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Making Good of What is Hidden in Plain Sight: Sebald's *Austerlitz*

Abstract: W. G. Sebald's approach to the Holocaust in *Austerlitz* leads the reader to realize what is hidden in plain sight. Jesus is also a paradigm educator of the obvious. These examples show that imagination becomes possible within a framework of meaning. I consider examples of widespread denial of reality (Shoah, James Cone) to show that imagination can serve to make features of reality freshly visible, linking the possibility of truth to the pursuit of justice. The paper reinforces indirect, parabolic, and round-about religious education that can be effective in postmodern conditions. Educators can appeal to learners' imagination to help learners bring what is hidden but obvious to consciousness.

Sebald's Loaded Tour

The academic and author W. G. Sebald left his native Germany for a teaching assistantship in England in 1966. He claimed that he took up self-imposed exile to protest the pervasive unwillingness of his country to reckon with its Nazi past. Two decades later, a successful academic career underway, he began also to publish a striking type of autobiographical documentary fiction in which readers are invited to overhear a witness about a sojourn, both geographic and psychological.

Sebald's 2001 novel *Austerlitz* is the last novel before his death in an automobile accident. In light of his protest against German surreality, it is also his magnum opus. *Austerlitz* concerns an architectural historian of the same name who arrives at full awareness of the abuse and murder of his Jewish parents at Nazi hands. The protagonist came to Britain as a four-year-old. His parents placed him on a children's evacuation train from Prague to England in 1939. But his early childhood memories are lost or repressed.

The young *Austerlitz* excels at school and launches into an academic career in architectural history. When the Sebald-like narrator begins to hear his story, *Austerlitz* the character is engaged in a synthesis of architectural history so massive that it seems unlikely ever to be completed. So the narrator happens on the protagonist in European cities, making notes and taking pictures of their landmark railway stations, fortresses, spas and national archives.

The reader must learn to read the book. Pages are given to technical expositions of fortresses whose technology had been superseded even as they were completed and whose defensive capability proved to be zero. Or the reader overhears the historian describing Liverpool Street rail and tube station in London. Its platforms are many meters below its concourse. An archeologist tells *Austerlitz* that excavating a nearby taxi rank turned up an ancient cemetery

where, from pressure of an increasing population, not fewer than seven or eight skeletons per cubic meter were found. Liverpool Street station was built on top of centuries of human activity. Sebald's message is that reality is covered in concrete. Europe constructed a new reality, like Leopold II constructed Antwerp railway station. Modelled on the highest expressions of European architecture, the cathedral-like station was intended to affirm the glory of turn-of-the-century Belgium. The narrator points out its Pantheon-like statues of modern gods like Commerce and Industry, plus a verdigris-covered statue of a negro boy. In elliptical fashion Sebald thus leads the reader to see the station as unintentional monument to Leopold's late-Victorian era Congo genocide, known now mainly through Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998). The massive Bibliotheque Nationale de France turns out to have been built on the site of the Austerlitz (again) warehouse repository where, in the early 1940s, confiscated Jewish belongings were elaborately catalogued and which comprised a macabre shopping centre for Nazi officers. Public buildings dominating Europe appear like so much fascist architecture. Architecture is as much to hide as to reveal. The book obliges readers to fill in the blanks. In so doing they realize the significance of apparently bald description.

A picaresque journey to European architectural landmarks becomes a voyage into a sort of silent Dantean Inferno where not people in torment but architecture is forced to tell the tale of woe. The fortress that young Austerlitz erected against the knowledge of his parents' end crumbles. Sebald encapsulates the horrific history of twentieth-century Europe in one individual, a history that cannot be seen straight on. Austerlitz is every European, perhaps every member of a Western society. As readers participate to understand, they join the protagonist's Gothic journey to uncover what of ultimate significance he -- and they -- repress.¹

Jesus, Shocker

The New Testament witness about Jesus is a teacher whose pedagogy also challenges unreal understandings of the world. An example is at Matthew 16:2-3:

When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.
(NRSV)

Jesus' saying depends less on an understanding of nature than a process in time. The vivid sky gives an unmistakable clue to approaching weather. Possibly one might be able to read the way human affairs should be from an orderly creation; certainly the thought is present in Psalm 19, touchstone of natural theology: "The heavens are declaring the glory of God." However, the

¹ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2014).

thought in Matthew 16:2-3 is that the social or historical situation speaks as loudly and clearly as a red sky, but humans resist uncomfortable truths.

Jesus' anthropology is in a direct line from the prophets. Especially in Jeremiah the word translated as "imagination" (transliterated *shriyruwth*) is negative. The prophet connotes plans and intentions that resist God's ways.² Perhaps the controlling verse is Genesis 6:5 where the writer reports that God saw that "every inclination (*yēšer*) of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually." The word is cognate with the word for forming humans in Genesis 2:7; thus the writer implies at 6:5 that not an originally good human being but those twisted by wrongly acquiring the knowledge of good and evil practice perverted forming.³ The Hebrew Bible frequently links the words with heart (*lev*) meaning the seat of human personality, including will and thought.⁴ The biblical anthropology identifies a human tendency to dress up or redefine sin. Jesus takes a prophetic understanding of human nature for granted when he says, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him" (Mt 7:11, NRSV).

Jesus' anthropology leads to definite pedagogical implications that are visible in the Gospels. In light of his anthropology, no wonder that Jesus' hallmark technique is "slant": the parable. Parables are introduced in Matthew's gospel precisely because they will be veiled to those unwilling to consider any alternative to the status quo. Walter Wink, Jack Sammons, Robert Farrar Capon, and others help one see Jesus' teaching as challenging denials of plain reality. Wink's article, "The Education of the Apostles: Mark's View of Human Transformation," zooms in on the structure of Mark 6-8. Wink shows that Jesus repeats situations to emphasize to chosen followers that his identity demands a response. The gospel writer thus reproduces a way to overcome (reader) resistance to the claim that Jesus is Lord. Sammons's article on parables makes plain that they implicate readers morally. Jesus' stories are not mere Kohlbergian moral dilemmas, to be resolved intellectually as ethical puzzles. Rather, one must make a decision; one must position oneself in relation to the parabolic situation. The parable is thus a language event. Parables are also able to undercut resistance by involving hearers existentially and personally. Capon similarly underlines the paradoxical, upside-down nature of Jesus' Kingdom and its *modus operandi*. Here any who believe they know may well be last to come to true comprehension.⁵

² H. W. F. Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, trans. Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 850 translates the word as hardness.

³ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1996), 184.

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 1: Genesis 1-15* (Waco Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 144 see Gen 11:6, Deu 29:19, 30:18, 31:21; 1 Chr 28:9; Jer 3:17, 7:24, 9:14, 11:8, 13:10, 16:12; Psa 2:1; Prov 4:23.

⁵ Walter Wink, "The Education of the Apostles: Mark's View of Human Transformation," *Religious Education* 83, no. 2 (1988): 277-90; Jack Sammons, "Parables and Pedagogy," in *Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach: Living Out One's Calling in the Twenty-First Century Academy*, ed. J. M. Dunaway (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2005), 46-66; Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1985).

All of the above cohere with the bleak anthropology of Romans chapter 1. The apostle urges that a knowledge blockage gives rise to a full range of evils. Human beings systematically “hold under” knowledge of God's sovereignty and justice. A close reading of Romans 1 indicates that, as with Matt 16:2-3, not so much is the knowledge of physical reality as of social developments or the pattern of history.⁶ Old and New Testaments see human depravity as blinding. The solution is its call for transformation, change of heart and mind, a *metanoia* from orientation to self to openness to God. Being willing to see what is hidden in plain sight opens up reconciliation with God for forgiveness and freedom.

What is imagination?

The examples above -- Sebald and Jesus -- show that imagination often if not always depends on an inescapable framework of meaning. Perhaps all human knowing calls for an “act of ... creativity and imagination,” as Roger Shinn observed. Since

the mind is part of, sometimes the servant of, a self with appetites and cravings, aspirations and jealousies, loves and fears that have no resemblance to any black tablet ... human comprehension of the world is an activity, mingling responses to given data with imaginative creation of meaning.⁷

Imaginative Picasso refracted Freud and African art. That is, even so counter-rational an art depended on a new way of seeing. While this way of seeing it seems to restrict human imagination to elaborations of a prior created reality, humans are finite creatures in time who depend on languages to make sense of their world. Frameworks are, again, inescapable.

Here we encounter a basic difference of opinion about imagination and its uses. On one hand, Sebald lays bare a reality that is, to him and many others, simply unspeakable. After his character happens into Liverpool Street Station's waiting room, about to be demolished, he realizes how he came to England and the fate of his parents. He suffers a nervous breakdown and is remanded to a modern version of the Bedlam asylum. The frameworks of sense disintegrate from the shock of the horrific injustice. Words fail Austerlitz. Indeed, wordlessness about its real matter is the genius of the book. Architecture is made to speak, as it were. For Sebald, as for Claude Lanzmann, auteur of the massive 1987 imaginative documentary *Shoah*, silence is the only fitting response to the horror.⁸ It takes a certain kind of amnesia to forget that for centuries European culture persisted with a horrific crime as its center. Chorales and hymns were sung about it, music was written about it, and sermons preached about it. Theology was constructed upon it. I refer to the crucifixion of the Son of God, of course. Recently I heard the seventeenth-

⁶ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 105.

⁷ The phrase “inescapable frameworks,” is from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), chap. 1; R. L. Shinn, “Perception and Belief,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34, no. 1 (1978): 15.

⁸ Dominick LaCapra, “Lanzmann's ‘Shoah’: ‘Here There Is No Why,’” *Critical Inquiry*, 1997, 231–69.

century violinist Biber's Crucifixion Sonata, where another language than words -- instrumental music alone -- attempted to make sense of the epochal event. In the divergence over whether one can speak or not about such a horror as the Holocaust is a basic philosophical difference. For Christians, an adequate response must be contrition, repentance or *metanoia* in response to crushing guilt, and faith. For those for whom suffering cannot possibly be answered by any monotheistic, all-powerful, and therefore guilty God, only silence serves.

In 1964, two years before Sebald's departure from Bavaria for England, Eric Voegelin gave a series of lectures entitled "Hitler and the Germans" in Munich University. An academic who lost his position in the Hitler era, Voegelin ended two decades in America to return and urge a mastering of the German past which was to be also a mastering of the present. Voegelin says that a society-wide loss of spiritual sensitivity and a retreat into language disconnected from reality was responsible for the Hitler disaster. He diagnoses what he terms a "pneumapathology." Talk of collective memory is a cop-out to Voegelin. Always individuals possess memory, and individuals must return to reality. For Voegelin, silence is definitely not a solution, not silence to avoid the topic, not silence to deal with it.⁹

Seen as creative extensions of meaning frameworks, acts of imagination like books, films, visual arts, music, theatre, poetry, and more, are wedges into another world. One could call these systematic creativity except that the phrase seems programmed. As imagination derives from and extends perceptions and beliefs, its public presentation will invite persons to enter their world. Cubist painters virtually invited Americans into fractured modernity at the 1913 Armory Show. The invitation was deeply controversial then exactly because so radical, to many so implausible, inviting mockery. Jesus met a similar reaction. John Lennon's song "Imagine," invited hearers to a rational utopia free of religions. If only we would reason, urged Lennon: "It's easy if you try." His anarchic free-love pacificism in the late 1960s irritated many conservatives. Legal or media clashes in the US such as the Hobby Lobby or the Obergefell decisions, or the Duck Dynasty cancellation and reinstatement, may be skirmishes in a broader war of imagination. Imagination subverts taken-for-granted worlds.

Imagination is not only an aesthetic invitation to a new world. Imagination is a moral category. James Cone points out that lack of imagination can be culpable. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone points out that renowned Christian ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr as a young pastor in Detroit did nothing to bring blacks into his white church and spoke little or nothing of racial reconciliation. Bourgeois white status quo was fine for Niebuhr then. Later in his career he urged that churches and societies cannot be pushed too hard for change. Contrast Niebuhr with fellow ethicist Dietrich Bonhoeffer who attended Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem during his 1930-

⁹ Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, ed. D. Clemens and B. Purcell, vol. 31, *Collected Works* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

31 New York stay, and toured the American south, thus identifying with Jesus' poor. Niebuhr's gospel imagination failed him. Bonhoeffer wins credit for a commendable moral imagination.¹⁰

The call for the conference directs us to address "the contemporary environmental crisis, and the persistence of racism, sexism, and classism, as challenges of the religious educational imagination." Historical examples of transformative Christian social imagination are many. One could identify care for the poor, hospitals or even insane asylums, schooling for children of both sexes, penitentiaries rather than prisons, perhaps the seed of recognition of women's inherent dignity, all historical innovations. While any of these claims to social justice are controverted and depend on the assessor's perspective, Hart or Cochrane or Hill would affirm these as stemming from the Christian revolution in Constantine's or Theodosius's Rome.¹¹ An able response to contemporary multiple crises requires a renewal of Jesus' message. Comprehensive theological reflection must characterize the religious educational imagination.

Imagination may be visual or performed invitations to a world, or enacted social practices. Both meet Emily Dickinson's famous criterion:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant --
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind --¹²

Imagination, I said above, invites into a world. Success is to have others accept the invitation and enter the new world. Since Christian faith claims to describe reality, adherence ends unreality (in principle) and commences lived reality (in principle). Persons experiencing conversion as coming to themselves; converts often use the terms. When imagination is seen as expression and extension of linguistic-cultural reality, the line between it and what we term "faith" becomes faint.

Sebald's transformation is less than world-affirming. But his puzzle-laden guide to the built environment is a model for more powerful invitations than didacticism ever imagined.

¹⁰ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2013).

¹¹ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957); Jonathan Hill, *What Has Christianity Ever Done for Us?: How It Shaped the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

¹² Emily Dickinson, "Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant," in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, vol. 2, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955).

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