Sterne, Sebald, and Siege Architecture

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I want to begin with some typical reactions to calamity and ruin. First of all, or at least what is first noticeable to readers of scenes of unparalleled horror and destruction, is the failure of language adequately to express what has happened or what it is like to experience an incomprehensible event. Here for instance is H.F., alleged historian of the Plague Year of 1665: “It is impossible to say any thing that is able to give a true idea of it to those who did not see it, other than this: that it was indeed very, very, very dreadful, and such as no tongue can express.”1 The same embarrassment of language in the face of an immeasurable phenomenon occurs frequently in voyage literature and in the utopias that derive from it, often as a sidelong invitation to the reader to engage with the sublime. But in respect of pestilence, war, starvation, and death, the drumbeat never alters and words seem to attest only to their own futility. The anonymous woman, whose memoir of the first eight weeks of the fall and occupation of Berlin was recently republished, pauses in her account of being raped again and again, to say simply, “Poor words, you do not suffice.”2 When Robinson Crusoe sees his one chance of human company lost in the wreck of the Spanish ship on the reef near his

1 Daniel Defoe, A Journal of the Plague Year (1722; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 60. References are to this edition.
island, not even memory can supplement his inarticulate grief: “I cannot explain by any possible energy of words, what a strange longing or hankering of desires I felt in my soul upon this sight.”

Perhaps it is the familiarity of reactions to what is in itself utterly unfamiliar that prompts W.G. Sebald to be wary of eyewitness testimony of ruin as being inexact and trite: “The reality of total destruction, incomprehensible in its extremity, pales when described in such stereotypical phrases as ‘a prey to the flames,’ ‘that fateful night,’ ‘all hell was let loose,’ ‘we were staring into the inferno,’ and so on and so forth. Their function is to cover up and neutralize experiences beyond our ability to comprehend.” Sebald makes this point about the language of eyewitnesses in his *On the Natural History of Destruction*, where he is trying to explain why the reality of the total destruction of German cities by allied bombing never became present to the minds of postwar Germans. He cites Hermann Kasack’s *The City beyond the River* (1947) as an example of what went wrong, a narrative in which bomber squadrons are referred to as “the teeming messengers of death.” Sebald makes a point that extends well beyond the literature of the Second World War. Nothing is more typical of H.F.’s eyewitness testimony of the plague than a certain formal or automatic extravagance in figuring it. Thus the pestilence came upon the people of London “like an armed man” (120), “Death now began not, as we may say, to hover over every one’s head only, but to look into their houses, and chambers, and stare in their faces” (54). To stay in London at this time, declares H.F., was like “charging Death itself on his pale horse” (236). In his memoir of four appalling years in a German regiment on the Western Front in the First World War, *In Stahlgewittern* (Storm of Steel), Ernst Jünger uses the same language: “Death with his steel club assaulted our trenches,” “Death loomed up expectantly between us,” “I had felt Death’s hand once before ... but this time his grip was more and more determined.” And so on, and so forth.

W.G. Sebald and J.M. Coetzee might be regarded as the most thoughtful writers about devastation and suffering during the last twenty years. They have both agreed that the solution to the problem of clichés uttered in the presence of extreme circumstances is to clear

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away trite metaphors and personifications and to cultivate instead
an austere language, stripped down and fit to deliver things as they
are. After all, as Sebald points out, “facts ... stare us straight in the
face.”7 So Sebald and Coetzee’s shared cause is realism, the sole basis,
Sebald maintains, “for continuing to produce literature in the face
of total destruction.” He continues, “Conversely the construction of
aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins ... is a process of
depriving literature of its right to exist.”8 Coetzee could not be more
in agreement. In two notable commentaries on the description of
torture, he makes the point that lyric metaphors are just as bad as
gross exaggeration because they sidestep the issues of torture by
claiming a beauty in pain, just as the other avoids it by drawing an
obscene but jejune picture of human beastliness. Citing the highly
metaphoric descriptions of torture and prison in the work of writers
such as Mongane Serote and Alex La Guma, he observes that they are
not alone in being unhappy in their flights of fancy: “Presenting the
world of the interrogator with a false portentousness, a questionable
dark lyricism, is not a fault limited to South African novelists: the
same criticism might be leveled against the torture scenes of Gillo
Pontecorvo’s film The Battle of Algiers”—where, if you remember, an
Algerian prisoner is tortured by legionnaires to the accompaniment
of baroque music.9 But Coetzee reserves his greatest scorn for the
scenes of the torturous deaths of the Wehrmacht plotters in Paul
West’s The Very Rich Hours of the Count von Stauffenberg. To represent
such cruelty as a lumbering harlequinade with half-dead men hoisted
and unhoisted from the gallows to the accompaniment of vile jokes
is, he says, to defy humanity. “To save our humanity, certain things
that we may want to see,” says Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee’s alter ego,
“must remain off-stage. Paul West has written an obscene book, he
has shown what ought not to be shown.”10

In his Elizabeth Costello story entitled “Realism,” Coetzee cites the
technique pioneered by Defoe in Robinson Crusoe as the most eligible
because it is faithful to the facts and at the same time tactfully cognizant of the feelings they arouse. And this is how Coetzee illustrates
and explains what he means:

7  Sebald, On the Natural History of Destruction, 53.
8  Sebald, On the Natural History of Destruction, 53.
Robinson Crusoe, cast up on the beach, looks around for his shipmates. But there are none. “I never saw them afterwards, or any sign of them,” says he, “except three of their hats, one cap, and two shoes that were not fellows.” Two shoes, not fellows: by not being fellows, the shoes have ceased to be footwear and become proofs of death, torn by the foaming seas off the feet of drowning men and tossed ashore. No large words, no despair, just hats and caps and shoes.¹¹

Coetzee wishes to assert the importance of bare facts in respect of the irrefragable authority of the suffering body, an authority that strides above all other earthly powers. He makes his claim for this power of pain by closely attending to the circumstances in which the body suffers. This body is therefore a stranger to figurative language, such as metaphor, personification, and irony: “Whatever else, the body is not ‘that which is not,’ and the proof of that is the pain it feels ... In South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering therefore of the body ... The suffering body takes this authority: that is its power ... [and] its power is undeniable.”¹²

This is all very well, but we have heard even Robinson Crusoe step beyond the sober limits of realism to mourn his want of terms suitable to the urgency of his feelings, for when circumstances are extreme, feelings need words of extraordinary energy. Elizabeth Costello experiences this problem. Despite the high value she sets on what she calls a moderate realism—where words stand up and are counted, where you say what you mean and mean what you say, and where words and things subsist so closely together that you are enabled, like Swift’s Houyhnhnms and the suffering body, to say only the thing which is—she finds her words cannot stand in a one-for-one relation to things. She is forced to make her report from the thick of things by impersonating Kafka’s Red Peter, a talking ape. The defence of humanity she associated with the pursuit of a moderate realism has to be relinquished, for she can no longer determine who is speaking to whom, or what is being spoken about, “whether it is a man speaking to men or an ape speaking to apes or an ape speaking to men or a man speaking to apes ... or just a parrot speaking to parrots.”¹³

Sebald himself is forced to take a step from realism to something else he calls the synoptic view. The effects of realism must be garnered

¹¹ Coetzee, “Realism,” in Elizabeth Costello, 4. (Citing Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, 46.)
¹³ Coetzee, “Realism,” in Elizabeth Costello, 19.
from other sources besides eyewitnesses—from manuals, official reports, photographs, statistics, experiments—so that an account may be given that does justice to the immensity of the event, and at the same time be capable of vindicating literature. Here is his example of what he calls, with reference to Dante and Peter Weiss, the virtuoso representation of suffering. He is catching the rhythm of the firestorm in Hamburg on the night of 27 July 1943:

The fire, now rising 2000 metres into the sky, snatched oxygen to itself so violently that the air currents reached hurricane force, resonating like mighty organs with all their stops pulled out at once ... At its height the storm lifted gables and roofs from buildings, flung rafters and entire advertising hoardings through the air, tore trees from the ground and drove human beings before it like living torches. Behind collapsing arcades the flames shot up as high as houses, rolled like a tidal wave through the streets at a speed of over 150 kilometres an hour, spun across open squares in strange rhythms like rolling cylinders of fire. The water in some of the canals was ablaze. The glass in the tramcar windows melted; stocks of sugar boiled in the bakery cellars. Those who had fled from their air-raid shelters sank, with grotesque contortions, in the thick bubbles thrown up by the melting asphalt. No one knows for certain how many lost their lives that night, or how many went mad before they died.14

What would be the simplest way to describe what is being done when Costello exchanges a moderate realism for Red Peter’s report, or Sebald takes up a synoptic view? Well, each is exploiting a tendency latent in all attempts to describe ruin, which is to replace human activity with the activity of things, such as a talking ape or a fire that feeds and moves itself. The tendency is brought to its most lurid form in that category of figurative language called personification, where the destructive force acts like an intelligence, and human beings stop dying or killing one another, and instead Death sits astride his white horse, destroying people, and fire gluts itself with human fuel. Even within the spare terms of moderate realism, the tendency to personify can be detected: Do not the harsh facts of ruin “stare us in the face,” just like Death in Jünger or Defoe? Those three hats, the cap, and the two shoes that are not fellows, what are they doing? They have withdrawn from their function as covering for the human body and now owe a different allegiance, standing up as signs of loss, servants of Death. In occupied Berlin during May 1945, manufactures

14 Sebald, On the Natural History of Destruction, 28.
switched their allegiance from human use and exchange to a force beyond the limits of civil society; thus shoes were metamorphosed into rapeshoes, wine into plunderwine, and coal into filchcoal. The authority of the suffering body, along with the authority of the eyewitness and the authority of literature itself, is usurped by another force. Coetzee admits as much when he quotes this description of a drunken man beating a donkey from Nadine Gordimer’s novel *Burger’s Daughter*: “The infliction of pain [had] broken away from the will that creates it; broken loose, a force existing of itself, ravishment without the ravisher, torture without the torturer, rampage, pure cruelty gone beyond the control of the humans who have spent thousands of years devising it.” Sebald acknowledges the same usurpation when, in his essay “Between History and Natural History: On the Literary Description of Total Destruction,” he alludes to the blindness and confusion of those caught up in ruin and says, “the autonomy of mankind in the face of the real or potential destruction that it has caused is no greater in the history of the species than the autonomy of the animal in the scientist’s cage.” We are left with our ignorance: “No one knows for certain how many lost their lives that night, or how many went mad before they died”; “We don’t know and will never know, with certainty, what is really going on.”

The force that arises from human activity supplants human will and understanding, turning effects into causes, and transforming the myriad symptoms of ruin into personifications—Death, Torture, Cruelty, Rape, Rampage—all of which have lives of their own and their own miracles and transmutations to perform. This force has become more evident in history as the technologies of destruction and pain have been developed for mass application. The development of siege architecture in the early modern period put war on such an expanded footing that destruction had never before been seen on such a grand scale. The Prior of Barletta thought the citadel of Turin the embodiment in stone and mortar of the summit of human intelligence. Similarly Gulliver boasts to the horse his master of improvements in the art of war, particularly sieges. But such embodiments of human intelligence cost a high price in disintegrating human bodies, and introduce a ghastly novelty into the number and nature

15 A Woman in Berlin, 190.
16 Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 367.
of wounds. After the springing of a mine at the siege of Steenwijk, in 1592, it was reported that “bodies of men might have been seen hovering piecemeal in the air, the torn and divided limbs yet retaining their decaying vigour and motion.” This is precisely the point of Gulliver’s boast, the effects of explosives on bodies: “And to set forth the valour of my own dear countrymen, I assured him that I had seen them blow up a hundred enemies at once in a siege ... and beheld the dead bodies come down in pieces from the clouds, to the great diversion of the spectators.”

I want to suggest that the figurative language Sebald associates with eyewitnesses and their false aesthetic necessarily pervades descriptions of ruin, and until the invention of tanks and heavy bombers, it is never so dramatically exhibited as in memoirs of sieges. Here are two examples, one from the English Civil War and the other from the bitter culmination of siege warfare in the trenches of Flanders between 1914 and 1918. This is a report on the effect of mortars during the bombardment of a fortified town, Rowton Heath, in 1645: “Our houses like so many splitting vessels crush their supporters and burst themselves in sunder through the very violence of these descending firebrands ... two houses in the Watergate skip joint from joint and create an earthquake, the main posts jostle each other, while the frightened casemates fly for fear.” Falling houses are the agents here, humans nowhere in sight. So they are again in Jünger’s description of the village of Fresnoy: “As if by some magical power, one house after another subsided into the earth; walls broke, gables fell, and bare sets of beams and joists went flying through the air, cutting down the roofs of other houses. Clouds of splinters danced over whitish wraiths of steam. Eyes and ears were utterly compelled by this maelstrom of devastation.” In both descriptions, objects escape from the passivity that might have kept them within the pale of human intention, and they act instead on their own initiative or in service to a force that cannot be identified other than as a personification of some aspect of ruin, such as Jünger’s Death, Sebald’s Fire, or Gordimer’s pure Cruelty. Several times Jünger calls his war a war of matériel, as if it were being fought by the traverses and saps of the trenches, and directed by the guns, shells, and bullets. There is a moment when,
aware of this transformation, he is forced, like Sebald and Coetzee, to forsake the simplicities of moderate realism. This is what he says as he explores a ruined house at Guillemont:

I took a walk through the ravaged gardens, and looted delicious peaches from their espaliered boughs. On my wanderings I happened into a house surrounded by tall hedges, which must have belonged to a lover of antiques ... Old china sat in piles in large cupboards, ornate leather-bound volumes were scattered about the floor, among them an exquisite old edition of *Don Quixote*.

I would have loved to pick up a memento, but I felt like Robinson Crusoe and the lump of gold; none of these things were of any value here.24

These things are no longer owned, and no longer familiar with human concerns. Like rapeshoes and plunderwine, and like the three hats, the cap, and the two shoes that Crusoe found on the beach, they operate in a different time and serve a new master. Still, in the midst of ruin and the loss of human autonomy, Jünger like Crusoe spots an opportunity for happiness, a garden world behind the lines of fortification where something can be made out of fragments. In the same mood Andrew Marvell thought of the devastation of fortified country places in the English Civil War as he composed “Upon Appleton House,” where his mind moves from defensive architecture and horrid wounds to a voluptuous flower-piece:

> When gardens only had their towers,  
> And all the garrisons were flowers;  
> When roses only arms might bear;  
> And men did rosy garlands wear.25

For Jünger this possibility of reconstitution amidst chaos was accomplished with a book—not *Don Quixote*, but *Tristram Shandy*—which he started to read at Favreuil before an assault in which he was badly wounded and felt the hand of Death weighing on him. He finishes reading the book in hospital during the endless hours lying flat on his back recovering from a bad chest wound.26 And what he seems to want to understand in reading it is the strange happiness his wound caused him: “I felt surprise and disbelief that it was to end there and

24 Jünger, 103.  
26 Jünger, 278, 288.
then, but this surprise had something untroubled and almost merry about it.” How does a wound in the chest become a rosy garland?

Jünger went directly to a book at whose core is a story of a war wound and its cure. Toby Shandy, a soldier in King William’s wars, is struck in the groin by a splinter during the siege of Namur, specifically while negotiating a traverse “about thirty toises from the returning angle of the trench, opposite to the salient angle of the demi-bastion of St. Roch.”  

Toby’s recovery is delayed until he can state with absolute certainty where exactly he was hit, and he cannot do this until he finds his hobbyhorse, namely a growing obsession with shapes of siege architecture and the path of projectiles. By then what is in view is not just a matter of recovery but happiness, for Toby transforms his back garden into a mock citadel where he can re-enact every siege of the Duke of Marlborough’s campaigns during the War of the Spanish Succession (1700–13) and thereby fulfil the great ends of his (that is, Toby’s) creation (figure 1).

Figure 1. “Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim viewing their artificial fortifications,” from Twelve Prints, Representing the Most Interesting, Sentimental, and Humorous Scenes, in “Tristram Shandy” (London, 1785), engr. R. Dighton (1751–1814). Reproduced courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library.

There is an interesting parallel to be drawn between Sterne’s novel and Sebald’s Austerlitz (2001), whose eponymous hero recovers the history of his mother’s death in the ghetto of Theresienstadt, where German Jews were packed inside the fortifications of the town and starved. He finds his way back to those grim lines of circumvallation by dwelling on clusters of images associated with siege architecture and railway stations until finally they cohere and the truth of the past returns as an intense and mixed emotion. In both of these works of fiction an extremely painful memory is absorbed by means of emotions whose vehicles are images drawn from the original circumstances of the pain, namely siege architecture.

Possibly Toby’s character was based on Sir Walter Earle, a Parliament general whose garden at Charborough was cut into redoubts and works representing the sieges he had attended. In any event, the taste for landscape gardens that incorporated or mimicked the innovations of siege architecture was common in the first half of the eighteenth century. In his essay on fortified gardens, Robert Williams compares early eighteenth-century examples of baroque formal gardens, such as Vanbrugh’s Seaton Delaval Hall (1719–26), with seventeenth-century gardens, such as those at Basing House in Hampshire, or Hillesden House in Buckinghamshire, whose ditch and bastion defences had at first functioned as defensive lines during the English Civil War. Although these were no longer necessary when Vanbrugh was building at Seaton Delaval, he nevertheless chose to set the garden inside a square, each corner dominated by a strong bastion that even today could act as a gun platform. The bastions are linked on three sides by a ha-ha, or what Williams prefers to call a deep, walled ditch or fosse, forming a scarp and counterscarp (figure 2). When Vanbrugh moved to Stowe he must have enjoyed the ha-ha designed by landscape architect Charles Bridgeman (d. 1738). The ha-ha at that time was armed on the inside with wooden spikes, called fraises (figure 3), for he was stimulated to pursue his vigorous line in military gardening by fortifying the Home Park with spiked walls rather like those Robinson Crusoe uses to defend his cave on the island.

Here then is a pattern based on refiguring ruin as an aesthetic pleasure and turning the facts of pain into emblems of delight:

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28 Cited in Duffy, 145.
bullet wounds construed as garlands of roses, armed walls reduced to garden ornaments, ruins rebuilt as eye-catchers, and a state of war rendered as a delicious paradise. These paradoxical transformations are partly to be explained by the personifying tendency of siege warfare itself, which grants to things an independence and agency which, like the contents of the wreck in Robinson Crusoe, the shoes and wine in Berlin, or the antiques Jünger finds in the ruined house at Guillemont, are not necessarily malign. In the finished version of Marvell’s Garden, fruits playfully trip and embrace their human objects, utterly amiable personifications. And partly these paradoxes are to be explained by the
contradictions implicit in siege architecture itself. The innovation of the great siege architects such as Vauban and Coehoorn involved the reduction of everything—citadel and works—to the level of the walls (figures 4 and 5). This flattening seems also to have encouraged the baroque proliferations of siege architecture, as if in being reduced it was also allowed to spread. So out of the basic polygon there develops a fractal geometry of ravelins, half-moons, counterguards, tenailles, hornworks, and crownworks (figures 6 and 7). Now it is reasonably clear that the logic of obsidional development is the strengthening of each weak angle. Each ravelin or half-moon repairs and reinforces an imagined breach in the walls made by artillery fire or infantry attack. Each plan is a starburst of damaging possibilities congealed at the limit of practicable material redress. The whole structure expands as a scene of anticipated ruin rebuilt. The idea of its demolition turns into the rationale of its shape, of which the ha-ha, the defensive wall that apparently is not there, is exemplary: it survives by appearing to be destroyed (figure 8).

Austerlitz has two fortified citadels in mind. One is the portion of the Theresienstadt citadel used by the SS as a pen for sixty thousand people. The other is the casemate of Breendonk, all that remains of the vast fortifications around Antwerp, rebuilt after they were destroyed in 1832 by French artillery. Austerlitz spends some time reflecting on the absurd complexity of siege architecture, “the whole insanity of fortification and siege-craft”:

The study of the intricately sketched plans of such fortified complexes as those of Coevorden, Neuf-Brisach and Saarlouis will show ... the layman ... an emblem both of absolute power and of the ingenuity of engineers put in service of that power. In the practice of warfare, however, the star-shaped fortresses which were being built and improved everywhere during the eighteenth century did not answer their purpose, for intent as everyone was on that pattern, it had been forgotten that the largest fortifications will naturally attract the largest enemy forces, and that the more you entrench yourself, the more you must remain on the defensive ... As architectural plans for fortifications became increasingly complex, the time it took to build them increased as well, and with it the probability that as soon as they were finished ... they would have been overtaken by further developments, both in artillery and in strategic planning.30

Figure 4 (above). Mountain citadel. Daniel Speckle, *Architectura von Vestungen. Wie die zu unsern Zeiten mögen erbauen werden* (Strasbourg, 1589).

Figure 5 (below). Flattened citadel. Speckle, *Architectura von Vestungen.*
Figure 6 (above). Names of defensive features. Gabriello Busca (c. 1540–1605), *Della espugnazione et difesa delle fortezze libri due* (Turin, 1585).

Figure 7 (below). Siege architecture as starburst. Minno Coehoorn, *The New Method of Fortification* (London, 1725).
The irrational incremental logic of sieges noted here by Austerlitz is perfectly represented by Sterne’s uncle Toby. He acquires drawbridges, a sentry box (figure 9), a model town, and a church in order to improve the accuracy of his represented sieges: “This led the way the next campaign for half a dozen brass field pieces,—to be planted three and three on each side of my uncle Toby’s sentry-box; and in a short time, these led the way for a train of somewhat larger,—and so on ... from pieces of half an inch bore, till it came at last to my father’s jack boots” (2:540). Ruined by a piece of stone broken off from the parapet of a hornwork, Toby resorts to his version of a moderate realism, which is not the building but the ruin of the works:

When the duke of Marlborough made a lodgment,—my uncle Toby made a lodgment too.—And when the face of a bastion was battered down, or a defence ruined,—the corporal took his mattock and did as much,—and so on;—gaining ground, and making themselves masters of the works one after
another, till the town fell into their hands ... What intense pleasure swimming in his eye as he stood over the corporal, reading the paragraph [of the Gazette] ten times over to him, as he was at work, lest, peradventure, he should make the breach an inch too wide,—or leave it an inch too narrow. (2:536–37)

The ruins of Landen, Trerebach, Santvliet, Drusen, Hagenau, Ostend, Menin, Aeth, and Dendermond are all represented in the same methodical and exact manner. Why then the surge of emotion? Because by virtue of re-enactment Toby is contemplating not how he has made models of ruin but how ruin made him. At his most exhilarated he is the willing victim of a gang of personifications who spring a mine and blow him up with pleasure: “Heaven! Earth! Sea!—all was lifted up—the springs of nature rose above their levels” (2:793).

Figure 9. “Uncle Toby retired into his centry [sic] box. Vide Tris. Shandy” (London, 1786). Reproduced courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library.
There are sinister parallels between Austerlitz and Toby. Tristram mentions that contrary winds sometimes delayed the Flanders mail and the news of latest developments in the field, “and kept them so long in torture,—but still ‘twas the torture of the happy” (2:537). The metaphor is not meant to disguise the origin of all Toby’s pleasurable siege-craft in pain. In the casemate of Breendonk, completed just before the start of the First World War and commandeered by the SS in 1940, Jean Améry was subject to the strappado, the technique of raising the body by the arms tied behind the back, which dislocates both shoulders. Améry cannot convey the agony he felt then; he can only figure it by a kind of etymological pun that plays on torture and its Latin cognate: *A*torquere: to twist. What visual instruction in etymology.”31 This prompts the narrator to recall the same torture in Claude Simon’s book *Le Jardin des plantes*, where Gastone Novelli endures it in Dachau. In later years Novelli spent his time tracing out in various styles and materials the letter “A,” as Austerlitz says, “always the same and yet never repeating themselves, rising and falling waves like a long drawn-out scream” (36).

The dialectic of ruin and rebuilding which constitutes the crystalline expansion of a citadel corresponds in some respect to the feelings of pain and pleasure of those whom they enclose, or those who view them in a re-enactment. Toby’s body is assaulted and restored by the same formations of stone and earth. Even in *Austerlitz*, where the whole insanity of siege-craft is denounced, one of the most powerful tokens of retrieved history, “the octofoil mosaic flower” set in the hallway of Number Twelve Sporkova in Prague (213), bears a strong resemblance to the crystalline structure of a fortified town and to the fractal patterns on the domes of certain buildings—stations in Prague, Lucerne, and London, the Karmelinsky archives, and the dining room of the Great Eastern Hotel (figures 10, 11, and 12). As bodies and minds are spoilt within these defensive works, themselves emblems of ruin remade, so they are to some degree healed and restored by them. Wordsworth provides a commentary on this process. In *The Prelude* the dreariness of the decayed remnants of the past standing in the landscape—an ancient wall or the remains of a gibbet—has the power to restore whatever it depletes in the minds of beholders: “Our minds / Are nourished and invisibly repaired.”32 This restoration is owing to the

Figure 10. Mosaic floor at No 12 Sporkova (Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 213).

Figure 11. Saarlouis fortifications (Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 18).

Figure 12. Great Eastern Hotel stained-glass dome (Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 58).
print or impression left by the thing, to which the mind resorts in the
tour of its own internal landscape, “spectacles and sounds to which / I
often would repair.”33 The pun on a word like repair, as both to mend
and to resort, performs very differently from the pun on torture and
twisting, but they both participate in a reciprocal play of differences
sponsored by the figurative form of ruin. Here is an example taken
from Coetzee’s Nobel Prize speech, entitled “He and His Man,” a
guarded and oblique salute to the work of Defoe. And you will see
that it is remarkable for utilizing a metaphor whose triteness Sebald
and Coetzee formerly had castigated as bad art and incompetent
eyewitnessing: “He yields an able pen, this man of his, no doubt of
that. Like charging Death himself on his pale horse ... Death himself on his
pale horse those are words he would not think of. Only when he yields
himself up to this man of his do such words come.”34 Here is another
example from the Costello story “Realism”: “His heart is breaking;
sadness pours down like a grey waterfall behind his eyes ... Sleep, he
thinks, that knits up the raveled sleeve of care. What an extraordinary
way of putting it! Not all the monkeys in the world picking away at
typewriters all their lives would come up with those words in that
arrangement ... A miracle.”35

Austerlitz’s placement of pleasure within the pain of history is
managed by a similar melancholy attention directed not at personi-
fications like Death and Sleep but at images of citadels and domes.
When he thinks of time as a landscape, in which the sequence of
events is supplanted by their situation, he imagines that the worst
that has happened can still occur, and never be eased or forgotten:
“I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously,
in which case none of what history tells us would be true, past events
have not yet occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment when we
think of them, although that, of course, opens up the bleak prospect
of ever-lasting misery and never-ending anguish” (144). However, his
first recognition of such a moment takes place when, sitting in the
waiting room of Liverpool Street Station, he sees himself as a small
boy in the same waiting room, underneath a spider web of wrought
iron and glass. This recollection is blended with feelings that are
intense but equivocal: “I cannot give any precise description of the

35 Coetzee, “Realism,” in Elizabeth Costello, 27.
state of mind this realization induced; I felt something rending within me, and a sense of shame and sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, something inexpressible because we have no words for it” (193–94). In Prague, at Number Twelve Sporkova, where the octofoil mosaic forms a visual pun or rebus of fortification, memories flow in through his pores and he remembers, “I was overcome by such a state of blissful yet anxious confusion that more than once I had to sit down on the steps in the quiet stairwell and lean my head against the wall” (215). But his most exquisite moment is reserved for the period immediately after his discharge from the “fortress-like hospital” of the Salpêtrière, where he has been confined for insanity, unable to remember who he is. He goes walking through an area between the Gare d’Austerlitz and the Quai d’Austerlitz, until he comes across the place where the Bastiani Circus has erected its tent. Going inside, he is struck by the painted firmament hanging from the dome of the big top; then the band begins to play: “I still do not understand, said Austerlitz, what was happening within me as I listened to this extraordinarily foreign nocturnal music conjured out of thin air, so to speak, by the circus performers with their slightly out-of-tune instruments, nor could I have said at the time whether my heart was contracting in pain or expanding with happiness for the first time in my life” (383). Sebald had a similar experience himself, recorded in his essay “On Kafka’s Travel Diaries”:

Not so long ago I was listening to some Lithuanian buskers in the pedestrian zone of a north German town, and their music sounded exactly the same [as Jewish village music]. One had an accordion, another a battered tuba, the third a double bass. As I listened, hardly able to tear myself away, I understood why Wiesengrund once wrote of Mahler that his music was the cardiogram of a breaking heart.36

This intense and equivocal engagement with echoes and images of the past, gradually resolving themselves once again into the star-shaped works of Theresienstadt and the casemates of Breendonk, can be assigned to the double vision Austerlitz entertains of the landscape of memory in general. As he reconnoitres its monuments they confront him as painfully and irrecoverably contingent, the product of an absolute power he cannot name whose home lies in

what he calls the terra incognita of history, and on the other hand they accost him as promises of symmetry and necessity: figures and shapes belonging to an emotional landscape Wordsworth characterizes as at once dreary and visionary. These shapes are very like the fortified ruins to which Toby repairs, where even his gesture of delight—an eye swimming with pleasure—could be mistaken for a symptom of agony. Ruin brought to some kind of order then, but order never so divorced from ruin that you could claim for these figures and shapes an unambiguously human comfort, or a historical importance arising solely from the efforts of the human species. As for their triteness—"a prey to the flames" and "Death on his white horse"—perhaps that has something to do with the virtuoso performance of pain as necessarily limited by the banality of the facts of ruin and despair and by the ignorance of the witness and the re-enactor. This triteness produced by the banality and the ignorance results in a restricted panache that is still a lot better than silence and a lot less humbling than screams and tears.

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