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Stephen Thomson

Sleepwalking Certainties: Agency, Aesthetics, and Incapacity in W.G. Sebald's Austerlitz and Hermann Broch's The Sleepwalkers

> Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. (Adorno, Prisms 34 ; Prismen 26)
>
> With a precision suggesting a sleepwalker his clumsiness invariably guided him to the very centre of a misfortune... (Arendt 13)

Uncertain Steps

When we first encounter the narrator of Austerlitz, he is wandering round the unfamiliar town of Antwerp with, he tells us, 'unsicheren Schritten' (1; 9). As well as reflecting the unfamiliarity of the locale, these 'uncertain steps' evince a proud modesty characteristic of the classic Sebaldian narrator, a wanderer who discreetly relays the stories of the people and places he is privileged to encounter. In this instance, the willingness to get lost pays off almost instantly, leading to his first meetinng with Austerlitz in the railway-station waiting room, or 'salle des pas perdus'. Uncertain or lost steps, it seems, are the way to go. Later, when Austerlitz finds himself counting in Czech, a language he was previously unaware he could speak, he too feels as if he is walking with 'unsicheren Schritten' (226; 234). But the uncertainty here belongs only to Austerlitz's waking consciousness, as he witnesses with astonishment the spontaneous reemergence of a capacity he had forgotten he ever had. Although Sebald does not use the phrase, steps of this sort, unpurposed yet unerring, are made with what is commonly known in German as somnambule Sicherheit: the legendary surefootedness of the sleepwalker.

The convergence in a single phrase of sleepwalking and certainty poses an

interesting challenge to one of the central tenets of the English-language canonisation of Sebald. For where his writing has been most highly valued, it is in terms of its ability to move the reader through apparent certainties towards a salutary uncertainty. But somnambule Sicherheit presents the possibility that the current may be reversed, that narrative may move under cover of uncertainty towards certainty. That Sebald criticism has not been more troubled by this possibility is in no small part due to the fact that it, like Sebald's fictions themselves, tends to deploy the notion of sleepwalking with a minimum of reflection on its theoretical ramifications. To evoke some of the complexities of this matter, I will presently have to offer a brief history of some important issues in the cultural history of sleepwalking, as well as a brief account of the topic of uncertainty in Sebald criticism. The main part of my argument, however, will be given over to an extended comparative analysis of sleepwalking in Sebald's Austerlitz and Hermann Broch's 1933 novel-trilogy The Sleepwalkers. These writers have not previously been the object of any sustained comparison, and this is perhaps partly due to Sebald's extraordinarily hostile critique of Broch in his essay 'Una montagna bruna—Zum Bergroman Hermann Brochs', published just as he was starting to produce his own fiction. But Broch's sleepwalking can, as I will show, illuminate much that is left implicit on the topic in Sebald's fiction, and will also bring to light some difficult questions regarding the role of aesthetics and agency in Sebald's work.

Somnambulisms

Noting the presence of sleepwalking, and related notions of trance or hypnotism, in Sebald's narratives, is not in itself new. Indeed, 'hypnotic' and 'mesmeric' are amongst the most common epithets used to describe his prose. But such remarks are invariably casual, fleeting, and unreflecting, as if the ideas at stake belonged to a common stock of

familiar motifs of no particular provenance, and with no particular debts to settle. So, for Simon Ward, it is 'not surprising' that Michael Hamburger's vision of the ruins of postwar Berlin in The Rings of Saturn is 'hallucinatory', because it is experienced in 'a kind of sleepwalk' (Ward 62). Such a casual linkage of sleepwalking and extraordinary vision, however, belies a long and complex history. Of course, with the vogue for mesmerism in literary studies, it is now well-known that sleepwalking's association with clairvoyance dates to 1784 when the Comte de Puységur coins the term 'somnambulisme provoqué' (Ellenberger 70-72). But the vision of sleepwalkers had been a matter of debate long before this, and the sleepwalker's surefootedness is key to this history. From the early modern period, the question was: if the senses are shut, what keeps the sleepwalker safe? Thus, for Jacobus Horstius, it is surefootedness that exceeds nature and points to the hand of providential angels (Horstius 15-17). Such popish superstition was countered by more materialist accounts—usually a mélange of Aristotle, Lucretius, and Galen—but even in these, the performance of the 'imagination' set free by the extinction of the senses retains something of the marvellous (Pomarius 10-14, Sauvages 307, Muratori 51). Mesmerism inherits these debates, and never quite has done with them. And when mesmerism recedes from the cultural horizon, somnambule Sicherheit remains the aspect of sleepwalking that keeps one foot in the fantastic.

In an age of disenchantment and disappointed rationalism, however, this sense of the fantastic or providential proves highly equivocal. When Freud uses the phrase somnambule Sicherheit (or one of its common variants, schlafwandlerische or traumwandlerische Sicherheit) on a number of occasions in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, it describes the only-seemingly miraculous manner in which the unconscious leads us back to rediscover an object we hid in a blind rage (see e.g. SE

140; GW 155-56). But the phrase thus also holds open a door to a mystical reinvestment which, raised onto a political stage cleared of obstacles, may prove disastrous. Thus when Hitler, speaking in Munich in 1936, declares he moves 'mit traumwandlerischer Sicherheit', we are to understand that his steps are directed and consecrated by the destiny of the Volk (Domarus 790; 606). In a curious way, Hitler here represents himself as the mass man of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century social theory, only magnified and put at the head of the mass. The analogy may seem stretched: mass man, one would tend to think, is a figure of incapacity, not of surefootedness. In Gustave Le Bon's crowd theory, sleepwalking models the unconsciousness and moral incapacity of the individual caught in a crowd. And according to José Ortega y Gasset's techno-criticism, technology supplements mass man's capabilities in such a way as to supplant his rationality and agency entirely. Yet in either case, the sleepwalker is still surefooted after a fashion—that of the machine, the mass, or routine. Hitler has not added surefootedness to this picture, but he has reinstated the sense of providence that makes him a just instrument. This crucial detail apart, he never spoke a truer word.

It is important to note all this because the role of ideas of somnambulism in German art and culture of the period of the rise of National Socialism has tended to be swallowed up in the more familiar theme of hypnotism. Hypnotism's important and ambiguous role in German cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, notably in the films of the Fritz Lang, was pointed out long ago by Siegfried Kracauer. Its use as a fable for demagoguery is also familiar from novels such as Thomas Mann's Mario and the Magician (1930). But ideas of unprovoked sleepwalking and trance also have a part to play: the protagonists of Mann's The Magic Mountain (1924) and Elias Canetti's Auto da Fé (1935) are drawn into alternative worlds, disastrously blind to unfolding political events, and struggle to establish any meaningful agency. The most sustained and

nuanced exploration of these themes in all their social and political implications is to be found in Hermann Broch's 1933 novel-trilogy The Sleepwalkers. All Broch's characters are more or less sleepwalkers, in the sense that their idea of the path they tread is pathetically incapable and misguided. But they are at their worst when most surefooted. For this dubious capacity is owed to total complicity with a reified and false world. They may fall prey to, or even become, demagogues, but the efficient cause is their certainty.

It matters considerably, then, how Sebald positions certainty in relation to sleepwalking in Austerlitz. Austerlitz's attempts to recall his past—his Czech infancy and evacuation on the Kindertransport in the 1930s—are gradual and halting until, in the midst of a breakdown, he buries his papers—the fruits of a failed, obfuscatory mode of research—and takes to aimless night wandering round London (178; 186). Thus it is semi-conscious, seemingly-undirected physical activity, rather than study and reflection, that leads him to a waiting-room in Liverpool Street station where, with the intensity of a vision, he is suddenly sure the Kindertransport disembarked (193; 201). Similarly, when he arrives in Prague, his senses rather than his intellect carry him unerringly to his parents' old apartment (212; 220). Throughout the novel, Austerlitz makes his advances in this way, by retracing past steps on the ground, and giving his consciousness up to the path, engaging involuntary memory at a level beyond the defensive formations of consciousness.

As this last formulation hints, Sebald has often been read through variants of Freudian theory, in terms of trauma and anamnesis. The narrator's 'unsicheren Schritten', however, are far less easily accommodated into this sort of theory. Austerlitz's forgotten history is his own to rediscover, but the narrator has no part in this, and the uncanny coincidences which repeatedly bring the two together must be of another order. Moreover, Sebald scarcely plays down the element of the uncanny in

these encounters. They occur in what seems to the narrator an incomprehensible (unbegreifliche) manner (36; 44). And one encounter happens 'strangely enough' (sonderbarerweise) just as Austerlitz is musing on his need for a listener (59-60; 67-68). Doubtless a shared love of dingy train stations and other spots putatively imbued with the melancholy of disaster may go some way toward rationalising such coincidences, but what are we to do with the heightened rhetoric of destiny that accompanies them? Austerlitz's theory of the traces of pain which striate history (16; 24) seems germane to this question. For while we are lost in admiration for the beauty and pathos of his exposition of this dolorous idea, might not a doubt intrude as to the potential for mystification in the idea of an affective mark which exceeds the limits of the individual psyche to take on a quasi-objective existence as a pathway along which sensitive travellers may be unconsciously drawn? Our doubts will only increase if we suspect Sebald's writing itself aspires to this condition of perfect tact emerging out of apparent uncertainty. It is not impossible to read this claim in the narrator's admiration for Austerlitz's sentences. Developing out of absentmindedness (Zerstreutheit), yet highly balanced (ausgewogensten), Sebald's famous, rolling sentences might also be said to advance step-by-step (schritteweise) towards 'a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life' (14; 24). Indeed, given that a large part of the novel consists of Austerlitz's proxy narration, how could it not share in his putative capacities?

Critical Certainties

If there is any justice in the doubt I am raising here, it poses awkward questions for a highly influential tendency in Sebald criticism. Sebald is often seen as exemplary in his capacity to force readers into ethical vigilance by generating insoluble uncertainties. In this way the lulling, seductive quality of his prose, the seeming certainty of generic

categories, and the claims to truth of memoir and photography, are read as so many lures leading us to an inevitable and salutary frustration. So, discussing the ambiguous nature of Vera's somnambulistic vision in Austerlitz, Carolin Duttlinger notes that the photograph which prompts it positively engages 'imaginary, hallucinatory response' (Duttlinger 163). The artifice is, however, foregrounded so as to reveal 'the aporetical nature of the process of remembrance' (161). According to this line of argument, then, if Sebald's texts see clear, they nonetheless do not claim, in the mystical sense of clairvoyance or Hellsehen, to see through. Rather, what they show is precisely the opacity of phenomena, and the essentially fictive, mediated nature of historical recovery. If we as readers are led to sleepwalk, then, it is only to be jolted out of the illusion.

Necessary and persuasive as this sort of argument is, one may still worry that it is sometimes a little too certain that Sebald does indeed generate this sort of uncertainty, and, paradoxically, that this leaves us in a good place (see e.g. Gregory-Guider). Other critics have taken issue with this. Peter Morgan, for instance, argues that Sebald's cultivation of generic uncertainty is more evasive than epistemologically demanding, and sees in his melancholia a universalising of disaster which postively invites over-easy and all-too-gratifying identifications. Julia Hell, responding to another essay by Todd Samuel Presner published in the same number of the journal Criticism, is rather less emphatically condemnatory, but in her discussion of Sebald's famous description of the Hamburg firestorm she questions the idea that it constitutes a 'successful attempt to represent a modernist event' (Hell 370). The requisite 'estranging modernist traces' are visible, but only barely so (371). Hell's article also, however, asks us to think about another sort of uncertainty, one that most Sebald criticism seems reluctant to pursue. For, she argues, the horror-stricken (entzetzensstarre) gaze which Sebald grafts onto the wide-open eyes (aufgerissenen Augen) of Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history' conveys

his own predicament. Like the angel, Sebald is ‘mesmerized by death and destruction and seduced by a natural history of destruction’ (375). The horror of his gaze is thus directed not just at ‘Germany’s calamitous history’ (376), but ‘at his own writing that comes so close, so dangerously close, to what it tries to keep at bay’ (380).

Hell’s point here is not simply to condemn Sebald for aestheticising disaster, but rather to acknowledge what she calls the ‘unpredictable hazards of representation’. This consideration takes us beyond any idea of uncertainty as the trustworthy outcome of a textual game led by our admired hero-author. For it suggests that literary material, in its exteriority, is not infinitely plastic. Self-evident as this last statement may seem, it is worth remembering at this point. Sebald has been the doubtful beneficiary of a critical reception, especially in the English-speaking world, that sometimes seems to want to see in him the bearer of an exorbitant writerly tact, an exceptional ability to pick his way through toxic elements of his cultural inheritance. Yet this very surefootedness is itself part of that cultural inheritance and, pushed too far, may itself prove toxic. Sleepwalking is thus not just any example of an equivocal topic in which Sebald becomes embroiled. It has the potential to render ambiguous the readerly and textual consciousness upon which criticism bases its moral judgements of praise and condemnation alike, and may even counsel an ambivalence which will not allow us simply to divide the honours neatly between authors. I will return to this matter in my concluding comments. For the time being, suffice it to say that the benevolence with which Sebald’s fictions are often viewed stands in stark contrast to the (characteristically) polemical treatment he metes out to Broch.

Sebald on Broch

Sebald's essay, 'Una montagna bruna—Zum Bergroman Hermann Brochs', is trenchant and unforgiving to say the least.[i] It is, nonetheless, not hard to sympathise with the case it makes regarding Broch's 'mountain novel', Die Verzauberung (The Spell). The basic premise of the novel—a mysterious incomer gains mesmeric control over an Alpine village, leading the villagers to participate in human sacrifice—may suggest a parable of the dangers of demagoguery in the vein of Mann's Mario und der Zauberer. Troublingly, however, the sacrifice is apparently successful in restoring the serenity of nature. If the tale is thus evidently compromised by völkisch sentiment, Sebald nevertheless insists that the problem lies more in the manner of the telling ('Una montagna' 121). His aim, characteristic of his criticism, is to show how an 'aesthetic deficit marks an ethical one' (124), and in particular, how the novel's 'inflationary aesthetic'—its tendency to fill out a lack of meaning with tautology and portentous abstraction—can be seen as a symptom of political disavowal (125). The 'inner emigrant', anxious to portray his dubious flight into the consolations of nature as 'passive resistance', strays only further and further into notions of Heimat and transcendence; i.e. the heartland of Nazi ideology. Once the fatal first step has been taken, an empty style inflates itself exponentially with windy abstraction, as the self-deceiving writer can only bail out bad faith with yet more bad faith.

Thus far, one cannot but agree: The Spell is a dreadful novel. Sebald is taking aim squarely at the mainstream of Broch criticism as represented by Paul Michael Lützeler. Lützeler and his followers have, since Sebald's rise to fame as a fictional author, cited his article, but only to reiterate their original position unmodified in any way (see e.g. Lützeler, Die Entropie 56, and Gottwald 159). And in this they seem to confirm the sense of complacent political apologetics that so enrages Sebald. Yet as Thomas Edelmann has pointed out, Sebald and Lützeler, despite their differences, share

an exaggerated expectation of consistency in the author's canon (Edelmann 9). Indeed, Sebald's essay uses The Spell as a key to what he sees as the failings of Broch's entire œuvre, and for all the justice of his comments on that novel, it is hard to see how this generalising move can be justified. For one thing, as Sebald freely concedes, his critique is indebted to the theory of value produced by Broch himself 'in better times' (123). Yet it is unclear when these times are supposed to have been. For the essays on 'Disintegration of Value' in the final volume of The Sleepwalkers, from which the critical ideas in question derive, are otherwise held by Sebald to be symptomatic of that novel's malaise: indeed, they represent the culmination of a disastrous theoretical tendency present from the start. In Sebald's account of his reading, initial admiration for the 'cool objectivity' of the first volume (Pasenow) quickly gives way to mounting frustration as Broch 'tries to bring his work to a synthesis', and the 'analytical' narrative is increasingly held up by 'extravagant theoretical constructions' (118). Thus the 'priority Broch gives to system over empirical detail', which blossoms into full-blown essays in the third volume (Huguenau), is prefigured in the transcendental narrative perspective of Pasenow. In this way, The Sleepwalkers is seen to outline the trajectory followed by the whole œuvre*:* the implicit desire to 'tackle everything from an independent position once and for all' goes hand in hand with a 'growing loss of reality', and terminates in the 'hollowed-out resonance' of Broch's later novels (119). Sebald's tracking of the seeds of 'lyricising and pure mystification' back to what he sees as the pretentious and overweening rationalism of Broch's first novel, is remorseless (119). The intensely teleological character of this argument is itself, one might say, announced from the very start of Sebald's essay, in its epigraph—'Am Anfang Prophet, am Ende Zauberer' (118). This still leaves open the possibility, in the beginning, that the prophet may have had something to be said for him, before degenerating into a conjuror. But by

the end (of the essay), any such hope has been liquidated, leaving the prophet a mere shell from which the conjuror would always inevitably have emerged.

Strident and even repellent as the essays on value may sometimes seem, it is possible to disagree with this damning assessment. Crucially, it is by no means clear that they do claim quite the transcendent mastery over the narrative that Sebald infers; or, therefore, that they always own their propositions in quite the way Sebald implies. For one thing, there are fair circumstantial grounds for attributing the essays to a character within the narrative, the starving and chronically perplexed philosophy student Bertrand Müller. If, as Jean-Michel Rabaté has asked, the author of the essays seems 'alienated and mystified, how can one give them more than symptomological value? How can one reach beyond the limitations of individual logics and private worlds to find some central point of view?' (Rabaté 135). As Rabaté goes on to suggest, these are questions the novel not only poses but performs. If the essays strive to provide a rational supplement to the irrationalism of the narrative, they also argue that rationality is itself fatally constrained by the logos of the age, and ontogenetically sedimented with irrationality (Rabaté 145). Having thus cut the ground from under its feet, it is hardly surprising, and not necessarily a failing, that the novel struggles to come to a synthesis.

Likewise, if the 'loss of reality' in The Sleepwalkers is an aesthetic failing, it ought also to be admitted that it is fairly explicitly thematised as a symptom of the 'sleepwalking' which afflicts the characters. At this point, Sebald's failure to engage with what is after all the headline concept of the novel becomes critical. Viewed in this light, indeed, Sebald's sole reference to the topic is full of suggestion: 'Bewegten sich die Schlafwandler noch in einer weitgehend landschaftslosen Welt, so grenzt die Frequenz der Landschaftsbilder im Bergroman schon ans Inflationäre' (123). That is to say: if the sleepwalkers moved in a broadly landscapeless world, the frequency of

landscape description in the The Spell borders on the inflationary. This statement surely requires us to complicate somewhat Sebald's notion of 'loss of reality'. For what looks like an empirical deficit—a 'landscapeless world'—seems to be held less reprehensible than, and may even be preferred to, an over-abundance. The paradox is, however, like the empirical fullness of The Spell, only apparent. For as Sebald reminds us later in the essay, Broch saw inflation and tautology as the figures characteristic of a process of reification (125). The landscape of The Spell is thus made up of pseudo-objects, congealed globules of pure ideology posing as the objective world. A 'landscapeless world' may then quite reasonably be preferred in the limited, negative sense that it is at least less bad.

But could we go further to infer a more positive verdict on the 'landschaftslosen Welt'? Sebald's remark is framed by discussion of a letter written by Broch in 1935 as he sat down to write The Spell in Tyrolean seclusion. Gazing out of his window, Broch fears he will not be able to tear his eyes away from the beauty of the Tyrolean countryside, and back to the empty page on his desk. This note of regret, Sebald objects, gives the lie to the 'affirmative gesture' with which the landscape is presented in the novel, thus revealing its ideological function. To be truthful, in the circumstances, Broch ought to have presented the landscape 'unter dem Aspekt des Verlustes' (123). This idea of writing 'under the aspect of loss' is, though it is not applied directly to The Sleepwalkers, enormously suggestive; more so, indeed, than the somewhat inaccurate 'landscapeless world'. For Broch's sleepwalkers do see and move through landscapes: the point is that the ground upon which they set foot may no longer be quite what they think it is. Like sleepwalkers, they walk in a landscape of their dreams. Indeed, something very similar could be said of the solitary walkers of spectral, melancholic landscapes Sebald would come to write himself. How will we view Sebald's distaste for

Broch's theorising if that very theorising turns out to be implicit in his own works?

Groundlessness and Reification

From the start of the first volume of his novel, Broch suggests that a terrifying loss of firmness befalls the very substance of the ground when its anchoring ideology comes asunder. Joachim von Pasenow, as the younger son, is ejected against his will from the family estate, into the city and a military career for which he is temperamentally unsuited. This personal and circumstantial exile, however, only serves to obscure a more radical loss of the land. It is 1888 and, with the accession of Wilhelm II, we are invited to see the beginning of the end of the German Empire.[ii] The feudal Junkers have now to compete with rising industrialism, and though the loss of their estates and political influence is a long way off, the values once surely embedded in the land are already starting to work their way loose. Joachim feels this perhaps more than most of his class yet has no political understanding of the situation, experiencing only an amorphous and insidious 'Unsicherheit'. Clinging to the chimera of the land's essential goodness, he must look for alien interference in the shape of his friend Bertrand, who is leaving the army to become an industrialist: 'yes', Joachim reasons to himself, 'if Bertrand had grown up on the land he would not be spreading insecurity' (Sleepwalkers 31-32; 36). At times Joachim may even depend on what he sees as Bertrand's 'Sicherheit', his cosmopolitan sophistication, but this only makes him all the more uneasy (134; 150-51).

Blaming alien causes is doomed to failure, for the trouble infects the very heart of the aristocratic landscape of house and estate. Although Joachim says he longs for the country while he is in the city, it is precisely in the city, and in the form of longing, that the value of the land is most present to him. Wandering an unsuitable suburb, he is free to dream of this Heimat as an idealised parkland through which his intended, Elisabeth

Baddensen, wafts virginally in the evening mist (26; 30). In her physical presence, on the other hand, Joachim is deeply disturbed by the thought that marriage will mean consummation, which seems to him an outrage against the ideal; he would prefer to steal Elisabeth away so as to keep her forever 'unviolated [...] in a dream of white lace' (33-34; 38-39). Joachim is already fairly deranged even at this early stage in the narrative, but the dream parkland itself is no mere freak of his psychology. Elisabeth's father will, she feels, only be free of anxiety when he has bought up the entire surface of the world and turned it into 'a park in which [she] might walk about for ever' (71; 81). This tableau, then, represents the inmost desire of Joachim's belatedly chivalric class. The unabashed commercialism of Baron Baddensen's solution tacitly acknowledges that it is an anachronism. Joachim's problem, on the other hand, is that he believes too thoroughly in the purity of the ideal. This, indeed, is the 'Romanticism' of the novel's sub-title: it is what happens when 'the secular exalts itself as the absolute' (20; 23). But, as Broch explains in the final volume, this passionate yearning for 'the familiar assurance of home [Heimat], for an invisible assurance in visible things' only leads to the invisible usurping the visible (540; 596-97). So reverie, powerless to effect the required wholesale transformation of reality, terminates in hallucination. And hallucination proves a precarious refuge: Joachim has tried to export the problem of sex by having an affair with a deracinated Bohemian peasant, but as his reverie of the virginal parkland grows nearer and sharper, it is Ruzena the peasant he sees in Elisabeth's place (26; 30). As the novel moves towards the inevitable, conventional marriage with Elisabeth, Joachim becomes psychotic in his inability to manage the economy of his phantasies, endlessly merging faces, and unsure of where he is or how he got there.

Having drifted from its apparently objective grounding, the ideal of the parkland

seems to undergo a curious sort of democratisation in the second volume. By 1903 Esch, a clerk whose vision of an orderly double-entry universe has been shattered, shares the vision of Heimat as a vulnerable damsel in the park, even though he has never had any connection to the land. Doubtless his vision has become a little more obviously kitsch, with its spangly dresses and nuzzling deer (277; 311). By the same token, he also has a glimmering apprehension that it is a representation. It appears as a stage backdrop (Prospekt) in the midst of a troubled series of visions, all seen in explicitly theatrical terms (Kulisse, Bühne), relating to his demented plan to murder Bertrand, now an influential shipping boss. When Bertrand's country house fails to match Esch's vision, it is the reality that must be cast aside as a 'symbolic substitute' (sinnbildliche Stellvertretung), a dream within a dream. In this way, the dream landscape survives 'unscathed', but a dream nonetheless (297; 334). Esch and Joachim, then, suffer variants of the same malady. Both are untimely men, clinging to an antiquated, ideologically-compromised vision of the landscape, failing to fully apprehend the present. Unable to find a way through their predicament, they are often prey to chaotically eschatological explanations. They are preferable to those who simply accept things as they are, but they are far from heroic.

Although less mad, and far less given to unsavoury messianism, Sebald's characters are frequently subject to similar processes of hallucination and derealisation; experiencing people or places as spectral, and feeling that their own reality is in turn called into question. Sebald's specters, like Broch's, are symptoms of crises in history, and their appearance is stereotyped: they recur from character to character, and from book to book, and announce themselves as cultural givens. So the two envoys of the Jüdische Kultusgemeinde who come to arrange the deportation of Austerlitz's mother Agáta (250; 258) seem to echo the Kafkaesque goons who assail the narrator of Vertigo

(109; 123-24). The ‘flickering’ faces of the former, and the curious jerking movements of the latter, belong to a series of recurring traits which suggest the archival nature of the imaginary, the imperfectly-managed interpolation of other media which have supplanted memory. The pair from Vertigo look ‘as if they were out of an early motion picture’, and in a sense they are: they appear as emanations of the narrator’s researches into the fateful year of 1913. The pair from Austerlitz, on the other hand, are representations even in their present as Vera narrates it, because their collaboration with the Nazis is so incomprehensible, so irrational, that they cannot be quite real. It is as if, in surrendering their selves to the forces of history, they pass out of the realm of human individuality altogether.

Sebald’s characters, one might say, are at the Esch stage in this, insofar as they apprehend the theatrical nature of such scenes yet find themselves unable to dispel them. So, when Austerlitz travels by train through Germany for the first time in his adult life, he sees the landscape of the Rhineland as ‘mythological’, a ‘romantic stage set’. He can only remember the scene ‘as it was described by earlier travellers’, complete with as yet unregulated waters, and Bishop Hatto’s hordes of mice (318-19; 326-27). The narrative of this journey is thus ‘landscapeless’ in the sense that the present landscape is lost to a ‘symbolic substitute’. Austerlitz, indeed, speaks on another occasion of a sense of ‘Bodenlosigkeit’—literally groundlessness—experienced in places which threaten to open up the abyss of time (153-54; 161). Such loss of reality as presence, however, does not straightforwardly imply a lack of truth. On the train, Austerlitz temporarily loses the present, but he also knows with ‘absolute certainty’ (mit absoluter Gewißheit) that this was the same journey he made as a child on the Kindertransport, and gains the realisation that certain scenes of his subsequent Welsh upbringing owed their sense of the uncanny to their association with these scenes (316-17; 324-25). In a landscape

necessarily interpenetrated by other times and other scenes, uncertain footing may be the sign one is on the right track. What Austerlitz recovers is not a true picture as such: rather, what he apprehends is a chain of substitutions. But the apparent negativity of this displaced truth is belied, or at least tempered, by the certainty with which it is felt.

Broch may seem to go much further in the direction of crediting his characters with visionary insight; at any rate their visions are more ecstatic, hysterical, eschatological. Yet, at the same time, the outcome of the these visions may be rather more negative, and less certain. The state granted to Esch is referred to with emphasis, substantivally, as 'his sleepwalking', invoking a quasi-mesmeric notion that the benighted automaton may be compensated with clairvoyance (292-96; 328-33). And as he finally approaches Bertrand's house on foot, he even seems to enjoy somnambule Sicherheit (297; 334), leading some critics to wonder if the whole journey is not in fact a dream (Cohn 80-81). It seems to me, however, that Broch is not so much intent on the ontological status of the experience as on the sort of knowledge it affords. What is ultimately revealed to Esch is little more than the bare fact that he is a sleepwalker (339-40; 380). One can scarcely call such negative knowledge enlightenment, for it does not result in an awakening. Here, Broch follows the logic of his concept with remorseless fidelity: in a world in which sleepwalking is the normal condition of humanity, this is the form reflexivity must take, passive and involuted; a dim night-light of the soul counselling nothing but acceptance of a loss of certainty.

Indeed, if this process is even to begin, something must happen to break the stride of habit: Esch's everyday, we are told, will have to be thrown into uncertainty (ins Unsichere) in a way that makes it questionable whether or not one walks on one's feet (277; 312). The crucial moment comes with a seemingly banal accident, as Esch grazes his shin while boarding the train. Everything around him, he dimly realises, is mere

human contrivance (Menschenwerk), and so too are his thoughts (293; 329). They are, in other words, reified, and only the encounter with the brute objectivity of things can reveal this. The stay-at-home, Broch tells us, will never make this discovery because he sends only his thoughts out into the world, and flatters himself with their apparent success in the accidentless echo chamber of thought. The traveller, on the other hand, has lost this premature certainty (voreilige Sicherheit), so that the links between words and things slide into uncertainty (ins Unsichere), and he himself is 'unsicher' as he walks along the train corridor (293; 329-30). Though he knows the train rolls over the 'good firm earth', he is all at sea, and he only pretends to look out of the window at the passing landscape (293-94; 330).

Having gone through this crisis, Esch has got almost as far as Broch will generally allow his characters to go. For they seem, at best, to chafe at the limits of something like Hegel's 'unhappy consciousness' (das unglückliche Bewußtsein): locked in thought systems which are secured at the expense of denying contingent reality, their only way forward is through accident and insecurity. Although Sebald's characters share many of the symptoms, their conditions are presented as being much more individual and psychological, much less determined by a master ideology. Consequently their prognosis may be a little less gloomy. Before he sends out his steps, Austerlitz's rejection of thought is emphatic. In the midst of his breakdown, language seems to him 'a makeshift expedient', a tentacle man uses to 'grope blindly' through the darkness. Worst of all, the very mark of 'purposeful intelligence—the exposition of an idea by means of a certain stylistic facility—now seemed to me nothing but an entirely arbitrary or deluded enterprise' (174-75; 183-84). If narrative Sicherheit is thus ostensively renounced, walking takes up the relay as his 'nocturnal wanderings lead him to Liverpool Street station and the forgotten place of his first arrival in London. We make

our most decisive steps, he reflects, through an indistinct inner movement (aus einer undeutlichen inneren Bewegung) of which we are barely conscious (189; 197). His purposeful accumulation of knowledge, on the other hand, had only ever 'served as a substitute or compensatory memory' (198; 206).

By abandoning the pseudo-tentacles of the reflecting intellect in favour of a more direct, physical groping, Austerlitz seems to echo Esch. Yet he is more fortunate than Broch's sleepwalkers, for the knowledge he gains along the way is positive, recuperable by the intellect, and often very certain indeed. When he looks out of his train window at Prague's Wilsonova Station, the realisation that he has been there before dawns on him 'in vollkommener, auch nicht den geringsten Zweifel zulassender Evidenz' (308; 316). One sympathises with the difficulty of Anthea Bell's task as translator, but her 'perfect certainty', even though it already sounds rather sure, is a pale shadow of this 'utter, and not-admitting-the-least-doubt evidence'. Though critics are probably right to stress the ultimate incompletion of Austerlitz's quest, their elision of such moments of certainty is perhaps curious. What is their place in the narrative and economy of uncertainty? Is certainty in itself a problem or even an embarrassment?

Broch seems to think so. When his characters experience anything like this degree of certainty, it is generally not a good thing. In the third volume, Huguenau's 'schlafwandlerische Sicherheit' as he makes his way through the chaotic aftermath of the Great War is the mark of an amoral opportunism which culminates in the casual murder of Esch (348; 390). And his drift into business-like respectability in peace-time is no less damning: in either case he does nothing more than obey the logic of the times (637; 703). At this point we may look back to the remarkably extended meditation on Joachim's father's gait with which the trilogy begins, and understand why the utter want of purpose behind his mechanically purposeful air is so horrifying (9-11; 11-13). Herr

von Pasenow embodies the same sort of 'objectivity' (Sachlichkeit) as Huguenau.[iii] They are both mere formal men, passively and indifferently determined by the path of least resistance. They are not conscious of any unhappiness, but as their consciousness is entirely reified, they are perhaps not strictly conscious of anything at all.

System and Agency

While the moral reasons for rejecting Sicherheit are thus clear, the theoretical price of this rejection is high, and the consequences for practice are terrible, seemingly insoluble. For even if we eschew the form of purpose, and give ourselves up to wandering, this in itself does not, in Broch's terms, preclude the possibility of an occulted purpose. If, as the 'Disintegration of Values' essays argue, reason is in its very substance penetrated by irrationality, deciding or thinking anything at all is potentially problematic (564; 623). We are hostages to impulses beyond the reach of introspection, and as the trilogy draws to a close, reflecting reason has not achieved much beyond a painful consciousness of this predicament. At this, it makes its final, forlorn retreat into the body. Ill and undernourished, Bertrand Müller's certitude of living in 'a sort of second-grade reality' is the fruit, he says, not of cognition, but of a paradoxically lucid physical feeling (von einem luzideren Körpergefühl). Though, as Müller notes, we should mistrust enlightenment gained by fasting, what his body seems to grasp is nothing less than Platonic reality. And in this sleepwalking that leads into the light (Schlafwandeln, das ins Helle führte), he is quite certain that only the slightest step (einen geringen Schritt) will transform this physical knowledge into a rational one. The point, however, is not to take this step, but only to feel one could take it, so that Müller's final (non-) decision is to remain in a hovering condition (Schwebezustand), forever standing on the brink (574-75; 635).

It is, to say the least, a dubious position, one that explicitly refuses to reach a

synthesis, and which certainly seems to chime with the 'pure defeatism' which Sebald attributes to Broch ('Una montagna' 125). By demoting consciousness to a modality of sleepwalking, one might argue, Broch has undermined the chances of agency from the word go, so constructing a system whose job it is precisely to make defeat seem inevitable. It is in this light that we must read Sebald's distaste for Broch's love of system and intellectualising grandiosity; for his 'ethico-didactic sense of responsibility, in which he imagines he is allowed to leave nothing unsaid', and self-imposed need to tackle 'big problems with large-scale concepts' ('Una montagna' 120). Yet we will only concur in Sebald's view if we are convinced that Broch's initial premises, and so the dilemmas to which they lead, are entirely factitious. The problem for Sebald is that, as my analysis so far suggests, his own fiction seems to share many of these premises. Does he, then, have no 'ethico-didactic' responsibility towards the concepts and figures thus mobilised? If, as I am arguing, the implicit logic of sleepwalking in Austerlitz is remarkably similar to that made more explicit in Broch's novel, is the ostentatious rejection of large-scale social theorising, or trumpeting characters as ciphers for grand epochal shifts, sufficient to clear Sebald of implication in system? In short, does Sebald manage to avoid the problems that afflict Broch, or merely to evade them? Were we to suspect the latter, Sebald's ambiguity and open-endedness might start to seem less unproblematically generous. Indeed, what seems more open-ended and suggestive may just be more discreetly theorised, so leaving itself less open to interrogation. There are, in any case, a number of moments in Austerlitz where sleepwalking is more pointedly thematised. It will be necessary to examine these to see how they deal with the problems of agency which afflict Broch.

Somnambulistic Spectacles

Sleepwalking is explicitly referred to three times in Austerlitz and in each case it is used to describe the condition of those who have had the ground whipped from under their feet by catastrophes of history. The three instances can, what is more, be read as cumulative reworkings of the same spectacle, raising questions of how we should view what is presented. The first mention occurs as Vera relates to Austerlitz the reaction of the people of Prague to German occupation.

> People turned away, and from that moment they walked more slowly, like somnambulists, as if they no longer knew where they were going. (242)
>
> Die Menschen haben sich abgewandt, sind langsamer, wie im Schlaf gegangen von dieser Stunde an, als wüβten sie nicht mehr, wohin. (250)

One could quite easily take sleepwalking here as no more than a convenient and conventional metaphor for the dazed, hesitant air of people who have suffered a terrible shock. Yet this would be to underestimate the extent to which Sebald, like Broch, is concerned with the abyss that may open up between the step that tends, and the ground upon which it actually falls. Something cataclysmic has befallen the very fabric of Prague, effectively erasing the old habitual pathways. By helplessly insisting on the objectivity of this superseded reality, the people of Prague may indeed be said to walk in a dream. This reading is confirmed by the verb sich abwenden. Elsewhere in the novel this 'turning away' indicates Austerlitz's reaction to signs of a reality he is not yet ready to swallow (278; 286 and 304; 312). And in the lectures on aerial bombing, it is explicitly theorised as a 'quasi-natural reflex', a refusal through shame and defiance to accept the fact of destruction (Destruction 30-31; Luftkrieg 37-38). Prague has not been destroyed, but for its people it has undergone a change so radical it might as well have been. In their slowness and perplexity, the people register the fact that things are not right, but their awareness remains purely negative, locked in the physical act. Crucuially,

Vera's narration itself seems to share in this condition: it cannot seem to rise above seeing things in their most obdurate, alienated, barely-grasped form, that of the obstacle. So when she exclaims, we are now obliged to live in a false (or wrong) world (in einer falschen Welt), she is not casting a political judgement, but expressing shock at the sight of a car speeding towards her from the wrong direction. It is the change to driving on the right, she insists, that 'particularly upset us' (242-43; 250-51). Such a response, able only to point in dismay at the brute fact, is shocking in its political incapacity. Even the plight of the Jews, as Vera goes on to narrate it, is viewed almost entirely in terms of restrictions of movement.

If Vera initially seemed to claim the narratorial privileges of distance and clear-sightedness in presenting the pathetic spectacle of 'the people', she is thus ultimately disappointed: she remains trapped in the same impotent consciousness as her fellow citizens. It seems she is not happy with this, for shortly afterwards she reworks the drama of the helpless sleepwalker in a rather more artful, visionary form. The ostensible occasion is one of two old photographs she has found by chance in a volume of Balzac which, she knows not how, came into her hand (der ihr, sie wisse gar nicht mehr wie, in die Hand geraten war). She has no recollection of taking the book, and the first thing she remembers is seeing herself reading it (256; 264). The discovery is, in other words, an act of somnambule Sicherheit, suggesting that what she subsequently 'sees' is an act of clairvoyance.

> The Swiss boy with the apple on his head appeared in my mind's eye, Vera continued; I sensed in me the moment of terror in which the narrow bridge gives way under the sleepwalker's foot, and imagined that, high in the rocks above, an avalanche was already breaking loose, about to sweep the poor folk who had lost their way (for what else would have brought them to these desolate

surroundings?) down into the depths next moment. (257-58; 265).

The status of this vision is, as Carolin Duttlinger has shown, to say the least ambiguous. The putative uncanniness of the photograph's discovery rests largely on the assumption that it shows Austerlitz's parents. Yet this is almost immediately refuted as Vera realises, somewhat bathetically, that the two figures on a stage dwarfed by an Alpine backdrop are more likely to be an unknown stage magician (Zauberkünstler) and his assistant. Her attention, in any case, quickly shifts from the human figures to the backdrop itself, and from there to imagining for which production it might have been constructed; perhaps 'Wilhelm Tell, or La Sonnambula, or Ibsen's last play'. By now, the photograph has effectively been emptied out, ready to be replaced by a composite drama merging critical moments from the three pieces mentioned. The 'vision' is thus patently factitious and mediated in any number of ways, and perhaps says as much about Vera's identity as a former student of Romance languages and literature as anything.

Yet it is not denied all affective truth: Austerlitz, at any rate, thinks he too can see (258; 265-66). Indeed, it is precisely in this generalised form, and thanks to this elaborate theatrical framing, that Vera can feel pity for the plight of the sleepwalkers without falling into the picture. This is not an entirely reassuring reflection, for the vision is arguably guilty, in Sebald's terms, of 'lyricising and mythologising' the plight of the people of Prague: if it works aesthetically, it is by turning away from the empirical detail of Vera's own experience of history into a literary substitute. Of course, Vera herself may also be read as reflecting pessimistically on her own aesthetic means. As her notional walker steps from the theatre of Schiller (and Goethe, and Kleist), where sleepwalking certainty and clairvoyance are the prerogative of national heroes steadfastly pursuing self-determination, into the disenchanted world of Ibsen's When We Dead Awaken, where the failure of vision and surefootedness leads the protagonists

into disaster, we may see an allegory of the demise of the transcendental aspect of Romantic topoi. Indeed, in stripping Amina of her somnambule Sicherheit (in Bellini's opera she makes it safely across the bridge), Vera may even be said to force the issue somewhat. But no matter how many such reflexive gestures we read, we must also admit that they are aesthetically productive. For they all point to loss—whether in the spectacle itself, or in the spectacle of Vera's spectatorship, or even in our own spectatorship—and any pathos accruing to that loss is our gain as spectators. What if all this painful consciousness of artifice ultimately resolves into an aesthetic of despondency, and one, what is more, that we have grown to desire?

As I have been suggesting, a dominant tendency in Sebald criticism resolves such questions by effectively deciding that Sebald's 'steadfast gaze' really is 'bent on reality' here (Destruction 51; Luftkrieg 57), with the proviso that the reality in question is not destruction itself, but the character's inability to face it. This critical move thus depends upon motives ascribed to characters to mediate, and distance us from, the aesthetic effects of the spectacle presented. The question I am now raising, however, is: how often can a spectacle or motif recur before we are forced to abandon the appeal to the quasi-agency of characters, and see it as the property of the text itself? This question is surely starting to impinge as we come to the third and final staging of the scene, where Austerlitz takes up the relay from Vera. Frustrated in his attempts to find his mother's face in a propaganda film showing Theresienstadt as a model labour camp, he has a slowed-down print made, hoping this will allow him a clearer view.

> The men and women employed in the workshops now looked as if they were toiling in their sleep [im Schlaf], so long did it take them to draw a needle and thread through the air as they stitched, so heavily did their eyelids sink, so slowly did their lips move as they looked wearily up at the camera. They seemed to be

> hovering rather than walking, as if their feet no longer quite touched the ground. The contours of their bodies blurred and, particularly in the scenes shot out of doors in broad daylight, had dissolved at the edges... (345-48; 353)

Ostensibly this is a failure, in the sense that Austerlitz's technological intervention brings him no closer to finding his mother. In this way we are once more invited to confront the mediated, phantasmal nature of the search. Viewed from another angle, however, Austerlitz's slow motion succeeds brilliantly in correcting the image, effectively restoring to these poor people the appearance the novel deems proper to those dragooned into a false course of history. Transported for incomprehensible reasons into a false landscape, they really ought not to feel their feet touch the ground. The heightened artificiality of the scene, following this reading, provides a sort of objective correlative, an adequate or just image, for the unreality of the experience for those in it. Even the film's technical limitations—its blurring and flickering—which are presented as impediments to vision, become positive features of the spectacle, the natural complement of spectres throughout the novel. If we are being asked to question this spectacle, are we not also being tutored into desiring it?

Aesthetic Agency

At some point, all the framing and relativising of point of view in the world will start to seem a pretext, showing by a sort of preterition what it affects to cancel. And the accompanying reflexive gestures may, in their very pessimism and insistence, lose their critical force and resolve into elegy. It becomes important here to consider how we may argue, without riding roughshod over the legitimate operation of character and point of view, that such and such an image is ultimately the responsibility of the text itself. When Austerlitz is in the depths of his breakdown, we may fairly presume he has no choice but

to see colours and forms 'of diminished corporeality [...], images from a faded world' (von einer sozusagen verminderten Körperlichkeit [...], Bilder aus einer verblichenen Welt) (179-80; 187-88). But Alphonse, the Great Uncle of his friend Gerald Fitzpatrick, chooses to wear grey silk in place of lenses in his spectacles as he sketches his 'almost colourless fragments', comically supplementing his conviction that the world is fading away before our eyes anyway (124-26; 132-34). For all that he cuts a faintly preposterous figure, Great Uncle Alphonse is positively life-affirming in comparison to Uncle Evelyn who is (according to Gerald) bent with miserliness, and has, like May in Beckett's Footfalls, reduced his whole being to walking up and down the same strip of carpet. He also takes a line that is typically Sebaldian, and potentially offers a rationale for Sebald's own grey-tinted spectacles. Like Alphonse, Sebald is insistently drawn to images such as the 'phantom traces' left by moths lit up in the darkness; and like Alphonse, he seems to hold that this sort of 'sudden incursion of unreality into the real world' kindles our 'deepest feelings' (131-32; 139). Our deepest feelings here are, as they always are in Sebald's fictions, more or less melancholic. Uncle Alphonse is thus allowed to speak from the heart of the text, to transcend his status as an individual character, and tell us what we are supposed to feel; viz. melancholy. Uncle Alphonse can also suggest some reasons why melancholy alone is exempt from suspicion of 'the construction of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world' with which literature, according to Sebald, renounces its legitimacy (Destruction 53; Luftkrieg 59). Crucially melancholy is, as we have seen, rather indifferent to the sort of reflexive foregrounding of artifice for which Sebald is praised. Like those accidents of light that photographers call artefacts, Alphonse's phantom traces sketched in the retina produce their effect not in spite of, but precisely on account of a knowledge of mediation and artifice. One could say, then, that melancholy just is the natural affective

life of disenchantment. But this also points to the part of Romanticism that survives disenchantment. For as well as being thoroughly Romantic in its own right, melancholy can be understood in classic Freudian terms, as the inability to fully mourn; in this instance, to mourn the death of transcendent vision.

If this seems a grand claim, it is worth noting that, in Die Beschreibung des Unglücks, Sebald goes much further in the opposite direction, claiming that melancholy is 'a form of resistance' (12). So curious a notion is this, one cannot but pause and wonder. Melancholy is not generally thought of as an active state at all, far less as engagé. What could it mean to recommend a passive, unwilled affliction as an ethical or political choice? Surely when history comes knocking, melancholics are the last people to whom one would look for a plan: one thinks of Hamlet. What is more, resistance implies the moment: it is not something that can be done retrospectively or in a state of absence. A dreamily recollected house in the Slieve Bloom mountains, inhabited by a family of somnambulists who, lost to the current of time, go through the same motions endlessly, may give rise to most beautiful and acute reflections on the sadness of history, but it is scarcely at the heart of the action (Rings 208-22; Ringe 247-64). Likewise, the angel of history may be condemned to travel backwards, but when we speak of resistance we are usually expected to face forward. This is not to say that Sebald should offer an arm-raising call to action, but that his invocation of resistance strikes an odd note. For it comes dismayingly close to proposing something like the idea of 'passive resistance' with which Broch and his 'inner emigrant' contemporaries salved their consciences, and which was 'indistinguishable from passive collaboration' ('Una montagna' 121). Might we not begin to wonder if Sebald's own sleepwalkers may also be the vehicles of an aesthetic which offers a good conscience to political defeatism?

My purpose is not, however, to use Broch as a stick with which to beat Sebald.

Both writers have, in their very different times, a profoundly ambivalent relationship with the inheritance of German Romanticism. Both see the dangers of mysticism and its atavistic survival into modernity; yet rather than simply sloughing off these aspects of Romanticism they find it necessary to tackle them head-on, and work them through. They are hardly alone in this. Both are clearly influenced by psychoanalysis, and one of Freud's defining moves, it need hardly be said, was to take seriously what might seem mystical or irrational ideas. The Romantic inheritance—from Hegel to Hoffmann, and not least its gloomy or disenchanted side in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche—is acknowledged as an important source of insight in his work. One is reminded also of Adorno's equivocal remarks on Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, says Adorno, was positively drawn to the 'petrified, frozen or obsolete elements of civilization'. Rather than avoid mythical thought, his 'Medusan' (medusisch) gaze plunged headlong into it: by making everything mythical, he secularised myth. Benjamin's 'magnetic attraction', Adorno seems to say, made him a novel sort of magician (Prisms 229-41; Prismen 234-49).

Although the epigraph to the Broch essay might suggest he would balk at the term, perhaps we can see Sebald, a great admirer of Benjamin, as a similar sort of conjuror; one whose trick would consist of emptying Romantic topoi of transcendence whilst filling them up with secular marvels. Here somnambulism, with one foot in the everyday, and another in the world of miraculous feats and prophetic vision, is pivotal. For, as we have seen in the case of Vera's vision, even once it has been stripped of the supernatural, what remains may be a secular marvel. Something similar would apply even to mesmeric divination. The most emphatic articulation of theatrical divination in Austerlitz comes in the form of a goose in a circus. Joining the rest of the troupe in the finale, a strangely halting dance, it has the craned neck and lowered eyelids of a

clairvoyant, and seems to know the fate of its companions. The fact that it is a goose is, of course, a fairly clear signal that we are not to take this magic too seriously. Yet we are expected to believe that in the image (Bild) of the goose is captured or sublated (aufgehoben) something—the mysterious evocative power of music—which Austerlitz has never been able to understand intellectually (383-84; 389-91). In spite of the goose, the scene remains at some level an instance of the Romantic topos of seeing in the somnambulistic performance of a dancer or musician an intimation of something like destiny (see e.g. Heine 50).

Spectacular set-pieces of this sort are not, however, my ultimate concern. It is perhaps inevitable that they act as lightning-rods for critical attention in that they act out, in capsule form, problems with which the novel as a whole is concerned. But while they may influence how we weave the fabric of the narrative, they cannot simply legislate. Indeed, given too much authority, they may serve to distract us from other forms of divination, those solicited by the patterns of recurring images, so often labelled 'uncanny', of which Sebald's texts are composed. However mediated or unsettling these may appear in any given instance, their recurrence invites us to divine occulted links, and draws us into recognitions which constitute the doleful pleasure of the text. Many of these images are symptomatically Romantic: protagonists are wanderers who encounter, in otherwise unpeopled landscapes, lone figures with strange walks who flicker and jerk spectrally, and who may also be little people, or sport oriental headgear. And when they are not on the move, they are gazing longingly out of windows, or leaning their heads melancholically against walls. But far less obviously uncanny motifs can perform the same function. Gloves, for instance, trace throughout Austerlitz a mournful current of destiny: Austerlitz and the narrator have one of their first long chats in the 'Handschuhmarkt' of Antwerp (16; 24); Vera's Aunt Otýlie ran a glove shop (225; 233);

Austerlitz imagines his mother in a haberdashery in Theresienstadt taking gloves from a drawer (343; 350); and, though this is not apparent in the English translation, it is a glove that the photograph of the infant Austerlitz as the Rose Queen's page boy extends in challenge to his older self (260; 268). This last-mentioned instance seems to provide the key to the motif, by tying it into the novel's exploration of the problems of memory and history. But it is also the most emphatically picturesque and folkloric, and if it can be made to raise questions concerning the knowability of the past, this is very far from diminishing the pathos of destiny.

It has been argued that Austerlitz marks a new development in this respect. For John Zilcosky, what made the earlier fictions authentically uncanny was the characters' inability to become sufficiently lost: only in Austerlitz are we offered a more conventional postmodern model of lost-and-found. I would argue, however, that Austerlitz, rather than changing the game, differs only in that it shows its hand a little too much. In so doing, it may lead us to ask if the uncanny, or the inability to escape repetition, need be as unsettling as we have become accustomed to think. Zilcosky cites, for instance, the 'astonishment' and 'horror' with which the narrator of The Rings of Saturn finds himself constantly returning to the same stretch of heath en route to Michael Hamburger's house (Zilcosky 683). Yet this episode prefigures, and is subsequently countersigned by, Hamburger's account of his own sleepwalk round the ruins of post-war Berlin (Rings 178; Ringe 212). What is more, during his stay with Hamburger, the narrator notes as 'incomprehensible' the coincidence of a shared acquaintance (187; 223), and even feels he is losing the ground from under his feet (188; 224). For all that they evoke melancholy and confusion, these Sebaldian repetitions conspire here, as in Austerlitz, to suggest a sort of fellowship in exile and sleepwalking. Like Sebald and Hamburger themselves, such motifs must become, in their repetition

within and between texts, old friends, so that the reader too may find a way into their somnambulistic community, along a path made of steps only ostensibly uncertain, leading as they do all-too surely to a ritualised despondency.

Pleasure, Ambivalence, and Polemic

I may seem thus to take a rather solemn, moralistic view of the pleasure of reading, but this is not at all my intention. In the first instance, the problem of pleasure is not something I am introducing into the debate. Implicit in claims for Sebald's reflexivity is precisely the idea that pleasure must be managed or circumscribed, that an unreflecting delight would, in this context, be a danger; that the text must prove itself worthy of our pleasure by showing its awareness of the danger. But John Zilcosky, it seems to me, raises a question too often taken for granted when he warns that 'we cannot uncritically grant ethical status to a literary device' (695). In other words, the plausible demonstration of a reflexive gesture is not in itself sufficient. Even so, having floated this caveat, Zilcosky seems to be under a powerful compulsion to conclude: 'But Sebald is not so easily caught'. Thus, even after he has seemingly damned the too-easy pleasures of Austerlitz as 'Holocaust melodrama', Zilcosky perorates by tentatively wondering if this may not be an entirely bad thing, provided we can find in it an 'ethical dimension' (697-98). The reasons for this drawing-back from condemnation are not in themselves particularly mysterious. For we all stand here under the terrible shadows of Auschwitz and Adorno, and are compelled to ask if lyricising or aestheticising disaster are at all acceptable. On pain of banning writing on the subject altogether, Sebald, and consequently his critics, must look for ways to dramatise the problems of their task. Yet, precisely because the stakes are so high, and the vigilance demanded so impossibly acute, the response will very readily polarise into condemnation on the one hand, and

apology on the other. To raise serious difficulties without seeming to compromise a work entirely becomes exceedingly difficult.

At this point, however, Adorno's essay on 'Cultural Criticism and Society' reveals a further, less-often considered danger. For, immediately before declaring poetry after Auschwitz barbarism, Adorno remarks that 'the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter'. Reading in line with the relentlessly dialectical tenor of Adorno's argument, we may infer that this is not just a contingent hazard, but that there is an inherent logic tending to flip from one extreme to the other. And, again following the insistent lines of Adorno's argument, this will be so to the extent that a 'consciousness of doom' is subject, like everything else, to commodification and reification. At a push we might even argue that the most extreme consciousness would be especially vulnerable: in its incessantly repeating anxiety it may take on the character of a fetish. Adorno's own passage from doom to fetish is of considerable interest here, for it resembles in some respects that of Sebald. In his very insistence on the dangers of the 'bewitched reality' (Prisms 23; Prismen 12) of 'a humanity which has been enchanted [...] into clientele' (26; 15), Adorno compulsively hallucinates the very mysticification against which he so vigorously strives. Few oeuvres are as full of ghosts, spells and witches as that of Adorno, and at times these may seem what is most real in it. Indeed, the spell is real insofar as it dominates the world, and the terms in which it does so may remind us of both Sebald and Broch: for '[w]hat differs from the existent will strike the existent as witchcraft, while thought figures such as proximity, home, security hold the faulty world under their spell.' (Negative Dialectics 33; Negative Dialektik 41).

Curiously enough, Negative Dialectics even has its own fairy-tale goose, Mimi, from Wilhelm Hauff's tale 'The Dwarf Nose'. Mimi, says Adorno, helps the boy who

has been transformed into a dwarf to an understanding of his deformity that no amount of introspection could have supplied. In Adorno's reading, the tale is a fable of subjectivity: the subject is enchanted (verzaubert) by the name of subjectivity, just as Dwarf Nose is enchanted by the herb 'sneezejoy'. Just as he must be directed by Mimi to the take the herb once more, so must we confront subjectivity homeopathically, so to speak, rather than by looking into our own subject as a given (182; 181). It is a charming fable, but the pharmakon—or, if you prefer, the hair of the dog that bit you—is always a risky quantity. Kill or cure, Adorno's rhetoric of enchantment inflates in direct proportion to the grinding intensity of his negative dialectic. Become compulsive, the language of disenchantment curiously rivals the sleep of reason in the production of monsters.

If one felt inclined to indict Adorno for backsliding one doubtless could. But where a predicament reveals itself so intractable in writers so differently situated, we may begin to suspect that it is a serious one, and it can hardly be the occasion for polemic and straightforward taking of sides. Neither Broch, nor Sebald, nor Adorno can remake from the ground up their intellectual inheritance; and there is no other ground on which they can stand, free of entanglement. This, indeed, is what Adorno's 'Cultural Criticism' essay tells us. Each, therefore, must negotiate it after his fashion, but none can ever hope to dispose of it entirely. The task of criticism in such a case is thus not either to denounce or to excuse: it is to take stock of the risks in which our pleasure as readers entangles us. And this entails an order of uncertainty far more unsettling than that which may result from a textual game set up by a conscientious author. Is there not, in any case, something a little alarming in the idea of an author who would be so far the master of his proclivities, and who would move with such perfect tact, as to be able to lead us unscathed through doubt and destruction? And if our fervent attention to spectacular

enactments of uncertainty only serves to screen more intractable problems, do we not risk sleepwalking through a simulacrum of critical consciousness?

We are all compelled to take a leap in the dark here, for the idea of a correct bad conscience is incoherent, ultimately indistinguishable from a commodified good conscience. As Sebald says of Broch, what distinguished him from the pedlars of fascism was his 'good faith, coupled with a bad conscience as to the inner qualities of his writing' ('Una montagna' 129). Faint praise as this may seem, ought not something of the sort to apply, to a greater or lesser extent, to any writer who takes seriously the difficulties of confronting political disaster? The practical question is, what form does one's conscience take, and where does one put it? There may be a sense in which Sebald's criticism acts as a proxy conscience for his fiction, reassuring through its trenchant certainties that the suggestiveness and ambiguity of the fictions are in good faith. But if this is so, it seems the first casualty of polemic is ambivalence. For any appearance of moral rigor achieved in this way will be at the expense of evading, through a rather brutal division of labour, the synthesis that caused Broch so many pains. Can such a cantonisation of the critical and the fictive, each in its proper place, ultimately work? One may suspect that the repressed part will, in either instance, have its revenge. In its anxiety to achieve moral clarity and distance, criticism may undo itself and end up acting out what it condemns. It is thus precisely through his sense of freedom from entanglement in any of Broch's dilemmas that Sebald ends up perversely evincing, in his criticism, the very pose of high-minded rationalism he claims to find so repellent in Broch's fiction, and even in terms avowedly borrowed from Broch. Likewise, the denunciation of a prophetic style may itself take on a dismayingly prophetic tenor. Sebald perorates by imagining Broch close to death in exile in the United States, and contemplating a return to Judaism. Perhaps, Sebald suggests, Broch had at long last

climbed Mount Nebo to look down, like Moses, on the Promised Land of Canaan he could never enter ('Una montagna' 129-30). Given his view of Broch's mythologising tendencies, is Sebald really so sure he can keep his footing at such rhetorical heights?

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[i] Sebald’s essay remains untranslated, and all translations offered here are my own.

[ii] The trilogy advances in fifteen-year stages to 1918, the end of Wilhelm’s reign, and of the Empire.

[iii] The third volume’s full title is ‘1918 . Huguenau oder die Sachlichkeit’. By construing the three volumes as ‘The Romantic’, ‘The Anarchist’, and ‘The Realist’, the Muirs’ translation risks obscuring the skewed, ironised relationship each of the protagonists bears to his allotted concept.