

«Umgekehrt wird man leicht selbst zum Verfolgten»: the structure of the double-bind in W.G. Sebald

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ABSTRACT

W.G. Sebald's engagement in his first book *Schwindel. Gefühle* with Kafka suggests a hauntingly ambivalent relationship with his literary predecessors. His narrator is both «passive» and «active» in Nietzsche's terms, hunted by history as much as the hunter of his story. In this paper I attempt to address two main areas: in the first half I examine the ambivalence of this intertextuality, whilst in the second half I consider examples of how this ambivalence is enacted in the structures of his syntax, drawing in particular on Sebald's annotations in his own personal 'Handbibliothek'. My central contention is that both his engagement with his chosen predecessors, as well as his circular syntax, can be characterized as (in his own words) «eine klassische Situation des *double-bind*».

KEY WORDS: W.G. Sebald; Double-bind; Dialectics; Intertextuality.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

W.G. Sebalds Auseinandersetzung mit Kafka in seinem ersten Buch *Schwindel. Gefühle* deutet auf ein merkwürdig ambivalentes Verhältnis zu seinen literarischen Vorgängern an. Sein Erzähler ist sowohl «passiv» als auch «aktiv» (in der Terminologie Nietzsches), ebenso verfolgt von der Geschichte als auch Verfolger der Geschichte. In diesem Aufsatz gehe ich zwei Hauptthemen nach: erstens untersuche ich die Doppelwertigkeit dieser Intertextualität, zweitens wie sich diese Doppelwertigkeit in den Strukturen seiner Syntax abspielt, indem ich mich vor allem auf Sebalds Anmerkungen in seiner ‚Privatbibliothek‘ beziehe. Meines Erachtens muss man sowohl seine Auseinandersetzung mit seinen Vorgängern als auch seine kreisförmige Syntax als «eine klassische Situation des *double-bind*» bezeichnen.

SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER: W.G. Sebald, *Double-bind*, Dialektik, Intertextualität.

RESUMEN

El enfrentamiento de W.G. Sebald con Kafka en su primera obra, *Schwindel.Gefühle*, supone una relación curiosamente ambivalente con sus predecesores literarios. Su narrador es tanto «pasivo» como «activo» (en la terminología de Nietzsche), tanto perseguido por la historia como perseguidor de la historia. En este artículo parto, pues, de dos cuestiones fundamentales: en primer lugar, analizo el doble valor de esa intertextualidad; en segundo, como ese doble valor se refleja en las estructuras de su sintaxis, refiriéndome sobre todo a las notas de Sebald en su «biblioteca particular». En mi opinión hay que definir su confrontación con sus predecesores al igual que su sintaxis circular como «una situación clásica del *double-bind*».

PALABRAS CLAVE: W.G. Sebald, *Double-bind*, dialéctica, intertextualidad.

SUMARIO: 1. Sebald's intertextuality as a double-bind. 2. Sebald's syntax as a double-bind.

It has become a critical commonplace that W.G. Sebald's writing is centrally concerned with the poetics of memory. His books attempt to evoke collective experience through individual examples: the celebrated final book *Austerlitz*, for instance, investigates the displaced life of the post-Holocaust European in one single, representative story. The mechanisms of remembering are explored in the context of world-historical events, of the enduring shadow of the second world war; history thus elicits an inevitable emphasis on memory. Sebald's specific *style*, however, remains to be fully explored. In his earliest full-length prose work *Schwindel. Gefühle* (1990), for instance, this recurrent concern with memory is framed not by the perspectives of history, but rather by a dialogue with certain aspects of literary tradition. Sebald uses this literary tradition as a means of exploring the representation of memory in art. His engagement in this first book with Stendhal and, in particular, with Kafka suggests a hauntingly ambivalent relationship with the art of the past, a relationship which is ultimately reflected in his syntax, in his very sentence structure, as well as in his historiography. In this paper I will thus attempt to address two main areas: in the first half I will examine the ambivalence of Sebald's intertextuality, whilst in the second half I will consider examples of how this ambivalence is enacted in the structures of his syntax, drawing in particular on Sebald's annotations in his own personal 'Handbibliothek'.¹

My central contention is that both Sebald's engagement with his chosen predecessors as well as his circular syntax can be characterized as a kind of double-bind. In *Schwindel. Gefühle*, in particular, he sets up a dialectical relationship to Kafka which can be seen as both «passive» and «active» in the terms which Nietzsche establishes in *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* as defining our relationship to the past, where «passivity» determines the mere *reception* of history, and «activity» lies in forgetting it.² For throughout the book, Sebald's narrator is hunted by history just as much as he is the hunter of his story. Not that this is particularly apparent in the first chapter, where he imagines the early life of Stendhal, or Henri Beyle as he rebaptizes him. Sebald uses this initial chapter to establish his preoccupation with «die Schwierigkeiten der Erinnerung» (Sebald 1990: 8). Looking back in later life on his experiences as a young soldier in Napoleon's army, Stendhal remarks on how the devastation of the Battle of Marengo made such an overwhelming impression on him that it precluded any other, more coherent, memories. Anything he does claim to remember has therefore been reconstructed post hoc, distorted by his own imagination. His memory of the town of Ivrea, for instance, is irretrievably distorted by a picture of it which he happens to chance upon years later: «denn eine Gravure besetze bald schon den ganzen Platz der Erinnerung, die wir von etwas hätten, ja, man könne sogar sagen, sie zerstöre diese» (Sebald 1990: 12). Sebald in his characteristic manner reports all this in the third person and subjunctive of

¹ This library, or at least part of it, is held in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar.

² See *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*. Stuttgart: Kröner 1964, 164.

indirekte Rede, so that Stendhal's lapidary conclusion in his original text, «Mon souvenir n'est qu'un roman fabriqué à cette occasion», literally becomes true in Sebald's novelistic reconstruction of events. «Denn in Wirklichkeit ist, wie wir wissen, alles immer ganz anders» (Sebald 1990: 10) he concludes.

It is this discrepancy, between the images of the battle in his head and the evident reality of events, that elicits the first occurrence of the talismanic motif of «Schwindel». The German title of the book, *Schwindel. Gefühle*, conveys something that the standard English translation of «Vertigo» misses: namely that «Schwindel» can mean not just dizziness, but also a 'swindle'. Moreover, how are we to read the full stop that pointedly separates the two nouns «Schwindel» and «Gefühle»? Should we agree with Martin Klebes that «Sebald's typographical manipulation ... points to the vertiginous disassociation of literature from any emotional truth» (Klebes 2004: 138), and thus implicitly *contrast* the two nouns? Or should we rather juxtapose them into the one single «Schwindelgefühl»? And anyway who, or what, is the fraud, the 'swindler'?

The recurrences of this leitmotif «Schwindel» seem always to be associated with a discrepancy between either past and present or imagination and reality, or indeed often both. So when, for instance, the narrator thinks he sees Dante walking ahead of him in the streets of Vienna, he suffers a vertiginous sense of the past collapsing into the present, of hallucination, which thus produces another moment of «Schwindel». The sentence which immediately follows the word in Sebald's text seems to allude to a kind of Chandos crisis of sensibility, (particularly the verb «zerfielen», which Hofmannsthal's Chandos uses repeatedly): «Die Konturen von Bildern, die ich festzuhalten suchte, lösten sich auf, und die Gedanken zerfielen mir, noch ehe ich sie richtig gefasst hatte» (Sebald 1990: 42). In other words, Sebald's recourse to Dante and Hofmannsthal here illustrates how his attachment to literature is a double-edged sword, a trap (or 'swindle') into which he precipitates himself: like Dante tantalisingly just ahead of him, it draws him on and fires his imagination, but then deceives him and leaves him on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

This double-bind is already latent in the structure of the book: the narrator is apparently retracing his own steps, undertaking a trip around northern Italy in 1987 which he first took in 1980. It is thus written into this structure that he is both hunter and hunted, terms that become increasingly apposite as the book progresses. The narrator becomes convinced he is being followed, or perhaps haunted, by two young men whom he comes to identify with an infamous series of murders carried out by a group calling themselves the *Organizzazione Ludwig*. Moreover, when asked what kind of book he is writing at one point, he replies «dass ich (...) in zunehmendem Masse das Gefühl habe, es handle sich um einen Kriminalroman» (Sebald 1990: 108). Again, the uncomfortable suspicion arises that he is both detective and quarry.

This structure of a 'double-bind' reaches its apotheosis in Sebald's relationship to Kafka, the undoubted pivot of the book. The two young men who seem to be following the narrator, these «zwei Männer in schwarzen Röcken mit silbernen Knöpfen» who reappear on his tail at least five times, are strongly

reminiscent of both the two executioners who lead away Josef K. at the end of *Der Prozess* and, most obviously, the two pall-bearers carrying *Der Jäger Gracchus*.³ Yet this level of allusion is deeply problematic. To take just one example, Martin Klebes has shown how the photograph Sebald uses to try to 'prove' the memory of his trip to Verona in 1987, which also connects back to his previous visit of 1980, in fact does just the opposite. The narrator claims to associate with a particular pizzeria the mental image of the two men in black silver-buttoned tunics carrying out a body on a bier. Yet, as Klebes remarks, «the relation between the supposed mental image and the photograph is established by something that is itself absent: the pigeons» (Klebes 2004: 129). Talking pigeons, of course, were the herald of Gracchus' arrival in Kafka's story – yet Sebald was precisely *unable* to secure a picture of the pigeons which he claimed were roosting on the roof of the pizzeria, showing us only the restaurant itself. In other words, rather than proving the evidentiary truth of photography, this image is marked by a lack. It emphasises once again the discrepancy between imagination and reality, particularly an imagination informed by literature and 'fiction'. Sebald's relationship to Kafka determines this story, but it also distorts it, re-presents it, and thus prejudices the reader's engagement with any objective truth.

What determines the nature of this double-bind, then, is that Sebald conceives his relationship to the story of Gracchus in both active and passive terms, just as he does the motif of vertigo in general (as Massimo Leone has written).⁴ He seems to be being hunted by these two sinister pall-bearers; at one point indeed he is even mugged by two young men in Milan. Yet he also of course uses the motif of Gracchus to link the four separate chapters of his book. We first encounter it when Stendhal arrives in Riva on a «Barke», just like Gracchus, and sees the two men carrying out their bier, and the circle is completed in the fourth chapter when Sebald returns to his home village and tells the story of the death of the hunter Hans Schlag from the Schwarzwald, who had the same small «Barke» tattooed on his arm. The pivot of the book, however, is the brief third chapter which reimagines Kafka's own journey to Riva. The title of the chapter, «Dr.K's Badereise nach Riva», both reduces Kafka to one of his own protagonists and alludes to yet another intertext, Jean Paul's *Dr Katzenbergers Badereise* (1809). The opening sentence of Jean Paul's novel is an advertisement placed in a newspaper, stating that «Ein Gelehrter (...) wünscht einige oder mehre Reisegesellschafter» (Jean Paul 1935: 79). Yet as the story progresses, so the professor ironically turns out to be the most unsociable of people, just as Sebald too seems to style himself as a solitary traveller.

In fact, though, Sebald is not travelling alone, since the ghost of Kafka is his constant companion. What is particularly fascinating about this central chapter of

³ Kafka uses the exact same wording to describe the pall-bearers in his Gracchus fragment.

⁴ See Leone's essay «Textual wanderings: a vertiginous reading of W.G. Sebald» in *W.G. Sebald – A Critical Companion*, p. 93.

Schwindel. Gefühle is the extent to which it sets up a parallel relationship between Sebald and Kafka (at least as he is conceived here). Their movements and mentalities are subtly mapped on to one another, often by nothing more than a suggestive phrase. For instance, Sebald observes how, in Limone, the throng of tourists walk «ineinander verschlungen» (Sebald 1990: 106), whilst Kafka then similarly watches how they walk «ineinander eingehängt» in Verona (Sebald 1990: 165). Sebald uses Grillparzer's *Tagebuch auf der Reise nach Italien* as a guide-book in Venice; Kafka stays in a particular hotel in Vienna «aus Sympathie für Grillparzer» (Sebald 1990: 157). Sebald describes how, in his hotel in Milan, he leaned back on his bed, «verschränkte die Arme (...) unterm Kopf und starrte an die, wie mir schien, meilenweit entfernte Decke empor» (Sebald 1990: 126); Kafka in Trieste «legt sich auf das Bett, die Hände unterm Kopf verschränkt, und betrachtet den Plafond» (Sebald 1990: 161). The parallels are subtle, but unmistakable. Sebald interweaves his own and Kafka's lives, observing how the way in which the poet Ernst Herbeck, whom he visits in Klosterneuburg, takes his hat off and carries it by his side, reminds him of his own grandfather – and then later describing Kafka as having exactly the same habit. And where did Kafka die? In Klosterneuburg.

This pattern of implied cross-reference is of particular interest given the order of the chapters. The sequence detailing Kafka's «Badereise» comes *after* the long chapter describing Sebald's travels, which has the effect of implying that Kafka is following Sebald, not the other way around. Within the context of Sebald's narrative, it is thus unclear who is hunting whom: the photograph of the fencer fighting himself in the mirror, «in der er zweifellos seinen Doppelgänger erkannt haben würde» (Sebald 1990: 166) as Sebald speculates, seems to summarise the situation. Everywhere Sebald goes, Kafka has been before him, and, within the body of the narrative, everywhere Kafka goes, Sebald has been before him. Bloom's anxiety of influence thus finds expression in a struggle for precedence, in Sebald's curious identification with his predecessor, to the point where his own identity seems to come under threat when he loses his passport and can only show his new one with the photograph blocked out. As Klebes remarks, «the narrator feigns more emotional insight and memory capacity concerning the days in Riva than his ostensible subject, 'Kafka'». In other words, his «Dr. K», who strictly speaking may or may not be Kafka, constitutes not only the construction of a fiction, but also *mutatis mutandis* the construction of the self. His research suggests this parallel identity, since he tells us that he sets off to Verona

(um) einiges ausfindig machen zu können, sowohl über meinen eigenen, vor sieben Jahre so abrupt abgebrochenen Aufenthalt in dieser Stadt als auch über den untröstlichen Nachmittag, den Dr. Kafka, wie er selbst berichtet hat, im September 1913 auf dem Weg von Venedig zum Gardasee in Verona verbrachte (Sebald 1990: 97).

This double movement gives the book something of a Proustian flavour, revisiting the author's own past as a structural conceit. In his copy of Walter

Benjamin's essay on Proust, for instance, Sebald underlined the sentence «es war in Prousts Neugier ein detektivischer Einschlag» (Benjamin 1961: 363).⁵ The author as the detective of his own memory – this could be a description of Sebald's book too, except that in *Schwindel. Gefühle* he is hunting both himself and Kafka, in a hermeneutic circle. Indeed he writes elsewhere of Kafka's travel diaries that they are so vivid to him, it is as if he actually plays a part in them (particularly since Kafka's travelling companion Max Brod shares Sebald's universally used first name 'Max').

These diaries seem to come to life as he travels to Verona. Before he gets on the train he sees the Italian word *Il cacciatore* (the hunter) graffitied in the toilets; once on the train, he comes across a boy «der auf die unheimlichste Weise, die man sich denken kann, den Bildern glich, die Kafka als heranwachsenden Schüler zeigen» (Sebald 1990: 101).⁶ Again, the problem of proof presents itself: the boy's parents won't let him take his picture, since they seem to think that Sebald is some kind of «in Italien herumreisenden englischen Päderasten» (Sebald 1990: 103). This comic misunderstanding produces another key moment of «Schwindel»: the motion-sickness caused by the train, but also the hunter's disappointment at having been swindled out of his prey.

Now it is my contention here that this nodal motif of «Schwindel» is essentially a double-bind: vertiginous heights enable one to see a long way, but also make one aware of a greater distance. This, in short, seems to characterize Sebald's relationship to literary tradition: he makes great use of its dizzy heights, but then repeatedly suffers attacks of vertigo when reminded of the discrepancy between the imagination it embodies, and reality. His understanding of memory, which seems to follow Nietzsche's conclusions, needs to be seen as a response to this vertigo. In an essay on Peter Weiss, he twice quotes *Zur Genealogie der Moral* to the effect that «Vergesslichkeit» is actually the guarantor of peace and sanity:

«Vielleicht», schreibt Nietzsche in der *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, «ist nichts furchtbarer und unheimlicher an der ganzen Vorgeschichte des Menschen als seine Mnemotechnik. Man brennt etwas ein, damit es im Gedächtnis bleibt: nur was nicht aufhört, weh zu thun, bleibt im Gedächtnis» (Sebald 2003: 140).

Moreover, Sebald underlined a passage in his copy of *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* which establishes explicitly a link between this dialectic of remembering and forgetting and the double-bind of the «passive» and «active» with which we have characterized Sebald's relationship to Kafka:

⁴ 'Zum Bilde Prousts', *Illuminationen*, held in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar.

⁵ John Zilcosky has investigated the link between Sebald's «Schwindel» and Freud's «Unheimliche», in *W.G. Sebald – A Critical Companion*, pp.104-9.

So macht der historische Sinn seine Diener passiv und retrospektiv; und beinahe nur aus augenblicklicher Vergesslichkeit, wenn gerade jener Sinn intermittiert, wird der am historischen Fieber Erkrankte aktiv... (Nietzsche 1964 b: 164).

This double-bind of historiography as Nietzsche presents it is of course implicit in his title *Vom Nutzen «und» Nachteil*. Memory is both an advantage and a disadvantage; it is paradoxically in forgetting that the passive reception of history can become «active». Sebald seems to intuit this dialectic, even if he all too often falls short of it. Significantly, for instance, he mentions in the scene in the pizzeria in Verona discussed earlier that the image of the two men carrying Gracchus plagued him «ehe ich es vergessen konnte» (Sebald 1990: 140) – that is to say, he is aware of the need *to be able* to forget, as well as to remember. Again, there is perhaps an echo of Proust, since in his copy of Benjamin's essay Sebald underlines precisely this point: «sollte man nicht besser von einem Penelopewerk des Vergessens reden? Steht nicht das ungewollte Eingedenken, Prousts *mémoire involontaire*, dem Vergessen viel näher als dem, was meist Erinnerung genannt wird?» (Benjamin 1961: 355). All the imagery of 'looking' and 'seeing' that underlies Sebald's work evokes a quest for lucidity, yet this can as equally be achieved by clearing away extraneous material as well as by adding it, by forgetting as well as by remembering. Whole sections of *Zur Genealogie der Moral* are centrally concerned with this dialectic: on the same page in the copy from which Sebald quotes, for instance, Nietzsche writes that «Vergesslichkeit ist keine bloss *vis inertiae*, wie die Oberflächlichen glauben, sie ist vielmehr ein aktives, im strengsten Sinne positives Hemmungsvermögen» (Nietzsche 1964: 285). Sebald's problem is that he seems precisely to lack this inhibition; Nietzsche could be describing him when he continues that «Der Mensch, in dem dieser Hemmungsapparat beschädigt wird und aussetzt, ist einem Dyspeptiker zu vergleichen (...) – und er wird mit nichts fertig» (Nietzsche 1964: 286). Characteristic of Sebald's style is precisely that he remembers *too much*, that his «Beziehungswahnsinn» connects everything to everything in ever-increasing circles: «Langsam habe ich seither gelernt, wie über den Raum und Zeit hinweg alles miteinander verbunden ist» (Sebald 2002: 163). In *Schwindel. Gefühle* this expresses itself in specifically literary form, for the narrator seems incapable of escaping the concentric circles of literary tradition, the rings of Saturn embodied by his preoccupation with Kafka. The labyrinth which he finds on the back of a map of Milan seems to comment ironically on this dilemma; underneath its deliberate disorientations, as Sebald points out drily, it claims to be «Una guida sicura per l'organizzazione del vostro lavoro» (Sebald 1990: 122).

A similar irony seems to extend to the pattern of uncanny coincidences and chance meetings, so characteristic of all Sebald's writing but manifest here in *Schwindel. Gefühle* in his engagement with Kafka. Tim Parks juxtaposes these chance encounters with his style itself, suggesting that «like the coincidences he speaks of, [his style] recovers, devours, and displaces the past» (Parks 2001: 91). Where references and allusions would usually be used to establish a clear metatextual framework, here they in fact make things markedly less clear. He

actively chooses to use literary precedents as his framework, but then only succeeds in establishing himself as their passive object. Despite the illusion of subjective choice suggested by his myriad quotations and references, things start happening *to* him, seemingly beyond his control.

The underlying paradox of this double-bind of memory is that the more images and ‘evidence’ of the past Sebald collects, the less sure he becomes of his material. This clearly relates to the structure of the book and his relationship to Kafka explored above: the more he hunts, the more he himself becomes hunted. At a syntactical level, however, this double-bind can be seen enacted in the counter-intuitive structure of the phrase ‘the more... the less’, in what George Szirtes in his elegy for Sebald calls his «tendency to counterflow / and double exposure» (Szirtes 2004: 19). As he writes in *Schwindel. Gefühle*, «Je mehr Bilder aus der Vergangenheit ich versammle (...), desto unwahrscheinlicher wird es mir, daß die Vergangenheit auf diese Weise sich abgespielt haben soll» (Sebald 1990: 231). Variations on this phrase recur throughout Sebald’s work, and reflect his preoccupation with the relationship between memory and decay: the more evidence of the past he collects («versammelt»), the less he seems capable of resisting its decay: «je mehr ich es bei mir erwog, desto weniger konnte ich mich von der Stelle rühren» (Sebald 1990: 76).

Implicit in this self-correcting syntax is a critique of the idea of progress, at various levels. Firstly, its structure mimics the motions of travel, of the journey which seems to characterize Sebald’s writing, just as, for example, Heine marks both the ascent and the descent of the Brocken in his *Harzreise* by using exactly the same construction when he climbs up and when he climbs down («Je höher man den Berg hinaufsteigt, desto kürzer, zwerghafter werden die Tannen» [Heine 1970: 38] he writes as they climb up; «Je tiefer wir hinab stiegen, desto lieblicher rauschte das unterirdische Gewässer» [Heine 1970: 52] he states on the way down). Secondly, this dialectical structure resonates at the personal level of the artist, as he writes in *Die Ringe des Saturn* about his doubts as to whether writing makes us more or less sane:

Vielleicht verliert ein jeder von uns den Überblick genau in dem Maß, in dem er fortbaut am eigenen Werk, und vielleicht neigen wir aus diesem Grund dazu, die zunehmende Komplexität unserer Geisteskonstruktionen zu verwechseln mit einem Fortschritt an Erkenntnis, während wir zugleich ahnen, daß wir die Unwägbarkeiten, die in Wahrheit unsere Laufbahn bestimmen, nie werden begreifen können (Sebald 1996: 217).

Sebald here is actually quoting Claude Levi-Strauss’s *Traurige Tropen* (*Tristes tropiques*). In his own copy he underlined the following sentence: «Eine noch ernstere Gefahr sehe ich darin, den Fortschritt der Erkenntnis mit der wachsenden Komplexität der Geisteskonstruktionen zu verwechseln» (Levi-Strauss 1991: 44). Levi-Strauss’s book, which can be understood as a critique of

⁶ See Zilcosky, W.G. *Sebald – A Critical Companion*, pp.102-20.

imperialist notions of ‘progress’ as imposed on recalcitrant colonies, resonates throughout *Die Ringe des Saturn*, but in particular can be read into Sebald’s dialectical syntax. What John Zilcosky has shown thematically, the uncanny impossibility of getting lost in Sebald’s work,⁷ can also be seen syntactically, in a pattern of advance and retreat built into his sentence structure, in the impossibility of progress, the impossibility of getting *anywhere*.

In the more specific terms of German history, this characteristic syntax can also be seen as a critique of the possibility of any kind of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In this context Sebald approvingly quotes the minor novelist Hans Dieter Schäfer, in the epilogue to his lectures on the Allied air-raids: «Je entschlossener ich mich auf die Suche begeben, desto stärker muss ich begreifen, wie schwer die Erinnerung vorankommt» (Sebald 2001b: 97). It is no coincidence, however, that the double-bind of this syntax achieves its apotheosis in the work most overtly critical of modern notions of «Fortschritt», his final book *Austerlitz*. Underlying this book, as in the lectures on the air-raids, is a critique of the dialectics of enlightenment along the lines of the famous post-war formulation of Adorno and Horkheimer. The more technology develops, the more we seem to destroy ourselves; the more mankind ‘progresses’, the less we seem capable of justifying ourselves morally. Sebald’s own private library, held in the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv* in Marbach am Neckar, contains eleven volumes by Adorno alone, as well as a selection of books by other dialecticians of the enlightenment such as Horkheimer and Arendt. In Adorno’s works Sebald very often underlines precisely this phrase «Je mehr...desto weniger», or variations of it, which recurs again and again as one of Adorno’s favourite dialectical constructions. To give just one of many examples: in Adorno’s *Versuch über Wagner*, Sebald draws attention in the margin to «die universale Verstricktheit, in der das Individuum desto weniger vermag, je rücksichtloser es sich selbst setzt» (Adorno 1964: 125), but he also specifically underlines the words «vermag, je rücksichtloser», as if to suggest that this structure is the key to the sentiment.

This dialectic of illusory progress drives much of Sebald’s work, but is particularly evident in *Austerlitz*, since the eponymous title character’s work on architectural history inherently suggests a critique of the modern urge to ‘construct’. The monstrous «Palais de justice» in Brussels, for instance, evokes Kafka’s *Schloss* in its infinite labyrinth of «Korridore und Treppen, (...) die nirgendwo hinführten, und türlose Räume und Hallen, die von niemandem je zu betreten seien und deren ummauerte Leere das innerste Geheimnis sei aller sanktionierten Gewalt» (Sebald 2001: 43). Similarly Sebald develops at great length the theme of the impenetrability of the new «Bibliothèque nationale» in Paris, which in its «Größendimensionierung und Grad der Komplexität» (Sebald 2001: 394) seems to serve only «die fortschreitende Auflösung unserer Erinnerungsfähigkeiten» (Sebald 2001: 400). The «Fortifikations- und Belagerungskunst» which Austerlitz describes early on in the book (using the example of the fortress in Breendonk) illustrates precisely this dialectic: he explains «daß die größten Festungen naturgemäß auch die größte Feindemacht anziehen, daß man sich, in eben dem Maß, in dem man sich verschanzt, tiefer und tiefer in die Defensive begibt...» (Sebald 2001: 23). The structure of the double-

bind is once again built into the syntax, since it is the extent of ‘progress’ which determines exactly the extent of retreat, «in eben dem Maß», emphasized by the irony of the comparatives «tiefer und tiefer». Austerlitz’s reaction later on to the elaborate roof structure of Liverpool St. Station similarly uses this dialectical syntax to illustrate the ultimately self-defeating nature of human endeavour:

Je länger ich, den Kopf schmerzhaft zurückgezwungen, in die Höhe hinaufstarrte, desto mehr kam es mir vor, als dehnte sich der Innenraum, in welchem ich mich befand, als setzte er in der unwahrscheinlichsten perspektivischen Verkürzung unendlich sich fort und beugte sich zugleich, wie das nur in einem derartigen falschen Universum möglich war, in sich selber zurück (Sebald 2001: 195).

The syntax here reflects the ever-increasing distortions of the roof: the more Austerlitz looks, the less credible his perspective becomes. «Here», as Tim Parks writes, «we are approaching the core of Sebald’s vision, the spring at once of his pessimism, comedy and lyricism. Engagement in the present inevitably involves devouring the past» (Parks 2001: 89).

The way in which Austerlitz imagines that this roof turns back on itself is thus analogous to Sebald’s relationship to memory and, in the case of *Schwindel. Gefühle*, to literary tradition. The more he shores fragments against his ruin, the more he creates a ruin for himself, like Benjamin’s «Engel der Geschichte» whom he cites at the close of his lectures on the air-raids. He floats between literary memories like Gracchus between the living and the dead, vacillating, as Anne Fuchs expresses it, between a Romantic and an Ironic historiography, (Fuchs 2004: 20) between the need to remember and the need to forget. Sebald himself uses the phrase «double-bind» to describe the relationship of the satirist to his society, which he characterizes as «eine klassische Situation des *double-bind*» (Sebald 1994: 111); his interpretation of Nietzsche and the dialecticians of the enlightenment suggests that the relationship of the novelist to history follows a similar pattern. As I have suggested, this double-bind is suggested in particular by his classically dialectical syntax, as well as by the ambivalent relationship in his earliest work to intertextuality. His preoccupation with Kafka in *Schwindel. Gefühle* on the one hand sets up the possibility of a normal intertextual relationship, of the subsequent author following his predecessor; as Sebald himself writes, however, «umgekehrt wird man leicht selbst zum Verfolgten» (Sebald 1990: 61).

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