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Articulation in Austerlitz:

The Reevaluation of the Holocaust Discourse

“It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart” (Frank 694). Often quoted; the final words in the July 15, 1944 entry of the famous *Diary of A Young Girl* resonate with the enduring spirit and optimism of the fifteen year old Dutch Jew who less than a month after writing the hopeful message would be discovered by the Gestapo, and taken to the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen where she later died in March of 1945. Of all the accounts which convey the destruction wrought by the Nazi efforts to exterminate the Jews, Anne Frank’s diary remains, by far, the most popular and influential. According to the Holocaust Historical Society, since first being released in Holland in 1947, the diary has: been distributed worldwide; translated into nearly fifty languages; sold over eighteen million copies; and been adapted into theater productions, films, teaching guides and political tracts (Neilsen).

In their novel *Anne Frank: Reflections on Her Life and Legacy*, editors Hyman Enzer and Sandra Solotaroff-Enzer observe that Anne Frank “has become a patron saint of adolescence... a literary prodigy, a champion of religious and racial equality” (2) - and as emphasized throughout the book – her story serves as a symbol of the gross injustices suffered by the innocent and virtuous victims of the Holocaust. Many other journals which were kept during the time of Nazi domination have been reprinted, and innumerable other memoirs written by survivors since the

liberation of the concentration camps over half a century ago are also in publication.

Traditionally, most of the works of Holocaust literature rely on a melancholic tone to evoke empathy in the reader – the familiar emotions and aspects of everyday life experienced by a fellow human being under terrifying circumstances – and in doing so, convey the atrociousness of the actions of Nazis who perpetrated that suffering. As a result of the prevalent use and overwhelming popularity of such direct representations, the form of prose which *The Diary of A Young Girl* utilizes exists as the prototype of the Holocaust literary genre.

Contrarily, in his novel *Austerlitz*, W.G. Sebald approaches the destruction of Holocaust indirectly. The novel details how a Jewish man struggled to uncover his true identity and past after having learned while away at college that his birth parents had sent him from Prague on a *Kindertransport* to live with a Calvinist Welsh family in order to protect him from the Nazi extermination efforts. By the end of the novel he had discovered that his mother definitely, and father assumedly did not survive. However, the narrative of *Austerlitz* is not central to the novel, and does not attempt to illicit the emotional connection between the reader and the victimized protagonist which traditional representations strive to do. Instead, *Austerlitz* relies on several nontraditional literary elements to convey the trauma of the Holocaust, or rather, communicate the impossibility of representing the cataclysmic devastation.

In his attempt to determine the ontology of intertextuality, John Frow defines two concepts which can be used to explain how *Austerlitz* breaks away from the traditional genre of Holocaust literature: articulation, or “any structure establishing a relation among elements” (52), is used to refer to a single element of a literary work, such as the type of narration or thematic structure, that can be altered to change the discourse, or rather “the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice” (53), to which the work belongs. *Austerlitz* adapts several aspects

of articulation through the use of the ambiguous characterization of the protagonist, and also, by employing both the form of the framed novel as well as the obstructive placement of a narrator between the central character and the reader; and thus, goes against the articulatory practice of sensationalizing the trauma generally accepted as the standard of the Holocaust discourse. The “so what?” question can be answered with the theory of another critic, Wolfgang Iser, who argues that “changes enters the system not through...the way new writing shatters or conforms to the existing repertoire” (Clayton & Rothstein 26). Therefore, *Austerlitz* is effective in re-representing the Holocaust not because it remains within the prescribed boundaries of the Holocaust genre, but instead, as a result of its intentional violation of the established tradition set forth by such works as *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Through an examination of how the vague characterization of Austerlitz functions within the novel, and also, how the use of the narrator as a barrier between the reader and the main character in combination with the construction of the novel as a framed narrative accomplish the central purpose of the work, this essay will substantiate how *Austerlitz* effectively diverges from the discourse of the established discourse of Holocaust literature, and in doing so, succeeds in questioning the genre which precedes it.

In a majority of the critical reviews of *Austerlitz*, the discussion of character development so prevalent in most criticisms of literature remains noticeably absent: and when broached, the subject of characterization leads to the dismal of the novel as sufficiently lacking and underdeveloped, as was the case with Tom LeClair, who asserted in *Book Magazine* that he did not “believe in Austerlitz or the narrator” (BookBrowse). The lack of attention paid by the critics to the characters in *Austerlitz* demonstrates a major articulatory element within the novel which distinguishes it from the prototypical representation of the Holocaust. Through avoiding

the depiction of the personality and inner emotions of Austerlitz, his character, and ultimately the story he tells become secondary to the theories he obsesses about.

During his first meeting with the narrator, Austerlitz revealed that he considered that time was created by modern society “out of some internal compulsion” (Sebald 101) for a precise forward progression, but in fact, it actually “disregards linear regularity...moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption, recurs in ever-changing form, and evolves in no one knows what direction” (101). He later correlates this speculation on the illusion of time to the broken continuum that occurs during travel: the return home after having been abroad is often accompanied by a feeling that no progress has been made in the interim. Furthermore, the narrator notes the obsession which Austerlitz has with architecture when he remembers that their initial conversations “turned primarily on architectural history, in accordance with his own astonishing professional expertise” (8), and that he had theorized that the “mightiest projects...most obviously betray the degree of [mankind’s] insecurity” (14).

In his article “Against the Power of Time: The Poetics of Suspension in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*,” Amir Eshel establishes that the Austerlitz’s “fascination with clocks, diaries, and ruins” (73) results in a “reflexive melancholy . . . rather than [the] depressive” (73) one embodied in traditional Holocaust literature. When Austerlitz theorizes that time serves as an insufficient measurement of existence, he recognizes the unconscious need he has to “keep apart from so called current events in the hope...that time will not has not passed away” (Sebald 101). Through his philosophical musings, the character of Austerlitz brings the legitimacy of a separable past, present, and future into question. Frances Restuccia, in another criticism of *Austerlitz*, explains the convoluted concept of time within *Austerlitz* as “the folding of the past into the present . . . [so that] the past is thereby engaged and at the same time evacuated of its

pastness and thus in a way, avoided [and] unaccepted as past” (310). The obsessions which characterize Austerlitz serve as the metaphorical fortress which surrounds him, and thus the evidence of his insecurities. Nevertheless, because of the barriers that envelop Austerlitz, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to form an empathetic connection with his character; thus, the ideas he proposes and dilemmas which those cause become the main focus of the novel. Unlike the prototypical Holocaust novel which forges an emotional bond between the audience and the victimized protagonist, *Austerlitz* separates the two in order to create a frustration in the reader about the difficulty of approaching what should be the primary concentration of the novel – Austerlitz as a relatable character – which mirrors the impossibility of reconstructing or fully comprehending the trauma of the Holocaust.

Another aspect of articulation which differentiates *Austerlitz* from the traditional discourse of Holocaust literature is the function of the narrator. Through the transfer of trauma from the central character to the narrator, and finally to the reader the novel maintains a distance not present in the prototypical Holocaust novel. Restuccia explains that the use of an intermediary subject – the narrator – in *Austerlitz* draws on the Caruthian conceptualization that trauma exists as a paradox in order to approach the Holocaust, but also, to demonstrate the inaccessibility of the atrocities.

In order to understand how the theoretical paradox functions within *Austerlitz*, it is necessary to first examine the way in which narration is constructed in the novel. *Austerlitz* begins with the observations of the narrator as he stands in the Nocturna before wandering over to the Antwerp train station where he and the reader first encounter Austerlitz. Their initial conversations consist of impersonal discussions of architecture, the modernity of time, and railway stations with no “hint of [Austerlitz’s] personal life” (Sebald 34). Only when the narrator reunites with

Austerlitz during a chance encounter two decades and twenty-six pages after the initial meeting does the fractured biography of the character begin to intrude on the historical and philosophical based observations and dialogues. Nevertheless, even the intimate details of his past fail to form a direct empathetic connection between the reader and Austerlitz because the narrator consistently steps between the two with the “I did...he said” construction. As Austerlitz provides the narrator with the fragments of his past – who in turn retells the details to the reader – the determination of both to “bring remembered things back to life” overwhelms the personal narrative of Austerlitz. The focus on the dual pursuits – that of Austerlitz attempting to reconstruct his past as well as the effort of the narrator to uncover the reason for the intrigue aroused in him by the mysterious stranger – rather than the particular details of the victim serves to move the novel away from the form of the prototypical narrative of the Holocaust, and towards a metaphorical representation of trauma.

Cathy Caruth proposed a definition of trauma which can be applied to the way in which *Austerlitz* utilizes an indirect approach to representing the tragic effects of the Holocaust. She explains that “trauma is elusive. It is not locatable ‘in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very assimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (qd. Restuccia 316). Furthermore, Caruth indicates the repetitiveness of trauma, and in doing so, establishes it as a paradox: trauma resurfaces repeatedly, but because of the imprecise origin, remains unattainable when actively sought. In *Austerlitz*, the elements of repetition and elusiveness that correlate to the Caruthian conceptualization of trauma can be evidenced in the both the placement of the central character behind the narrator as well as the use of the construction of the framed novel introduced earlier.

Near the conclusion of *Austerlitz*, the narrator presents the reader with the image of Austerlitz standing in the Paris train station where the search for his past concludes as he imagines his father leaning out a train window before disappearing into the untraceable oblivion of the Holocaust victims. With no further mention of the title character, the narrator details his return to Belgium and his arrival at the Antwerp train station where the initial meeting between the two had taken place. In addition to the revisiting of the same physical location at which the novel began, the return to the *sole voce* of the narrator completes the framing of the novel. Therefore, rather than the traditional linearity of Holocaust literature – observe in *The Diary of Anne Frank* that the form of a journal demands a chronological telling of events – *Austerlitz* relies on a circular construction to convey the irresolvable condition that is trauma.

Further substantiation of the divergence in *Austerlitz* from the form of narration aspect of articulation traditionally used in the discourse of Holocaust literature relies on an examination of how the lack of linearity and the distance which the narrator creates accomplish an effective portrayal of the trauma. Without an understanding of how the novel succeeds in representing the Holocaust while still breaking away from a prototypical depiction of it, *Austerlitz* would fall entirely into the category of postmodern recreation of the novel, and therefore, not be recognized as the allusive representation of Holocaust trauma which it was intended to be and so obviously is. When questioned about the indirectness of his approach and his avoidance of the sensational in his works, Sebald answered by comparing the recollection of the atrocities of the Holocaust to the Greek myth of Medusa, stating: “you can carry it [her head] with you in a sack, but if you look at it you’d be petrified. I was trying to write the lives of some people who’d survived – the *lucky* ones. If they were so fraught, you can extrapolate, but I didn’t see; I only know things indirectly” (Jaggi). Because the fate of Austerlitz is left undetermined, the novel lacks the

resolution of death, life - or in the particular case of *Austerlitz*, the attainment of the answers to his lost identity - which the genre typically demands. Together with the distance established by the positioning of the narrator between Austerlitz and the reader, the ambiguity within the novel serves to exemplify the tragic aspect of the irreparableness of the trauma that resulted from the Holocaust.

In demonstrating how *Austerlitz* breaks out of the discourse of Holocaust literature, it becomes necessary to examine the aspects of articulation of the prototypical novel in that genre which it violates: that element is the sensationalizing of the Holocaust in readers through the evocation of emotion. Consider the ability of *The Diary of Anne Frank* to convey the atrociousness of the Holocaust: the divulging of her internal turmoil as both an adolescent and a Jew living in fear of the Nazi regime allows readers to gain a sense of familiarity, and thus, form a personal connection with the author. The implication of the feeling of shared emotion – both in sense that her experiences as a teenager can be perceived as common ground, and also, that the reader has become a confidant for the pain wrought by the incredible injustices she suffered as a Jew – is that her murder exists as a personal tragedy suffered by the audience. Therefore, the Holocaust – which exists as the overarching reason for her death - is transformed into something real. In the article “An Americanization of the Holocaust,” Hilene Flanzbaum describes *The Diary* as “the most ubiquitous and influential rendering of the Holocaust in this country,” and after analyzing data from a University of Michigan study which was conducted to determine the knowledge that college students have about the Holocaust, she observes that “it is the prevailing source of Holocaust education...even those that have not read the book know Anne Frank’s name, and could connect it to the Holocaust, which is something they could not do consistently with the Warsaw Ghetto, Dachau...or the darker narratives” (92). Although the applicability of

the survey is severely limited by the demographic features of age, region and economics, the lack of knowledge among the subjects about the historical details and darker depictions of the Holocaust as compared to the more commonplace awareness of *The Diary*, serves to both substantiate the existence of a preferred genre of Holocaust literature, and in addition, offers an example of the ontology of its prototypical novel: one that sensationalizes the tragedy by creating a protagonist with which the reader forms a connection on the basic level of a mutual humanness, but then as a result of that bond being forged, is forced to acknowledge the inhumanity of their situation.

Eshel regards the tradition of Holocaust literature as embodying “modernist melancholia, which tended to confine itself to elegiac, mourning...and decadent ennui” (73). However, he argues that Sebald “decisively exceeds” the boundaries established by the genre through relying on a “signification in which not the historical or biographical, but the effects of figuration themselves constitute the referent” (73). If restated, what Eshel proposes is that: in *Austerlitz*, the Holocaust – the referent - is represented through the distance created by the form of the novel, and not in the characters that are depicted or the historical atrocities which are detailed. The distance between the reader and the character of Austerlitz demanded by the style of narration and the form of the novel mirror the gap which prevents any individual, including the children of victims, from comprehending the tragedy. Returning to the Caruthian conception of trauma, which determined that “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it” (Restuccia 317); *Austerlitz* provides a representation of the Holocaust as something that cannot be recollected effectively or understood entirely.

“I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all” (Sebald 185).

Although the revelation by the Czech-Jewish protagonist as recorded by the German narrator

might never supersede, or even come to equal the heroic words of Anne Frank; and despite that *The Diary of a Young Girl* will inevitably remain the example which defines the Holocaust genre of literature, W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* has succeeded in providing a powerful contrast to that discourse. Through the reinvention of the articulatory aspects of character, narration and overall form of the prototypical Holocaust novel, *Austerlitz* reestablishes how the tragedy can be represented and challenges the possibility of conveying the trauma. In fact, the effectiveness of the novel in portraying the incomprehensibility – according to The New York Times Book Review – “stands as . . . the prime contradiction of Adorno's dictum that after [the Holocaust], there can be no art” (1).

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