich, who introduced me to *Austerlitz* and who gave generously of her time and insight as this report developed. Mia Carter provided valuable feedback and encouragement as a second reader, while Jeff Boruszak, Erin Cotter, Alejandro Omidsalar, and Hannah Loeb all read early drafts and helped me clarify my understanding of the project. Finally, I want to express my love and appreciation for my graduate cohort in the UT Austin Department of English. I could not ask for a better community in which to learn, write, and grow.

Abstract

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An Object-Oriented Reading of W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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W.G. Sebald's final novel *Austerlitz* is often framed as a work of "postmemorial" Holocaust fiction. While trauma theory has generated valuable insights about the novel, its emphasis on witnessing (or failing to bear witness) tends to elide other important aspects of the text, most notably the careful attention *Austerlitz* brings to bear on physical things, spaces, and structures. This essay draws on recent work in object-oriented philosophy to suggest a new theoretical framework for reading Sebald's last novel. Taking *Austerlitz*'s meticulous descriptions of the physical world as my starting point, I trace how the text cultivates what Jane Bennett calls a "vital materialism," or a theory of matter that attends to the vitality of nonhuman objects. Instead of reading 'through' these descriptions for what goes unrepresented ("the main scenes of horror," in Sebald's phrase), I examine how the novel's attention to physical surfaces troubles the distinction between material things and immaterial processes like subjectivity, memory, and

affective response. Viewed in this light, I suggest that we might understand Sebald's 'surface readings' not as a failure to get beyond the surface to the depths, but as part of an alternative archival practice—one that facilitates, in turn, different modes of ethical engagement.

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> From the outset my main concern was with the shape and the self-contained nature of discrete things, the curve of banisters on a staircase, the molding of a stone arch over a gateway, the tangled precision of the blades in a tussock of dried grass. I took hundreds of such photographs at Stower Grange, most of them in square format, but it never seemed right to me to turn the viewfinder of my camera on people. In my photographic work I was always especially entranced, said Austerlitz, by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long.
>
> — W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

Introduction

In the passage above, Jacques Austerlitz, the title character of W.G. Sebald's final novel *Austerlitz,* is reflecting on his early experiments with photography. His meditations on his own photographic practice, though, would serve equally well as a description of the text he inhabits. *Austerlitz* shares its protagonist's decided preference for "discrete things" over people. Its landscapes and city scenes are populated largely by objects, ranging from train stations to knickknacks, archival documents to ruins. Since its publication in 2001, Sebald's text has generated a rich body of critical literature in fields as diverse as architectural history, translation studies, and photography theory. *Austerlitz* is often framed as a work of "postmemorial" Holocaust fiction, the story of a middle-aged architectural historian's attempts to come to grips with the events that claimed the

lives of his Jewish parents and severed the link to his own early history.[1] As J.J. Long notes, trauma theory remains one of the predominant critical frameworks for reading the text (Fuchs and Long 16-18).[2] While this approach has generated valuable insights about the novel, trauma theory's emphasis on witnessing (or failing to bear witness) tends to elide other important aspects of the text, most notably the careful attention it brings to bear on physical things, spaces, and structures.[3]

This essay draws on recent work in object-oriented philosophy to suggest a new theoretical framework for reading Sebald's last novel. As Austerlitz travels to archives, museums, and historical sites in the novel, searching for evidence of his family, he must continually renegotiate the relationship between the fragility of memory and the solidity of its objects—a division that, like a photographic image left in the developing bath, becomes less clearly defined the longer he clings to it. Taking *Austerlitz*'s meticulous descriptions of the physical world as my starting point, I trace how the text cultivates what Jane Bennett calls a "vital materialism," or a theory of matter that attends to the vitality of nonhuman objects (Bennett 16). Instead of reading 'through' these descriptions for what goes unrepresented ("the main scenes of horror," in Sebald's phrase), I examine how *Austerlitz*'s attention to physical surfaces troubles the distinction between material things and immaterial processes like subjectivity, memory, and affective response

[1] Marianne Hirsch defines "postmemory" as "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (*The Generation of Postmemory* 103).

[2] Long's "Bibliographical Essay" in *W.G. Sebald and the Writing of History* (2007) provides a useful overview of major trends in Sebald criticism, in both German and English, up to 2007.

[3] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, for example, describe the Holocaust as "the unprecedented, inconceivable, historical occurrence of 'an event without witness'—an event eliminating its own witness" (Felman and Laub xvii), while Cathy Caruth argues that trauma demands "the witnessing, *precisely,* of impossibility" (Caruth 1995, 10).

(Sebald, *The Emergence of Memory* 80).

As Bennett and countless others have observed, the mind/matter binary undergirds multiple forms of exploitation and violence, including those forms of structural or systemic violence that are, for Sebald, a defining feature of modernity. Engaging with the ongoing effects of such violence demands not only different forms of representation, but also other ways of conceptualizing the relationship between our present moment and traumatic histories that are not yet safely 'past.' It also means rethinking what forms of historical engagement are possible or, indeed, desirable. While *Austerlitz*'s meticulous descriptions of things, spaces, and structures have struck many readers as affectively thin or flat, lacking the emotional depth or the degree of *humanity* we expect from Holocaust literature, I read this flatness as a deliberate repudiation of a testimony-based model of historical witness.[4] In rejecting what Heather Love calls the "empathetic witness model," *Austerlitz* must develop other methods for putting the reader into contact with modernity's incredible capacity for engineering destruction. Viewed in this light, we might understand Sebald's 'surface readings' not as a failure to get beyond the surface to the depths, but as part of an alternative archival practice—one that facilitates, in turn, different modes of ethical engagement.

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[4] Ruth Franklin critiques Sebald's "disengagement" from the events he describes, arguing that this distance "amounts to an aestheticizing of catastrophe" (*The Emergence of Memory* 138). In the same essay, Franklin cites a piece by Dieter Forte published in the German periodical *Der Spiegel*, in which Forte argues that Sebald "prefers the indirect method, the clear reports, the clarity of calm observation; he remains distant from the actual horror" (137).

A Different Kind of Object

Austerlitz frames itself as a series of reconstructed conversations between an unnamed German narrator and Jacques Austerlitz, an itinerant scholar obsessed with the "architectural style of the capitalist era" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 33). Beginning with their first encounter in Antwerp's Centraal Station in 1967 and ending with their final meeting in Paris in 1997, the novel chronicles the development of a relationship that is at once extraordinarily intimate and curiously detached, marked by long gaps in communication and renewed by chance encounters in unlikely places. Initially, the narrator says, it was "almost impossible to talk to [Austerlitz] about anything personal"—for, incredibly, Austerlitz's extraordinarily wide-ranging knowledge does not extend to twentieth century history, including his own: "As far as I was concerned the world ended in the nineteenth century" (140). Separated from his Czech Jewish parents and sent to Wales as part of the *Kindertransport* program just prior to the war, Austerlitz grew up in complete ignorance of his previous life. It is only in middle age, after experiencing a strange revelation in a train station, that he begins to seek out the truth about his origins.

Large sections of the novel are given over to descriptions and photographs of the things, structures, and spaces that Austerlitz encounters as he travels to various sites and archives associated with the Holocaust. The grainy, black-and-white images reproduced in the text, ostensibly created or gathered by Austerlitz himself, represent only a small fragment of a much vaster archive: his scholarly researches on "the architectural style of the capitalist era," an undertaking that has long since "outstripped [its] original purpose

as a project for a dissertation, proliferating in his hands into endless preliminary sketches" (33). The forms of observation and information collection Austerlitz practices in his 'fieldwork' are general, in the sense that they can be applied to nearly any object, and generative, in terms of the volume of material they produce, yet they have a relentlessly exteriorizing effect on the observer himself. In fact, Austerlitz's mind often seems less like a narrative consciousness than a complex but narrowly defined information system, designed to collect and store massive amounts of historical data without situating this information in relation to his own first person perspective. Though he has devoted most of his adult life to amassing information about the structures and spaces he occupies, Austerlitz's mental and emotional life is rigidly delineated by the data collection systems he has fine-tuned since his early student years. As J.J. Long writes, Austerlitz "never materializes as a subject in possession of a full interiority," remaining "in effect external to himself" even as he attempts to reconstruct the narrative of his early history (Long, *Image Archive Modernity* 163, 171).

If Austerlitz is not quite a subject, nor are the physical things and structures described in the novel quite 'objects,' at least in the conventional sense of the word. *Austerlitz,* I contend, is fascinated by what Bennett calls "thing-power"—the capacities of nonhuman objects to disrupt, diverge from, and ultimately complicate our ability to speak of, a purely human history (Bennett xvi). Bennett's work on vital materialism reflects a growing interdisciplinary interest in what is loosely known as "object-oriented theory." Informed by a variety of theoretical precursors, among them Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, object-oriented thinkers share a desire to rethink dominant theories of

materiality in an effort to reconfigure a seemingly intractable subject-object divide. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on two key tenets of object-oriented thought: first, the idea that there is "a vitality intrinsic to materiality," and second, that recognizing this vitality would necessitate an expanded definition of the 'object'—one that would treat ideas, affects, and fictions as entities in themselves, varying from physical entities not in essential substance, but in their degree of intensity (Bennett 3).

In his book *The Democracy of Objects,* the philosopher Levi Bryant writes that post-Kantian Western philosophy has overwhelmingly privileged issues of how humans perceive and interact with the world (*Democracy of Objects* 16). By elevating questions of access (epistemology) over questions of being (ontology), Western thought has effectively divided up the world into subjects and objects, split between the human actor or agent and the nonhuman element (the raw, passive 'stuff' upon which agents work). From this perspective, objects exist for me and through me alone: it is the "I"—alive, vibrant, and possessed of a singular agency—who animates dead matter, invests it with meaning, and, ultimately, conditions its very existence. No thing can be said to exist outside the scope of my own thought; and my thought can only encompass that which currently exists in some relation to me. Object-oriented ontology rejects this construction, dubbed "correlationism." Instead, OOO presumes a *flat ontology,* which holds that all things exist equally—independent of human perception, or of their relations to other objects.

It is at this point that the term 'object' becomes somewhat problematic, as it is difficult for us to think an object that is not already in some relation to a subject. Another

issue is that for most people, ‘object’ implies a physical thing: something produced or discovered, available for us to pick up or manipulate. This emphasis on handling still assumes an implicit distinction between material objects (which are assumed to have a body) and those transcendent, ‘immaterial’ processes that produce and/or give meaning to matter. As I will seek to demonstrate, it is this division, and the corresponding hierarchy of being it reflects, that *Austerlitz* critiques: the notion, for example, that I can touch this paper, but I cannot touch capitalism, or the Holocaust, or grief. The feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz writes that, in questioning the material/immaterial distinction, the aim is not to “reduce what there is to matter,” but to cultivate “an understanding of the real that […] is capable of conceptualizing the nuances and layers of identity that matter carries within itself” (“Significant Differences” 1). Bryant makes a similar argument, writing:

> I certainly don’t, for example, wish to reduce symphonies, signifying systems, etc. to neurological events. [But] in drawing attention to the materiality of all those things we often think of as incorporeal—signifiers, signifying systems, discourses, cultural practices, etc.—a whole set of issues come into relief that we, in cultural studies, would not ordinarily notice. We come to recognize the *temporal* and *spatial* features of discourse, ideology, signifying systems, etc. (“Field of Discourse”) [emphasis in original]

An object-oriented, vital materialist perspective does not reduce the subject to object status, nor does it disqualify the human perspective (as if there were only one mode of being human). Instead, it facilitates an expansion of attention that pluralizes angles of access onto the world while contextualizing our own. The subject is conceived of as an “object among many others”: radically other, wholly independent, yet entangled and enmeshed in a dynamic network of object-relations (Bryant, *Democracy* 22).

Addressing fears that adopting such a worldview would "authorize the treatment of people as mere things," Bennett observes that:

> [The] Kantian imperative to treat humanity always as an end-in-itself and never merely as a means does not have a stellar record of success in preventing human suffering or promoting human well-being […] If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief. Vital materialism would thus set up a kind of safety net for those humans who are now, in a world where Kantian morality is the standard, routinely made to suffer because they do not conform to a particular (Euro-American, bourgeois, theocentric, or other) model of personhood. (12)

Grosz similarly acknowledges that while this ontological framework does not "give us a politics (or an ethics) in itself," it can "orient us toward political and ethical action" ("Significant Differences" 2). As much of the more explicitly political work in object-oriented theory has focused on environmental politics, *Austerlitz* offers a different context for thinking about what is ethically at stake in endorsing a vital materialist ontology.[5] The text situates itself within a longer history of modernity, with many of its allusions dating back to the late medieval and early Renaissance periods. Its particular focus on twentieth century history, though, throws the question of the materiality/subjectivity relationship into sharp relief, as the Holocaust constitutes the modern era's most chilling example of what can happen when we ground our political and moral judgments in a too-firm distinction between people and things. Rather than confirming the inherent uniqueness and worth of the individual human, such moral

[5] See, for example, Bennett's reflections on food politics and waste disposal in *Vibrant Matter*, or Timothy Morton's extensive discussions of the contemporary ecological crisis in *The Ecological Thought* (2012) and *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (2013).

systems often open up the possibility of redrawing the lines between human/nonhuman, in order to relegate certain groups of people to object status. Grosz writes that the human/nonhuman division operates by the same logic as other, familiar binaries—between mind and matter, subject and object, culture and nature, and so on (*Volatile Bodies* 3). In each of these pairings, the former term defines itself through the (often violent) expulsion of the latter: for instance, body or matter is defined negatively as "what is not mind, what is distinct from and other than the privileged term," understood in "nonhistorical, naturalistic, organicist, passive, inert terms" (*Volatile Bodies* 3).

If matter is already vital, as these theorists suggest, then the task is not to bestow vitality upon objects but to develop ways of tuning our attention differently, so as to better perceive various bodies (human, textual, and otherwise) as entangled, enmeshed, and mutually constituting. Within object-oriented philosophy, the concept of the 'encounter' is often used to describe how entities can affect or influence each other while still remaining "withdrawn," or irreducible to the perspective of any single observer.[6] According to the object-oriented literary theorist Timothy Morton, the encounter must be figured as an experience, not just an event occurring at some fixed point in space and time (*The Ecological Thought* 78). An encounter produces something new—a weird, shifting assemblage of things, subjects, experiences, and affects—but it also names a kind of paradigm shift, a change in our angle of vision. The encounter does not stage a confrontation between a preexisting human subject and a discrete, self-contained object.

[6] The notion that objects "withdraw" from complete access is an important tenet of object-oriented thought, but not strictly relevant to my argument here. Cf. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* for a longer discussion of this issue.

Rather, it brings us into an intimate awareness of our entanglement in a dynamic network of relations: “When I encounter the strange stranger, I gaze into depths of space far most vast and profound than physical space that can be measured with instruments […] Everything is intimate with everything else” (Morton 78).

Spatial Memory and the Rail Station

In *Austerlitz*, experiences like the one Morton describes occur most frequently in rail stations—a reminder, perhaps, that the figure of the encounter cannot be easily disentangled from long histories of trauma, erasure, and displacement. In his cultural geography of the German railway system, Todd Presner describes the nineteenth-century rail station as the "best material witness to German/Jewish modernity […] an embodied, transnational space emblematic of both the emancipatory hopes and the destructive nightmares of an epoch" (2).[7] For Presner, as for Sebald, railways embody the "dialectic of modernity," one face of which is "construction, progress, and emancipation," and the other "destruction, regression, and enslavement" (Presner 10). The 'objectifying' effect of rail transit was also a principal anxiety for nineteenth century writers, who worried that "the industrial nature of railway travel effectively turned passengers into parcels" (Long 145). In *Austerlitz,* train stations have special resonance as sites of convergence but also of dissolution, marked "by both blissful happiness and profound misfortune" (34). Most critics have emphasized the associations with "profound misfortune"—not surprising, given the tendency to frame the novel as a work of Holocaust literature and thus to associate rail transit with mass deportations. In an essay on narrative temporality in *Austerlitz,* Amir Eshel argues that the train station serves as "the crypt of the modern age"

[7] Drawing on Walter Benjamin's analysis of rail transit in *The Arcades Project*, Presner situates the rail station within a longer history of modernity, focusing on (pre-Holocaust) depictions of rail transit in nineteenth-century German and Jewish literature. Presner's description of his project—a "cultural geography" that examines "the spatial constitution of a German/Jewish modernity by mapping its intellectual and cultural history onto a decidedly cultural-geographic surface: the railway system"—also resonates with Sebald's extended meditations on the relationship between rail transit and spatial memory in *Austerlitz* (Presner 12).

(Eshel 85). Focusing on one of Austerlitz's long digressions on the construction of the Liverpool Street Station in London, Eshel writes:

> [Humans] are removed from their 'natural' place, and nature itself is crushed by the nonhuman, indeed inhuman, body of modernity—a body whose threatening muscle […] is that of railway transportation. What is left of 'nature' is only railway tracks, spaces of transition on which trains carrying their material and human loads are rushing back and forth. 'Time,' standardized time, and railway transportation are two elements of the nexus of modernity and barbarism. They participate in and perpetuate the cycle of ruthless, narrow rationalism (85).

Eshel's reading complicates the conventional nature/culture divide, tracing out a more complex relationship between nature, technology, and humankind. Modernity's technological developments—including the rail system—are the products of human activity, yet they are aligned here with the nonhuman ("indeed inhuman") realm, figured in antagonistic opposition to both humanity and a rapidly vanishing natural world. In treating the rail system as both symptom and cause of a "ruthless, narrow rationalism," Eshel's reading resonates with Austerlitz's own remark, made during his first conversation with the narrator, that "time truly [reigned] supreme" in Europe only after the standardization of the railway tables in the mid-nineteenth century (*Austerlitz* 12). This regimenting of time, Austerlitz says, also produced a static conception of space: "It was only by following the course time prescribed that we could hasten through the gigantic spaces separating us from each other" (12).

Situating Austerlitz's experiences within this context, then, allows us to consider how the encounter radically reconfigures the subject-object relationship without positing

it as a utopian or apolitical experience, unconstrained by the limits of bodies, identities, and relations of power. While the novel draws a strong connection between train stations and a rigidly linear temporality, Austerlitz's fascination with train stations cannot be read in purely negative terms. In the conversation cited above, he notes that the experience of traveling by train seems to reveal the "illusionistic and illusory" nature of constructs like linear time and fixed space (12). Rail stations are liminal spaces, subsumed into patterns of movement that are shaped in turn by the temporal rhythms of industrial capitalism. But stations, like objects, are also disturbingly solid: sites of densely knotted history, feeling, and experience, which are permeable in some ways and yet never dissolve entirely into the currents of time or capital in which they are immersed.

Early in the novel, Austerlitz tells the narrator that he often finds himself caught up "in the grip of dangerous and entirely incomprehensible currents of emotion" when he enters the Parisian train stations (34). While the narrator interprets this comment as a rare glimpse into the inner workings of his friend's mind, Austerlitz's remark seems destabilize any easy distinction between interior and exterior. In fact, the experience he describes gestures towards a different understanding of the subject, one which bears a strong resemblance to the railway system itself—a subject imagined not as a wholly self-contained agent, divided between private thought and public action, but as a radically open system, crisscrossed by forces that exceed the individual's complete comprehension or control. As Austerlitz's own experiences in train stations demonstrate, such spaces often activate memory in unpredictable ways, including forms of collective or affective memory that cannot be said to 'belong' to any specific individual. While these

experiences are “dangerous” in that they threaten the self’s coherency, they also offer a model of memory that is exterior and place-bound rather than grounded in the interiority of the individual. As such, they facilitate forms of contact with the past that Austerlitz finds impossible to attain elsewhere (for example, on his research trips to various institutional archives like the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris or the Imperial War Museum in London).

One of the most pivotal encounters in the novel—and the first ‘contact’ Austerlitz has with his own early history—takes place at London’s Liverpool Street Station. Austerlitz, who has been suffering from a series of mysterious and increasingly debilitating anxiety attacks, finds himself repeatedly drawn to the Liverpool station, a place he describes as “one of the darkest and most sinister places in London” (128). Built below street level, the old rail station exists in a state of “eternal dusk,” its clouded glass ceiling admitting only a faint and diffuse grey light (128). The walls and columns are thickly coated by a “greasy black layer formed, over the course of a century, by coke dust and soot, steam, sulfur, and diesel oil” (128). For Austerlitz, the grease on the walls also recalls the psychic residuum of suffering that he imagines to have accumulated at this site, which housed the notorious Bedlam asylum before the station was built. “I often wondered whether the pain and suffering accumulated on this site over the centuries had ever really ebbed away,” Austerlitz says, “or whether they might not still, as I sometimes thought […] be sensed as we passed through them” (130).

For months, Austerlitz returns to the site daily to watch the crowds of “innumerable people [passing] in great tides” through the station (128). These faceless

crowds never break apart into individual travelers; instead, they are described as a kind of natural or elemental force akin to a river, "coming together, moving apart, and being held up at barriers and bottlenecks like water against a weir" (128). Though he stands physically in their midst, Austerlitz remains at a remove from them. He is not traveling; nor is he, as an academic, bound to the same regimented schedule as the laborers and businesspeople moving through the station on their way to and from work. While Austerlitz can recount the details of the station's history with ease, he is similarly unable to locate himself within it. For Austerlitz, this inability to situate himself in relation to a larger collective or a longer history springs from his failure establish any kind of intellectual or emotional connection between his present and the past. This disconnect creates in him an abiding fear, reiterated throughout the novel, that he himself is not real: "As far back as I can remember […] I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all" (185).

One day, by chance, Austerlitz crosses over the builders' fence that separates the active lines from the disused section of the station. Upon stepping into a large, vacant hall formerly used as a ladies' waiting room ("the existence of which, in this remote part of the station, had been quite unknown to me"), he has a remarkable experience:

> Minutes or even hours may have passed while I stood in that empty space beneath a ceiling which seemed to float at a vertiginous height, unable to move from the spot, with my face raised to the icy gray light, like moonshine, which came through the windows in a gallery beneath the vaulted roof, and hung above me like a tight-meshed net or a piece of thin, fraying fabric […] From time to time, and just for a split second, I saw huge halls open up, with rows of pillars and colonnades leading far into the distance […] 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 (135).

Apart from his entry into the room, neither Austerlitz nor the space itself have undergone any discernible physical change. In fact, Austerlitz is rooted to the spot, his face upturned to the ceiling. Yet without moving, he experiences a sudden shift—a change in his angle of vision that, for Morton, both heralds and constitutes the encounter. Austerlitz is not depicted here as a self-contained subject who decides to look, nor is there anything passive about this encounter with the more-than-human world. Instead, a way of looking takes hold of him, seizing him in a way that is painful and even violent (his head is "wrenched back"). Reality does not make itself available to Austerlitz as a specimen to be described, studied, or known. It throws him, making it impossible to establish where the 'material' realm ends and the 'immaterial' begins.

In this passage, light—more conventionally depicted as atmospheric or immaterial—assumes corporeal form, appearing in Austerlitz's view like a net or a ragged piece of cloth stretched across the hall. Brightest at the ceiling, fading as it sinks lower, the light seems to be "running down in black streaks, rather like rainwater running down the smooth trunks of beech trees or over the cast concrete façade of a building" (135). (This description, which implicitly links the Liverpool station episode to the novel's more overtly natural historical sections, exemplifies what I will later call Sebald's 'natural historical' gaze—a way of looking that registers continuity rather than disconnect between the human and nonhuman worlds.) Light is often associated with

illumination or increased clarity of vision, its presence and quality either facilitating or impeding the observer's ability to perceive an external reality. Embodied in this way, however, the "icy gray light" becomes an object in its own right, capable of encountering other objects—including Austerlitz himself. Rather than confirming the contours of an objective and knowable world, this experience awakens in Austerlitz a sense of a much stranger, less fixed reality.

Near the end of this episode, Austerlitz becomes aware that he is not alone in the room. Across the hall, a middle-aged couple is meeting a child who has just arrived on the train. As Austerlitz watches them, he sees that the young boy is carrying a rucksack identical to his own. "But for that rucksack I don't think I would have known him," Austerlitz says—for, as he realizes suddenly, the boy is the four-year-old Jacques Austerlitz, arriving at the Liverpool Street Station to meet his Welsh foster parents more than fifty years earlier (137). Significantly, this moment of recognition—the first contact he has been able to establish with his past—is not framed as a recuperation. Austerlitz's vision of the arrival scene is depicted as doubly external, in that it occurs spatially outside of himself (he stands at one end of the hall and the boy at the other), and also remains irreducible to his own first-person perspective. Austerlitz recognizes himself, but his past does not return to him as lived experience or sense-memory, assimilated back into the "I." Initially, this experience only reinforces his feelings of estrangement, causing him to experience a "sense of shame and sorrow" and a "terrible weariness […] at the idea that I had never really been alive, or was only now being born, almost on the eve of my death" (137). In a larger sense, however, this episode marks a turning point, both in the plot (the

encounter galvanizes Austerlitz into seeking out his past) and in terms of how Austerlitz conceives of his relationship to space and time. In place of a fixed, linear history, Austerlitz begins to develop the sense that:

> time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like, and the longer I think about it the more it seems to me that we who are still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead, that only occasionally, in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, do we appear in their field of vision (185).

Imagining time as a set of interlocking spaces might seem to produce an even flatter, more grid-like vision of reality than a strictly linear temporality. But this conception also permits Austerlitz to imagine other ways of moving through time, offering an alternative to the understanding of history as an inexorable forward march. In describing the rules that govern these interlocking spaces, Austerlitz invokes a now-defunct branch of physics and natural geometry practiced in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: stereometry, or "the art or science of measuring solids; that branch of geometry which deals with solid figures, solid geometry; the practical application of this to the measurement of solid bodies" (*OED*). A "higher form of stereometry" would expand the category of "solid bodies" to encompass not just physical things, but also those supposedly incorporeal elements or processes like light, feeling, and history—entities envisioned here not as bodiless or transcendent, but as enmeshed in material reality, possessed of a specific and tangible weight.[8]

[8] In an interview shortly after the publication of his novel *The Emigrants* (1992), Sebald reflected: "The older you get, in a sense, the more you forget […] But that which survives in your mind acquires a very considerable degree of density, a very high degree of specific weight" (*Emergence* 54).

Walter Benjamin and Object-Oriented Theory: An Encounter

Though *Austerlitz* never directly references Walter Benjamin, the German critic looms large in the novel's imagination, both as a philosopher of history and as a model of critical practice. Austerlitz himself is a quasi-Benjaminian figure; his unfinished, ever-expanding dissertation project on the "architectural style of the capitalist era," for example, is an obvious allusion to Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project,* his massive but fragmentary study of the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades (*Austerlitz* 33). Like the object-oriented theorists, Benjamin argues that static conceptions of time and history emerge out of, and are continually reinforced by, a static conception of matter. In his 1940 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," he outlines a detailed critique of what he calls 'historicism,' a philosophy of history that views the past as linear, successive, and fixed. Benjamin writes that historicism "rightly culminates in universal history, [for] its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time" ("Theses" 262). The historicist critic gives the past the form of an "'eternal' image," stringing it into a sequence of events that can be told repeatedly and without variation, "like the beads of a rosary" ("Theses" 263). In "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Benjamin articulates an even clearer link between historicism and a conventional understanding of the object as inert, passive matter. The historicist, Benjamin writes, views the past as "an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things," to be amassed and inventoried in "the aererium of civilization" (*Arcades Project* 14).

Though Benjamin's critique of historicism is realized most fully in his later

essays, the relationship between linear history and 'non-vital' materiality emerges first in a much earlier work: his graduate dissertation on seventeenth-century baroque drama. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), Benjamin warns that a flat conception of matter produces a similarly 'flat' version of history, which he calls "natural history." Like many of Benjamin's central concepts, "natural history" invokes an older Western intellectual tradition, but takes on a specific and highly idiosyncratic meaning within the context of his work. In Benjamin's analysis, the baroque dramatist views material things, structures, and landscapes as a raw, formless substance upon which human history is stamped or "impressed" (*OGT*). As in a historicist framework, the nonhuman world is made to serve as either prop or setting in the enactment of an exclusively human drama. While the historicist draws from this relationship a sense of heightened agency, grounded in the belief that the "things" of the past can be acquired and hoarded up by those in power, the baroque dramatist perceives this relationship in terms of diminished agency (and, by extension, responsibility). For the baroque dramatist, Benjamin writes, history becomes "chronicle" (*OGT* 90). Human catastrophe thus "merges into setting," accorded no greater ethical valence than a natural disaster (*OGT* 92). Both the historicist and the baroque natural historical framework prevent us from seeing the relationship between past and present as a site of dynamic and ongoing negotiation, whose very contestation signals the potential for becoming-otherwise.

Benjamin's ideal critic is the historical materialist, who sees "the work of the past as still uncompleted" ("Edward Fuchs" 35). Historical materialism, he writes, "perceives of no epoch in which the completed past could even in part drop conveniently, thing-like,

into mankind's lap"; it seeks to supply instead "a unique experience with the past" ("Eduard Fuchs" 35-6; "Theses" 262). This description of the historical materialist's experiential relationship to history recalls the language of the encounter: an experience that, for Austerlitz, opens up new ways of situating himself in relation to the past, and of accounting for the persistent "claim" that this past still exercises over the present (Benjamin, "Theses" 254). Though object-oriented theory's central concerns often overlap with Benjamin's, no sustained effort has yet been made to bring these two bodies of work into conversation.[9] In my next reading, I seek to draw out some of these connections, treating *Austerlitz* as an encounter of sorts between object-oriented theory and Benjamin's philosophy of history.

Upon arriving in Terezin, the site where his mother was interned, Austerlitz finds the town oddly deserted. As he wanders along the streets and alleyways, making notes and taking photographs, he is confronted by a series of locked doors and shuttered windows. These doors physically bar him from entering the buildings, and, in most critical readings of the text, symbolize the impossibility of accessing the past he has come in search of. Though he may describe and document the physical exteriors of the buildings (the whitewashed walls, the spiders "spinning their threads, scuttling on crooked legs") he cannot gain access to the secret heart of experience itself (190). The issue of blocked access is enacted even at the level of the sentences themselves: Austerlitz recalls, for example, how he "thought [he] sensed" that the doors of Terezin

[9] This may be because of Benjamin's interest in the figure of the "collector"—a term which, in the context of object-oriented ontology, may seem to imply that the human is still privileged as the subject who gives meaning or significance to lifeless objects. I return to this point in the final section of my paper.

“[obstructed] access to a darkness never yet penetrated” (190). Thinking is subtly dissociated here from sensing, opening up a gap that can only be bridged by an imprecise translation of feeling into thought. In his reading of the Terezin episode, J.J. Long writes that Austerlitz is shut out from the past, estranged not just from the knowledge of his mother’s fate but also from the possibility of experiencing the world as she and the other Jewish internees did: “The knowledge Austerlitz desires precludes internalization, or, to put it another way, Austerlitz will always be shut out from the knowledge he seeks” (Long 160). Austerlitz seems condemned to always arrive too late and understand too little about his own history—condemned, in other words, to have “no place in reality” (*A* 185).

An object-oriented reading of this episode, by contrast, opens up different ways of reading the ‘barrier’ between past and present. In the novel, Austerlitz’s description of the closed doors transitions almost immediately into another recounting, this time of a dream he has some time after leaving Terezin. In this dream, Austerlitz has managed to gain access to the Terezin barracks at last. Instead of finding his mother or the other internees within, he discovers that the barracks have been “filled from floor to ceiling with layer upon layer of the cobwebs woven by those ingenious creatures,” the spiders (190). Upon waking, he recalls how he:

> tried to hold fast to my powdery gray dream image, which sometimes quivered in a slight breath of air, and to discover what it concealed, but it only dissolved all the more and was overlaid by the memory, surfacing in my mind at the same time, of the shining glass on the display windows of the ANTIKOS BAZAR […] where I had stood for a long time around midday in what proved to be the vain hope that someone might arrive and open this curious emporium. (194)

Like the spiderwebs in the Terezin barracks, which testify to decades of activity in the absence of human actors, the objects in the bazaar have a nonhuman vitality that compels Austerlitz's attention. The display case is crammed full of things: "hundreds of different objects" are visible in the window alone, which Austerlitz knows must represent "only a small part of the junk heaped up inside the shop" (195). In contrast with the empty streets and houses of Terezin, which are laid out "to a strict geometrical grid," the objects in the window seem haphazardly arranged, lacking a discernible ordering principle (195). Indeed, the longer Austerlitz stands looking at the display, the more it seems that the objects have not been arranged at all, at least not by a human hand. His initial assumption—that these "still lifes [were] obviously composed entirely at random"—gives way to a sense that the objects have in fact "grown quite naturally into the black branches of the lime trees standing around the square and reflected in the glass of the windows" (195). As the juxtaposition of natural imagery and human-made objects indicates, there is a different kind of natural historical gaze at work in this passage. This mode of perception does not, as Benjamin fears, reduce human history to natural disaster, but does suggest an intertwinement or a 'growing together' of these two seemingly divergent temporal and material frameworks. As Austerlitz later speculates, it is likely that many of the objects in the case once belonged to the Jewish inhabitants of the camp, but had "outlived their former owners and survived the process of destruction" (197). Like the rail station, the objects in the display case are linked not only to the temporal rhythms of the natural world, but also to longer histories of displacement and modern

habits of production and consumption.

Entranced by the display, Austerlitz draws physically closer until he is standing with "[his] forehead pressed against the cold window," staring at the array of objects before him (195). He describes the objects in the window with his typically fine-grained attention to detail, focusing especially on the array of materials (the "light, pale, summery linen" of an embroidered jacket, the "worn brocade cover" of an armchair) and each object's style of composition (the "fine brushstrokes" of a painted lampshade, the "moth-eaten" stuffed squirrel) (196). Gazing at a porcelain figurine of a rider pulling a girl onto a horse, Austerlitz thinks that the things exhibited in the shop window:

> were all as timeless as that moment of rescue, perpetuated but forever just occurring, these ornaments, utensils, and mementoes stranded in the Terezin bazaar, objects that for reasons one could never know had outlived their former owners and survived the process of destruction, so that I could now see my own faint shadow image barely perceptible among them (197).

In the act of describing these objects, Austerlitz becomes the object of his own attention: as available to description, yet still as vital and strange, as the items displayed in the window. As he apprehends himself in the present moment for the first time, he is integrated into his own textual and visual description (his shadow is present, if "barely perceptible," in the image of the display window reproduced in the text). Unlike the forms of documentation Austerlitz practices at the beginning of the novel, which seem to exclude him from his environment, this practice of description figures the seeing self as enmeshed in a network of relations with the objects he describes, grown "quite naturally" in their midst.

The display window separates Austerlitz from the things inside, and in that respect is, like the locked doors, a barrier to some real or imagined interior. But the glass is also a space in which natural, human, and artificially constructed objects seem to exist on the same footing—in which everything (the mementoes, the lime trees, reflection and shadow, human and nonhuman) is equally foregrounded. In that sense, the case is analogous to the text itself, which displays textual and visual 'objects' including historical anecdotes, memories, and visual artifacts like photographs. *Austerlitz*'s long, meticulous descriptions are also, like the glass of the display window, a two-dimensional surface where physical things and structures exist on the same level of 'reality' as thought, feeling, and historical processes. Within the space of Austerlitz's description above, for example, the seemingly impassable doors of Terezin dissolve into the dream of the finely woven cobwebs (delicate, yet strangely dense), which in turn give way as the display window "surfaces" in the text. Such passages make it increasingly difficult to parse the material from the immaterial, or to make a clear distinction between experience, thought, and fantasy. Like the light in the Liverpool station episode, literary representation emerges both as an object in its own right and as a contact zone—the staging ground for a series of shifting encounters between past and present, reader and text, observer and environment.

In a recent essay entitled "Context Stinks!", the literary critic Rita Felski decries a tendency among contemporary critics to "[treat] works of art only as cultural symptoms of their own moment, as moribund matter buried in the past" (575). Reflecting on the differences between a 'historicist' literary critical practice and an object-oriented one,

Felski concludes that the former approach limits our ability to imagine other forms of engagement with the "textual object":

> Instead of swarms of actors moving toward each other, we imagine an immobile textual object enclosed within an all-determining contextual frame. Frozen in time and space, the literary work is deprived of the very mobility that forms the precondition of our own experience of it. Impaled on the pin of our historical categories and coordinates, it exists only as an object-to-be-explained rather than a fellow actor and cocreator of relations, attitudes, and attachments (590).

Though Felski does not directly cite Benjamin here, her call to develop a mode of criticism that would treat the text as a "fellow actor and cocreator" of history suggests an important link between his critique and object-oriented theory. Her notion of the text as a specimen "impaled on [a] pin" also deliberately invokes the image of a sterile museum display, while the reference to "historical categories and coordinates" alludes to the forms of taxonomic analysis that dominated natural history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the historian Brian Ogilvie notes in his book *The Science of Describing,* this growing emphasis on taxonomy corresponded with the professionalization of natural history and the rise of the institutional natural history museum. Nineteenth century taxonomists practiced modes of collection and display that uprooted living specimens from their environments and pinned them into place so as to view and describe them from a panoptical perspective (Ogilvie). These methodologies, Ogilvie writes, supplanted an earlier Renaissance naturalist tradition that privileged collaborative scholarship and *in situ* engagement with the natural world (Ogilvie). Sebald makes frequent reference to figures from this older tradition in his literary work (most notably the seventeenth century polymath and naturalist Thomas Browne, who is a major figure in Sebald's 1995 novel

The Rings of Saturn).[10] As David Freedberg writes, the texts produced by Renaissance natural historians often mixed multiple sources and mediums, including poetry, anthropology, personal anecdote, and carefully hand-colored illustrations—a description reminiscent of Sebald's own mixed-genre texts (Freedberg 162).

In engaging with this older natural historical tradition, Sebald must also reckon with the dramatically altered political circumstances of his own era. In *On the Natural History of Destruction* (1999), a series of lectures on postwar literature, Sebald considers how such a history might be written. Reflecting on the Allied bombing campaign on major German cities, an event that permanently altered the country's physical and psychic landscape, Sebald writes:

> How ought such a natural history of destruction begin? With a summary of the technical, organizational, and political prerequisites for carrying out large-scale air raids? With a scientific account of the previously unknown phenomenon of the firestorms? With a pathological record of typical modes of death, or with the behavioral studies of the instincts of flight and homecoming? (*OND* 47)

Though these lectures are not my focus here, they are of interest in thinking about how Sebald understands the problem of representing human and ecological trauma on an unprecedented scale. Modernity's capacity for engineering destruction demands new forms of natural history—forms capable of registering how these "processes of destruction" increasingly cross and confound the division between the human and nonhuman worlds (*A* 197). Sebald's remarks suggest that such a history must incorporate macroscopic or 'objective' forms of analysis rather than remaining tethered to the

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[10] Cf. Mark McCulloh's *Understanding W.G. Sebald* for a further discussion of the Sebald/Browne connection. McCulloh describes Browne as "a kindred soul to Sebald" and the "spiritual patron" of *The Rings of Saturn* (61).

individual perspective, a move that anticipates Austerlitz's desire to map those "marks of pain [that] trace countless fine lines through history" (16). Posing these suggestions in the form of questions, though, leaves the issue unresolved, perhaps reflecting a reluctance to endorse the sort of historical "chronicle" that would fix events and actors in place like specimens "impaled on [a] pin" (Felski 595). As I will suggest in the final part of my paper, *Austerlitz* is guided by these concerns, but seeks also to reframe the debate—offering an alternative to the choice between intimacy and detachment, between a history told in the first person and a history that remains at a safe distance from its objects. *Austerlitz* extends Benjamin's critique but also expands the ontological playing field, transforming the "work of the past" into a collaborative project that engages human and nonhuman actors alike.

An Ethics of (Nonhuman) Witness

As Austerlitz travels to different sites associated with his family's past (including his childhood home in Prague, the Terezin ghetto where his mother was interned, and various state archives), he repeatedly experiences a bizarre form of déjà vu: the feeling not that he has seen these sites or objects before, but that they have already seen *him*. Looking at a series of snapshots from his childhood, Austerlitz muses on "the mysterious quality peculiar to such photographs when they surface from oblivion," a quality that gives one the impression "of something stirring in them […] as if they had a memory of their own and remembered us" (182). He experiences this phenomenon again while traveling via train from Prague to Germany for the first time since the *Kindertransport.* Disembarking at one of the stations along the way, Austerlitz:

> went out to the platform to photograph the capital of a cast-iron column which had touched some chord of recognition in me. What made me uneasy at the sight of it, however, was not the question whether the complex form of the capital, now covered with a puce-tinged encrustation, had really impressed itself on my mind when I passed through Pilsen with the children's transport in the summer of 1939, but the idea, ridiculous in itself, that this cast-iron column, which, with its scaly surface seemed almost to approach the nature of a living being, might remember me and was, if I may so put it, said Austerlitz, a witness to what I could no longer recollect for myself (221).

For Austerlitz, the cast-iron column occupies an uncertain position between the categories of past/present, organic/inorganic, and matter/mind. In wondering whether the column "had really impressed itself on my mind," Austerlitz implicitly places his mind and the material object on the same ontological footing. Memory is depicted here not as a meta-representational system, through which an external stimulus is given form and

meaning, but as a flat surface brought into contact with another flat surface (the "scaly surface" of the cast-iron column, to be exact) (221). Like the photographs or the train station, the cast-iron column does not serve simply as a repository for human histories, nor is it depicted as a medium through which Austerlitz is able to access his lost memories. While *Austerlitz* acknowledges that human memory can, and often does, function in this way, with places, situations, or things summoning up experiences long submerged or forgotten, what emerges here is a different conception of the object's relationship to history. What makes Austerlitz "uneasy" about the column is not his failure to remember whether or not he has seen it before, but rather the realization that his own memory or thought need not enter into the equation at all—that the cast-iron column may well possess its own independent capacity for bearing witness to history.

Though Austerlitz describes the idea as "ridiculous in itself," the novel frequently situates human consciousness on a continuum with animals, structures, and things. "There is no reason to suppose that lesser beings are devoid of sentient life," Austerlitz says at one point, speculating that "perhaps moths dream as well, perhaps a lettuce in the garden dreams as it looks up at the moon at night" (94). Certainly there is some degree of anthropomorphizing occurring in these examples, but as Morton and Bennett note, the anthropomorphic element in human perception need not be fatal to a vital materialist project. In fact, Bennett argues that it may even be productive:

> We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of 'talented' and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self). A touch of anthropomorphism, then, can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of being (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations" (99).

Bennett's comment about recognizing the "seeing self" as part of the "swarm of 'talented' and vibrant materialities" recalls the display window scene, but also implicitly gestures towards Sebald's specific natural historical "sensibility" (99). In these encounters, it is not that Austerlitz, the human subject, has graciously extended the capacity for acting, moving, or witnessing to a nonhuman entity within the circumscribed space of the encounter. Instead, Austerlitz's encounter with the cast-iron column, like his experience in the Liverpool Street Station, seems to heighten his own sensory-perceptual capabilities, allowing him to perceive things as having independent bodies, powers, and ways of affecting other entities.

Austerlitz frames this form of contact as a tactile experience that brings bodies into contact—or, as the word "chord" suggests, into resonance. Like the "stirring" photographs, touch has dual connotations of action and reaction: it is, by definition, always an encounter, never purely a doing or a receiving. Touch also, of course, suggests emotional response—implying that the 'flattening' of memory into matter, or the separation of witnessing from empathizing, does not forestall affective engagement. In fact, this conception of 'flat engagement' or surface contact gives rise to a much weirder and more densely layered vision of reality: a reality in which a cast-iron column is not seen as a block of dead, inert stone, but as a scaly, shifting, animate being. Similarly, treating memory as a kind of material object (on par with, and enmeshed in, other physical objects) does not evacuate agency. Instead, what emerges is a kind of intensified or extended agency, a concept of agency stretched far beyond its conventional limits. As

Bennett writes, the capacity of these 'bodies' is "not restricted to a passive 'intractability,' but [includes] the ability to make things happen, to produce effects" (Bennett 5).

The emphasis *Austerlitz* places on nonhuman witnessing also suggests an important connection between the novel's descriptive practices and its larger ethical and political project. Asked in an interview why *Austerlitz* never ventures beyond the threshold of the concentration camps, Sebald replied: "To write about the concentration camps is in my view practically impossible. […] These images militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things. And also paralyze, as it were, our moral capacity" (*Emergence of Memory* 140). For Sebald, any encounter between a reader and an "image" of suffering always involves the possibility (indeed, the inevitability) of failure, whether it is the writer's failure to convey the magnitude of the event or the reader's failure to adequately grasp, reflect upon, and respond to the situation depicted. The cast-iron column and the Liverpool station episodes both sketch out a form of memory that is emphatically not grounded in recall, recovery, or even imaginative reconstruction. Austerlitz does not try to reconstruct what the column has 'seen,' nor does he imagine what it might feel like to be a cast-iron column himself. The bodily frames of these two entities (the human and the column) are simply too different, their sensory apparatuses too unlike, to trigger this kind of empathetic response. Though Austerlitz wonders if the column has been "a witness to what [he] could no longer recollect for [himself]," what emerges here is a model of historical witness detached from the activity of projective identification and untethered from the human subject.

In her recent work on literary ethics and description, Heather Love outlines and critiques what she calls the “empathetic witness” position, a model of critical engagement grounded in the “affective and ethical capacities of the witness” (“Safe” 7). She calls for the humanities to adopt modes of reading that would refuse the “ethical charisma of the literary translator or messenger,” citing the observation-based social sciences as an example of a field that does not engage the “metaphysical and humanist concerns of hermeneutics” (“Close but Not Deep” 375). Fields like ethology and microsociology, Love writes, have developed “practices of close attention” that produce detailed and precise descriptions of human and animal behavior (“Close” 375). In focusing on “descriptions of surfaces, operations, and interactions,” these disciplines bypass the issue of accounting for the interiority of the other—a humanist project that, she argues, “always involves a certain violence, whether it is by the hard way of epistemological violence or the soft way of projective identification” (“Safe” 7).

Flat reading or “thin description,” as Love refers to it elsewhere, offers the possibility of formulating “an alternative ethics, one grounded in documentation and description rather than empathy and witness” (“Close” 376). Within a critical framework that privileges testimony-based witness, *Austerlitz*’s descriptions might strike some readers as superficial, even evasive, skimming over the surfaces of things but rarely achieving the depth or degree of emotional intensity we look for in literature concerned with traumatic experience. But framing our reading of *Austerlitz* in terms of first-person witness—asking, in essence, why *Austerlitz* does not or cannot bear such witness to the Holocaust—obscures how the novel reconfigures the activity of witnessing itself, not to

mention the category of ‘persons.’ This approach also encourages us to read *through* the text, treating its descriptions as a thin veneer overlaying what Cathy Caruth calls the “inexplicable traumatic void” (Caruth, *Trauma and Experience,* 7). By contrast, reading these passages as part of an alternative practice of observation and documentation allows us to consider the text’s descriptive impulse in a new light, as a way of keeping us “close but not deep,” in Love’s phrase: dwelling within a vitally material reality, rather than located somewhere outside or above it.

In *Austerlitz,* this vision of reality is not always affirming or uplifting. Cultivating a vital materialism may involve celebrating the rich diversity of human and nonhuman forms, but it also entails acknowledging a more unpredictable, unknowable, and potentially dangerous field of being. Similarly, an object-oriented reading may well force us to reckon in new and potentially painful ways with the limitations of our cultural and bodily frames. In the process, however, such experiences can also facilitate different ways of inhabiting those positions, and of locating ourselves in relation to the worlds and histories we have “grown quite naturally” into. Time and space need not be conceived of as static fields through which passive bodies are shuttled from an irrevocable past into an inalterable future; instead, the past, like the text or the ‘object’ more broadly, becomes a space of encounter, a contact zone, a hinge.

Here we might return to the passage I quoted at the beginning of this essay, in which Austerlitz reflects on his fascination with “the shape and the self-contained nature of discrete things” (77). This remark, which emphasizes the fixity of the ‘things’ photographed, may seem like an odd fit with the more dynamic conception of the object I

have outlined here. Yet the images Austerlitz produces suggest a continuity between his fascination with physical solidity, on the one hand, and a conception of objects as always enmeshed in and invested by other objects. Austerlitz's photographs, many of which are reproduced in the text, are often so closely cropped it is difficult or impossible to discern the shape of the whole. Rather than focusing on edges and outlines, details that might sharply delineate between object and context, Austerlitz takes as his subject matter those natural and human-made forms that suggest movement or flow: "the curve of banisters on a staircase, the molding of a stone arch over a gateway, the tangled precision of the blades in a tussock of dried grass" (77). Sebald's novel, as I have suggested here, functions in a similar manner, staging encounters with "discrete things," experiences, and histories that produce entirely new ways of looking at the world. In place of the empathetic human witness, locked into a one-sided relation—with a text, an object, a world of dead matter—*Austerlitz* gives us a cast-iron column and a middle-aged Jew: each gazing at the other, wondering; speculating, perhaps, about what is "stirring in them" (182).

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