Unrecyclable Times: The Traumatic Topographies of Global Capitalism in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*

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The notion of trauma as an overwhelming experience of violence that exceeds all forms of representation has become axiomatic. Beginning with Cathy Caruth’s pioneering study of historical trauma in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) and Shoshana Felman’s equally seminal work on testimony and witnessing, literary theorists have since conceptualized trauma nearly unanimously as a temporal rupture or “missed encounter” (Caruth 6) whose belated return assumes the form of a symptom, psychic or otherwise. However, as Susannah Radstone notes disapprovingly, in this perversion of the Freudian paradigm, traumatic experience is wholly identified with the so-called unrepresentable as opposed to the unconscious desire or fantasy and, as a result, it erroneously comes to serve as a “general theory of representation” (Radstone 12). Through the effacement of trauma’s pathological dimension—that is, the fantastical associations through which the subject interprets the traumatic event—its historical dimension is equally lost. As a result, trauma becomes a kind of “master signifier” through which the violence of history is articulated as a representation of subjective experience whose legitimate expression must take one of two poetic forms: testimony or allegory. Both of these poetic forms constitute trauma as a mode of historical rupture that leads to the relativistic insertion of alternative points of view, both in a literal and a figurative sense—literally, through its belated representation in the testimonial form, and figuratively, through its reification or personification in the allegorical form. Often these distinct forms are intertwined in the trauma text.

The central problem with the conception of trauma as historical rupture or belated representation is that it relies on a model of history in which the temporality of trauma corresponds to the unfolding of history, a model that Walter Benjamin (among others) has criticized for its association with a strictly ahistorical, “homogenous, empty time” (Benjamin 261). In this model, the traumatic rupture produces a break in time that is ultimately sutured by the belated process of working through, or re-presenting. Historical time is redeemed; the progression of history is restored through the recovery of missing or repressed experience. In this model of trauma, history serves as a point of departure. The excess produced by the violence of
history returns in the form of a traumatic or ghostly repetition whose disruptive potential is ultimately neutralized through narratives of closure and healing, or historical recovery. Social equilibrium is reinstated and the progression of history resumes, unaffected. Underlying material inequalities remain intact.

Not surprisingly, literary representations of trauma are often read in terms of historical recovery, both in the therapeutic sense of working through and in the political sense of historical repossession. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is a case in point. As a trauma text that articulates the historical violence of slavery through the traumatic experiences of its individual characters, it has been variously referred to as a “trope for recovered history” (Spargo 2002), the “ghostly return” of memory (Bhabha 1994), an invitation for ethical engagement (Brogan 1998), a “truth claim” regarding the nature of historical violence (LaCapra 2001), and, according to our current interlocutor, the attempt to “reclaim” history through the recasting of the past (Colangelo 2013). Despite the fact that each of these interpretations attempts to unearth the hidden meaning of traumatic experience through its historical excavation, what each overlooks is the fact that the very concept of trauma is the effect of a particular mode of production in which the narrative of history becomes not only a representation of the past but also the means of reproducing this representation. The language of recovery and repossession should, from the outset, point us in the direction of history’s constitution as both a form of property and a representation of the social relations that constitute its property form. By recognizing history *tout court* as an effect of the same capitalist mode of production that created the institution of private property, we can see history—or the specialized knowledge of the past—as a mode of enclosure that separates or divorces the subject of historical violence from the violent structures of history.

Dean Franco provides an alternative reading of *Beloved* that explicitly situates it in relation to capitalism; his interpretation transcends the paradigm of historical recovery and reconstitutes trauma as an expression of the loss of property rights, in which property is precisely “where trauma and material possession meet” (Franco 425). Providing examples from the narrative, such as the theft of Sethe’s milk which ultimately overshadows the trauma of her preceding beating, Franco argues that the “relationship between bodily trauma and the body as property, mediated by the language of ‘rights’ and ‘claiming,’ points out the flexibility of concepts like injury and redress that constitute the broader field within which trauma occurs” (426). The broader field, it turns out, is the field of capitalist production in which the history of slavery is also the history of a process of primitive accumulation synonymous with the production of private property. Marx defines this process as “nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (Marx 874-5). While the expropriation of common land in sixteenth-century England provides an exemplary model
for Marx, the logic of enclosure equally underlies forms of extra-economic violence, including “conquest, enslavement, robbery, [and] murder” (874). The traumatic narrative of Beloved, from this perspective, becomes an allegory of primitive accumulation in which traumatic ruptures betray the capitalist logic of historical violence. This privileging of property relations over psychic trauma ultimately leads Franco to pose a fundamental question: “is a psychoanalytically conceived effort of working-through adequate to the task when the experience of loss is mediated through the discourse of property?” (Franco 427). By understanding historical violence and its traumatic effects as the products of capitalist accumulation we might reformulate this question more generally, asking: how does narrative closure in the form of historical recovery, or as the recycling of the past, endorse the very logic of enclosure upon which the capitalist mode of production is founded?

A second paradigmatic text in the field of trauma studies invites us to reconceptualize trauma from the standpoint of the present, as a normative element of modern subjectivity that reflects the ongoing violence of capitalist accumulation in the era of globalization. W. G. Sebald’s highly acclaimed final novel Austerlitz (2001) is the haunting and enchanting tale of Jacques Austerlitz relayed by an unnamed narrator who befriends the architectural scholar and fellow ambler over a number of years through a series of chance encounters abroad. The story begins with the narrator’s account of his visits to Belgium during which he first encounters Austerlitz in Antwerp Centraal Station clad in “heavy walking boots and workman’s trousers” but set apart from other travellers in his pre-occupation with “making notes and sketches” (Sebald 7). Already, Austerlitz portrays a non-synchronous temporality with respect to the mindless bustle of the train station. Curious, our narrator approaches with a query about the historian’s interest in the building, and Austerlitz answers (we are told) “without hesitation” (8). This would be the first in their series of “Antwerp conversations,” which continue to articulate the topographic temporality of what Lefebvre (among others) has termed “the everyday” with the telescopic logic of historical time. The scene illuminates the conflicting temporalities of concrete and abstract time. A woman “whose peroxide-blond hair was piled high into a sort of bird’s nest” and whom Austerlitz refers to as the “goddess of time past,” passes beneath a “mighty clock” (8), the station beacon, which, as Austerlitz explains, represents the standardized time that assumed its throne in the mid-nineteenth century and to whose demands weary travellers continue to oblige. At the same time, our narrator remarks on the eternal time experienced in the intermittent silences of their conversation, which contrasts starkly with the rapidly condensed temporality of Antwerp station’s history as relayed by Austerlitz—its relation to Belgium’s colonial expansion under King Leopold, the Roman inspiration of its image as a “cathedral consecrated to traffic and trade” (10), and its capitalist symbolism, whose apex is “the heraldic motif of the beehive,” a symbol
standing not for the socialist ideals of a serviceable nature, or labour as social good, but for the very “principle of capital accumulation” (12). This initial scene encapsulates the ensuing tensions between (historical) progression and (capital) accumulation that constitute the structure of the remaining narrative.

The German expatriate’s four novels have stimulated an abundance of secondary literature. Often, his books are interpreted, at least implicitly, as a contribution to the growing body of work known as Holocaust literature, despite the author’s claims to the contrary and the fact that the atrocity is only ever represented obliquely in his texts. Analyses of *Austerlitz* in particular (and Sebald’s work more generally) tend to adopt one of two main approaches. The first is informed by developments in the contemporary field of trauma studies and its memory-related derivatives, for which the Holocaust serves as a paradigmatic historical rupture. Using concepts such as postmemory and traumatic repetition, this approach attempts to construct a socio-therapeutic framework that might further elucidate the ethical and political possibilities of collective acts of testimony and witnessing. Marianne Hirsch, for example, interprets *Austerlitz* as a prime example of postmemorial operations, where postmemory is “a structure of intergenerational and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” that illuminates the ways in which “second generation” subjectivity is informed by the “inherited memories” of historical violence (Hirsch 106-7).

Amending Hirsch’s analysis, Richard Crownshaw demonstrates the ways in which the use of photographs in *Austerlitz* resists the potentially appropriative nature of postmemory (which is nothing other than the possession of the other’s memory) through the “convolution of time” that accompanies the “belated return of the past” (Crownshaw n.p.). For this reason, the photographs that both augment and interrupt the story of *Austerlitz* “can be read as an ethical intervention in the work of postmemory” which is not simply “an ethical relation to the oppressed or persecuted” (Hirsch qtd. in Crownshaw) but a way of exposing the totalizing fantasy of archival completion that structures the historicist conception of history as progress.

The second approach prefers to focus more closely on the formal elements of the text in order to consider the ways in which Sebald’s poetics convey the particular aesthetic experience of modernity. Many of these interpretations focus on his engagement with “natural history,” a phrase Max Pensky (paraphrasing Adorno) elaborates as

a construction of concepts which like a chemical elective affinity become volatile in one another’s presence and can, under suitable theoretical conditions, reverse polarity, such that nature, developed to the point of its most extreme significance, appears as the saturation of time—that is, as fully timely, hence historical being—where humanity as a historical phenomenon in turn appears
under the sign of the historical repetition of catastrophe, and therefore as mythically recursive and static, that is, as nature. (Pensky 66)

Pensky argues that, in Austerlitz, Sebald presents a “version of the natural history of ruins” (82) that disrupts the “stability of the distinction between memory and forgetting” (83). Hal Foster suggests that Sebald “questions the humanist commonplace about the restorative power of memory” even as his characters are “ghosts of repetition” that inhabit a world “after nature” (Foster 16).

In a similar vein, Mary Cosgrove addresses what she calls the “natural history of capitalism” in Sebald’s work through a re-examination of the theme of melancholia that runs through all four of his novels. Departing explicitly from the traditional perspectives of trauma theory, in which melancholia is commonly linked to “history as repeated catastrophe” (Cosgrove 92), she states:

Melancholia in his work is not just a matter for the belatedly-born, post-memorial leftover of the second generation. On the contrary, it exceeds the downbeat mindset of his various narrative figures, transcending the individual subject to represent a historically informed and challenging discussion on topics as varied, contemporary and inter-connected as global capitalism, the planet’s weather systems and also genocide. (92)

Melancholic images transcend the individual subject in order to present a picture of “world history as a spatio-temporal whole” (96), a perspective affirmed by others who suggest that Austerlitz has no interiority.² A number of other critics have also noted the significance of time in Sebald’s narratives and its relationship to textual poetics. Ben Hutchinson describes Sebald’s prose as a “poetics of slowing down” (Hutchinson qtd. in Simine 26), which Amir Eshel identifies as the “poetic deceleration” that structures Sebald’s “polemic against time” (94). Sebald’s work is remarkable, Eshel claims, precisely “because of the ways in which the narrative organizes and reconceives temporality” (90).

According to the current paradigm of trauma theory, temporal rupture in the forms of belatedness and repetition is a significant aspect of traumatic experience. The temporal aspect of trauma was already present in Freud, who granted the concept a psychic dimension. Deriving from the Greek word meaning “wound,” trauma under the Freudian gaze was both revived and transformed into the symptomatic expression of repressed memory that took shape in the concept of traumatic repetition. In part, this new understanding of trauma was made possible by advances in modern technology; it is well known that Freud’s theories of the psyche were highly influenced by prevalent technological advances of the time, such as photography and railway travel, which would inform his theories of condensation and displacement (to be re-interpreted by Lacan in terms of the poetic functions of “metaphor” and
Nearly a century later, under the influence of deconstruction, the concept underwent a further transmutation. Building on Freud’s theory of traumatic repetition, Cathy Caruth, a pioneer in the field of what would eventually become trauma studies, defined trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 11). Trauma, in other words, is the effect of a temporal disruption that derives from the ultimate failure of representation, “a break in the mind’s experience of time” (61). Ulrich Baer attributes this temporal rupture to the lack of a “coherent mental, textual, or historical context” (Baer 10). The initial temporal rupture is followed by a belated representation. It is for this reason photography and not railway travel has remained the contemporary exemplar of the temporality of traumatic experience, despite the devastating effects of high-speed collisions.

The narrative of Austerlitz is fraught with references to time. Beyond Austerlitz’s initial allusions to the standardization of time in nineteenth-century railway travel, specific points are often set in relation to the technologies of observation. One reference stands out in particular: as narrator and protagonist gaze through telescopes atop the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park, Austerlitz initiates an extended meditation on the nature of time, which begins:

Time . . . was by far the most artificial of all our inventions, and in being bound to the planet turning on its own axis was no less arbitrary than would, say, a calculation based on the growth of trees, or the duration required for a piece of limestone to disintegrate, quite apart from the fact that the solar day which we take as our guideline does not provide any precise measurement, so that in order to reckon time we have to devise an imaginary, average sun which has an invariable speed of movement and does not incline towards the equator in its orbit. (Sebald 100)

In this passage, Austerlitz reveals even the cyclical time of nature as contrived, as an immaterial invention anchored in the most abstract elements of mathematics and astronomy. The new capacity to create precise measurements of the passage of time was in many senses an effect of the telescopic vision of time that had been “spreading out over everything” since the invention of the telescope in the early 1600s. Austerlitz points out the potential fallaciousness of this view of time, asking: “[c]ould we not claim . . . that time itself has been nonconcurrent over the centuries and millennia?” (100). Remarking on the continued unevenness of historical time in the age of global capital, he queries further:

Is not human life in many parts of the earth governed to this day less by time than by the weather, and thus by an unquantifiable dimension which disregards linear
regularity, does not progress constantly forward but moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption, recurs in ever-changing form, and evolves in no one knows what direction? (100-01)

During this second unexpected encounter in 1996, in which the first signs of trauma begin to surface, questions of sight and blindness are inlaid within the historical progression of time. Shortly following the narrator’s brief encounter with chorioretinopathy—in which a “bubble suffused by clear liquid formed on the macula” causing a “gray area” that partially obscured the field of vision, leaving only the periphery in focus, a condition he initially mistook for “merely hysterical weakness”—he rediscovers Austerlitz at “the edge of an agitated crowd” of gold miners at the Great Eastern Hotel on Liverpool Street (Sebald 35-38). Despite a twenty-year hiatus, the conversation resumes as if no time had passed; Austerlitz continues where he left off, the narrator tells us, “without wasting any words on the coincidence of our meeting again after all this time” (41). For the next 85 pages or so, visual motifs articulate lengthy taxonomic descriptions of the contents of various architectural landmarks: the Great Eastern Hotel with its “cool labyrinth for the storage of Rhine wines” and elaborate “fish section, where perch, pike, plaice, sole, and eels lay heaped on black slate slabs” (43); Stower Grange private school for boys with its “curious collection of oddities, most of them over sixty or suffering from some affliction” (59); and Andromeda Lodge, whose transformation “into a kind of natural history museum had begun in 1869, when Gerald’s parrot-collecting ancestor made the acquaintance of Charles Darwin” (83). Meanwhile, questions of the visual arise in the story of Evan the cobbliner who had a “reputation for seeing ghosts” (53), old photographs which resemble “shadows of reality” that emerge “as memories do in the middle of the night” (77), and a tale concerning the main resident of Iver Grove estate, “who suffered from insomnia and withdrew into the observatory he had built at the top of the house to devote himself to various astronomical studies” (104).

At this point, we encounter a shift in the narrative, both conceptual and temporal. If the first half elaborates the protagonist’s accumulation of architectural knowledge, the second is marked by the return of traumatic memory. Like the “philanthropic entrepreneurs,” whose “vision of model towns for workers . . . had inadvertently changed into the practice of accommodating them in barracks,” Austerlitz’s “best-laid plans . . . turn into the exact opposite when they are put into practice” (Sebald 28). Taxonomic descriptions are replaced with photographic observations. Rational observation is displaced by “nocturnal apparition” (165). His initially pedantic tone attains a more harried and anxious quality. Linking the onset of his decline to the accidental death of a close schoolmate named Gerald, whose passion for flying led him not only to study astronomy but to perish in an unfortunate but not altogether surprising plane crash, Austerlitz begins to
convey more personal details of his past in his telling of the search for his lost origins. Before this point, he explains, it had “never occurred to [him] to wonder about [his] true origins” (125), despite the fact that as a young student he had discovered his birth name was not Dafydd Elias but Jacques Austerlitz. The recovery of lost memory becomes an obsession replacing the perpetual accumulation of architectural knowledge, which, he explains, “served as a substitute for compensatory memory” (140).

At first glance, this turn to traumatic memory seems to endorse the disruptive temporality of trauma that marks ours as a culture of catastrophe. However, despite the fact that Austerlitz has all the markings of a traditional trauma text, including photographic interruptions, railway symbolism and ghostly returns, it departs from contemporary theories of trauma that conceptualize it primarily in terms of temporal rupture. Rather, traumatic memory in Austerlitz serves as a poetic device that signals a shift in the field of modern subjectivity from the melancholic subject of the modern era to the traumatic subject of so-called postmodern times. Like Morrison, Sebald situates the subjective experience of trauma within a broader field of historical violence. Whereas for Morrison this field is the history of slavery, for Sebald it is the history of the Second World War. Capitalism is the broader field of struggle underlying both of these historical traumas, a fact Sebald makes explicit. He presents an image of historical progress that is out of sync with the material forces of capitalism which yield historical atrocity; he exposes a tension between the uneven temporality of capitalist accumulation and the abstract progression of history, a tension represented by the contrast between the technologies of observation responsible for the compression of space and extension of time, and technologies of transportation responsible for the extension of space and the compression of time. These opposing branches of technological advancement represent the opposing axes of capitalist accumulation—which we might call the telescopic and the topographic—whose disarticulation represents the alienating experience encapsulated by the temporal ruptures and visual aporias that characterize the contemporary landscape of trauma. Austerlitz’s eventual breakdown in 1992 is preceded by the loss of his capacity for language, a common symptom of traumatic repression. Austerlitz explains: “But now I found writing such hard going that it often took me a whole day to compose a single sentence” (Sebald 122), which in the end only comes to resemble a city whose confusing urban sprawl disorients returning travellers (124). In a Lacanian sense, the withdrawal from language signals a retreat from the discourse of mastery. However, the retreat from language is accompanied by a new impulse, the recovery of the mother.

Marianne Hirsch interprets Austerlitz’s search for his mother’s image through the lens of traumatic memory, arguing that the fantasy of the mother’s recovery operates as a screen memory that highlights the roles of photography and family in postmemorial work. Both, she argues, “[strive] to reactivate and reembody more distant social/national and archival/cultural
memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and family forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Hirsch 111). These two mediums converge in the figure of the lost mother. This image serves a “space of projection” that draws on a storehouse of what Aby Warburg has called “pre-established forms,” which resonate in the popular imagination. For Hirsch, the figure of the lost mother is one such pre-established form through which “gender becomes a powerful idiom of remembrance in the face of detachment and forgetting” (Hirsch 124). In this model, the image of the lost mother becomes a screen for the remembrance of historical trauma, and familial images act as protective covers that “reinforce the living connection between past and present” (Hirsch 125). These claims rest on a number of assumptions implicit in Hirsch’s argument. First, the desire to maintain a “sense of living connection” is taken for granted and thus not critically interrogated; second, Hirsch assumes that the recovery of traumatic memory is what is covered over by the search for the lost mother, which fails to address the broader structures driving the recovery of memory in general.

The notion of the screen memory itself remains within the field of the imaginary, with one image ostensibly substituting for another, more accurate, image. If we remind ourselves, however, that Marx identified genocidal violence with the processes of primitive accumulation, then we must immediately acknowledge the fact that our current obsession with the recovery of memory has something to with the capitalist mode of production. Austerlitz recounts his history instructor’s assertion that “[o]ur concern with history . . . is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, as yet undiscovered” (Sebald 72). Read alongside this claim, the image of the mother and the trope of recovered memory equally operate as “preformed images” that correspond to the historical time of capital. From this perspective, the image of the mother must be interpreted as a mode of reification that conceals, not a truer or more authentic memory, but the forces of alienation that correspond to the historical time of primitive accumulation. This becomes particularly explicit when we consider the role of time in Austerlitz’s search for his mother’s image. Austerlitz commissions a slow-motion copy of a film fragment in which he hopes to discover his mother (246), while, at the same time, he experiences the “current of time slowing down in the gravitational field of oblivion” (257) during his nocturnal wanderings. This new experience of time, and not the recovery of lost memory, is what Austerlitz discovers in the search for his mother’s image. The recovery of memory itself does little to change the violent material forces that contributed to Austerlitz’s sense of alienation, which is placed under the sign of traumatic memory. Indeed, he states:

It was obviously of little use that I had discovered the sources of my distress and, looking back over all the past years, could now see myself with the utmost clarity as that child suddenly cast out of his familiar
surroundings: reason was powerless against
the sense of rejection and annihilation
which I had always suppressed, and which
was now breaking through the walls of its
confinement. (228)

A feeling of alienation underlies Austerlitz’s dis-
tress and threatens, but does not quite succeed,
in rupturing his erudite exterior.

In her analysis of *The Rings of Saturn*,
Mary Cosgrove elaborates Sebald’s skillful ren-
dering of the “particular temporal quality of
capitalism,” the ways in which “‘capitalist time’
operates in terms of trends and cycles which ebb
and flow, contract and expand” (Cosgrove 103).
For this reason, she argues, Sebald’s descrip-
tions of the ruins of nineteenth-century capital-
ism, “while melancholy in tone, should be read
as an informed, if poetically rendered critique
of the capitalist world system, not just as it was
in the past, but as it continues in the present”
(103). Time, in this context, is represented as
“a natural history of capitalism which has its
roots in the early sixteenth century and which
continues to expand in the present” (103).
Such claims are resonant with contemporary theories
of primitive accumulation, which emphasize the
continuous nature of what Karl Marx defined
as the particular mode of extra-economic vio-
lence that separates the worker from the means
of production through genocidal and annihilat-
ing actions.4 Despite the fact that primitive ac-
cumulation is, for Marx, a historical event that
identifies the “original” accumulation necessary
to establish the capitalist mode of production,
Marxist theorists at least since Rosa Luxemburg
have referred to its qualities of permanence and
repetition. Marx himself alludes to the perpet-
ual nature of primitive accumulation when he
states that the capitalist relation “not only main-
tains this [initial] separation [of the worker and
the means of production], but reproduces it on
a constantly extending scale” (Marx 874). The
initial separation of the worker from the means
of production is maintained through the inven-
tion of standardized time through which the
time of production that characterizes abstract
historical time is divorced from the time of sur-
vival, which is dictated by the natural rhythms
and cycles of everyday existence.

The Antwerp conversations, we might
say, narrate and make visible a specific histori-
ical period we might call the epoch of trauma.
Indeed, it is not insignificant that our narrator
first encounters Austerlitz in Antwerp Central
Station in 1967, the very same year Michel Fried
issued his critique of Minimalism, Roland Bar-
thes proclaimed the “death of the author,” and
Guy Debord published his manifesto, “Society
of the Spectacle.” It is equally significant that
these conversations end in 1996, the same year
Cathy Caruth published *Unclaimed Experience*.
This period, from 1967 to 1996, corresponds
precisely to the time that elapsed between the
emergence of two types of subject. The first,
emerging in 1967, is the Minimalist subject of
art, who Rosalind Krauss argues anticipates the
disembodied, fragmented, postmodern subject.
The second, emerging in 1996, is the traumat-
tized subject, who, according to Radstone, at-
ttempts to reclaim the autonomy of the subject
that was dissolved by poststructuralism by
reasserting what Ruth Leys calls the “sovereign, if passive” subject (Radstone 14).

Recall their initial conversation in 1967, which takes us on a swift journey through the sweeping history of Antwerp station, situating it within the crumbling façades of nineteenth-century architecture, with Austerlitz moving deftly between broad historical contexts, general architectural trends and particular biographical details (Sebald 7-12). The narrator comments on the astuteness of Austerlitz’s communications, marveling at his ability to form “perfectly balanced sentences out of whatever occurred to him, so to speak, and the way in which, in his mind, the passing on of his knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life” (13). In this informal architectural lecture, Austerlitz not only speaks of the relationship between capitalist accumulation and the standardization of time, but of the “marks of pain which . . . trace countless fine lines through history” (14). Crownshaw argues: “In 1967, [Austerlitz’s] sense of history replicates the very monumentalism (or forgetfulness) of the buildings he studies” (Crownshaw). Already, the Antwerp conversations draw an implicit connection between the fantasy of historical progress and the emergent subject of trauma. The Austerlitz of 1967 is a mouthpiece for historical progress and accumulated knowledge. From the perspective of trauma theory, his architectural knowledge is a screen that covers over or represses the memory of a historical trauma that he will eventually discover as the source of his discontent. However, from the perspective of capitalist accumulation, Austerlitz’s historical knowledge represents the utopian image of a complete historical archive that drives the narrative of historical progress made possible with the invention of standardized time. From this perspective, Austerlitz’s eventual breakdown and the ensuing search for his own origins allegorize the experience of alienation particular to the temporality of capitalist accumulation.

The metaphor of fortification that closes their initial conversation exemplifies the tension between historical progress and capitalist accumulation. Tracing the history of Antwerp’s fortifications from Floriani to Breendonk—the fortress which was later transformed, the narrator tells us, into a “reception and penal camp” only to become a “national memorial and museum of Belgian resistance” following the Second World War (Sebald 19)—Austerlitz explains:

From a certain angle, the fortification seems to metaphorically represent the operations of psychic defense. Freud articulated the psyche in terms of defense mechanisms, and he
conceived the repression of traumatic memory as one such mechanism that protects the psyche from overwhelming shock. But, of course, the repressed memory returns in the guise of a symptom, which forms the basis for traumatic repetition. The logic of fortification is itself overwhelmed by the return of the repressed. Assuming an anamorphic glance, however, the fortification is perhaps more aptly a metaphor for the irresolvable tension between historical progress and capital accumulation, a reading supported by Austerlitz’s claim that “somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins” (19). In the dialectic of history, capitalism, as Marx allegedly prophesied, contains the seeds of its own destruction. The duality of the metaphor, which marks the transition to a new master narrative, situates the production of traumatic subjectivity within the context of capitalist production. In this sense, the metaphor of fortification articulates the “blind violence” (Sebald 21) of primitive accumulation incarnate in our “mightiest projects” (14).

Beginning with the fact of global capitalism, Austerlitz provides a vehicle for re-conceptualizing trauma as the reification of alienation under the sign of historical time. Such a reading reconfigures the trauma text as an allegory of primitive accumulation through which the most extreme forms of alienation take shape in dialectic between the telescopic and the topographic, the linear and the cyclic, the metaphoric and the metonymic, the allegory and the narrative. In retreating from the common conception of trauma as primarily a rupture in time that reveals the hegemony of “homogenous, empty time” and drives the quest for the search for lost origins and the recovery of memory, the view provided by Austerlitz captures the ways in which trauma is a normative element of capitalist subjectivity that cannot be consigned to the past but which must be continuously reproduced in the present moment on an ever-expanding scale. In this sense, traumatic memory is not only a reflection of historical trauma (primitive accumulation as historical event) but also, more importantly, a permanent aspect of the forces of capitalist production (primitive accumulation as permanent process). In “Historical Temporalities of Capital,” Massimiliano Tomba argues: “To understand the permanence of primitive accumulation we need a kind of ‘historiography of the present’ that would allow us to understand the current combination of temporalities in the attempt to synchronize them through the intervention of extra-economic violence” (56). Austerlitz responds to just such a call.

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2 See Mark Ilsemann’s “Going Astray” and Michael Niehaus’s “No Foothold.”

3 Lacan makes this equation explicitly in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud.”

4 See, for example, Werner Bonefeld’s “The Permanence of Primitive Accumulation” (2001); Massimiliano Tomba’s “Historical Temporalities of Capitalism” (2009); Sandro Mezzadra’s “The Topicality of Prehistory” (2011).
Works Cited


