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W. G. Sebald is well known for the melancholy tone of his prose writing. However, as this article aims to show, there exists a heretofore underdiscussed debt to the German Romantic form of the *Kunstmärchen* in his work that is most discernible in Sebald’s final novel *Austerlitz*, which was published only months before its author’s sudden death in 2001. The date of this novel’s publication and its debt to the *Kunstmärchen* form are significant, since this suggests that Sebald’s well-documented melancholy perspective on twentieth-century European modernity has aesthetic origins in earlier Romantic literary forms. The tropes and conventions of the *Kunstmärchen* constitute vestigially important drivers in the construction of the understanding of the past as irrecoverably separate from the present that emerges in Sebald’s melancholy prose. By examining clear instances in *Austerlitz* which draw on thematic and structural elements of the *Kunstmärchen*, this article suggests that Romantic dissatisfaction with the world of the modern and the everyday finds its late echoes in Sebald’s millennial melancholy and emerges as a key constitutive factor in the novel’s sustained refusal to offer closure or reconciliation between the narrative’s present and the past it attempts to investigate.

Keywords: W. G. Sebald; *Austerlitz*; melancholy; fairy tale; romantic;
It has become something of a commonplace to talk of W. G. Sebald’s melancholy and, indeed, this is not even the first time that this has been claimed.\(^1\) Drawing on the sensation of melancholy that arises from a feeling of helplessness when confronting the past, Sebald fashions in his works what he terms, following Peter Weiss, his own ‘aesthetics of resistance’.\(^2\) However, as Kaisa Kaakinen affirms, discussions of melancholy in Sebald’s work have up until now taken place ‘either in relation to his position as a postwar German author or in relation to discussions on ethics of alterity’, simultaneously historicizing Sebald’s works and situating them in an historically removed conceptualization of ethical encounter.\(^3\) Eric Santner notes the overwhelming gloom of Sebaldian melancholy, remarking that his work ‘generates not so much profane illuminations as apocalyptic darkenings, moments where the last traces of light are, as it were, sucked back into black holes of despair and pain’.\(^4\) In the most lucid and comprehensive account of melancholy in Sebald’s œuvre, Mary Cosgrove delineates how it may be interpreted as an ethical, albeit ambivalent, vessel for memory of the Holocaust by questioning Sebald’s own assertion in his critical work that melancholy constitutes a form of resistance.\(^5\) Drawing on Dominick LaCapra’s theories of trauma, Cosgrove argues that an understanding of the Holocaust as an historical caesura, which divides those who came after from those who came before, results in what J. J. Long calls the ‘marooning [of] the survivors and those born after in a futureless vacuum of the present’.\(^6\) This understanding of history looms large in Sebald’s œuvre and encapsulates both his sense of historical lateness and an appreciation of the vertiginous separation of the past and present which engenders the melancholy aesthetic attitude of his prose fiction. Sebald himself did not care to use the term ‘novel’ to describe his creative writing, preferring instead to refer to his works as ‘Prosa’ or ‘Fiktion’, as opposed to ‘Romane’.\(^7\) Nevertheless, given that it lessens the confusion between fiction and (auto)biographical memoir, which characterizes his earlier prose works, *Austerlitz*

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(2001), the last of Sebald’s novels to be published during his lifetime, is more like a ‘real novel’, as John Zilcosky argues, than *Schwindel. Gefühle* (1990), *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992), or *Die Ringe des Saturn* (1995), and in what follows it is accordingly referred to as such.⁸

This article makes the case for reading Sebald’s final novel as the latest iteration of the Germanic literary fairy tale, a melancholy *Kunstmärchen* at the turn of the twenty-first century.⁹ Several posthumous reviews and accounts of Sebald have attempted to ascribe a certain mystical quality to the author and his work, variably alluding to his emergence on to the literary scene ‘as if out of nowhere’ as well as to his ‘belonging, mysteriously, nowhere’.¹⁰ If this is the case, at least in part, then it is redolent of the mystical non-places and alternative fantastical realms of Romantic fairy tales, which reveal a heretofore seldom acknowledged debt to the tropes and conventions of the *Kunstmärchen* in *Austerlitz*. In *Kunstmärchen*, for example, unlike in traditional folk tales or *Volksmärchen*, places and objects are described in detail, given names and background contextualization. Characters have more individuality and psychological depth, but they can also be read as allegorical personifications. Fantastic, irrational, or coincidental elements are experienced as problematic and alarming, and often there is no clear moral and no ‘happy end’ to the story. Reworkings of *Kunstmärchen* tropes such as these in *Austerlitz* contribute towards the novel’s refusal of any conventional reconciliation or satisfying conclusion, leading to a sustained melancholy perspective centred around the perceived irreconcilability between the past and the present. Reading the novel as a late and melancholy *Kunstmärchen* for the end of the twentieth century further suggests that *Austerlitz*’s debt to Romanticism complicates the notion of false worlds in the novel. The much discussed category of a ‘falsche Welt’ in *Austerlitz* might thus be read not only as a moral or ethical category, but also one that is intrinsically bound up with the aesthetics of the novel. As the falsity of Austerlitz’s world is revealed during his investigations of his past and his parents’ fates, so the narrator constructs an alternative reality – a false world – in his narrative. A reading of *Kunstmärchen* features in the novel thereby enhances prior understandings of Sebaldian melancholy in *Austerlitz*. By reworking Romantic *Kunstmärchen* tropes of crossing thresholds into other realities and encounters with the unfamiliar or the fantastic, Sebald both facilitates

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⁹ All quotations from this novel are taken from W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001). Page references to the novel will be cited hereafter in the main body of the text as A.

and produces a melancholy perspective on the past, grounded in a literary sensibility that is not only modern but also vestigially Romantic.

For Cosgrove, Sebald’s mobilization of melancholy’s performative potential entails a ‘response to the impossible path of Western history both during and preceding the twentieth century’.\(^{11}\) This ‘special brand of sadness’ emerges over the course of Sebald’s literary works as ‘insightful, mnemonic, and ethically driven mourning work, cross-dressed in traditional melancholy apparel’.\(^{12}\) According to Cosgrove, these trappings of melancholy draw on sources of inspiration as varied as Renaissance iconography, eighteenth-century conceptualizations of *Empfindsamkeit*, and even psychoanalytical theories on the condition of sadness. As Cosgrove observes, these psychoanalytical conceptualizations largely entail a reductive narrowing of the definition of melancholy to a pathological condition which causes the disintegration of an individual’s conscious experience and leads to an inability to engage with and accept the legacy of preceding events. In earlier literary criticism, such an interpretation resulted in long-entrenched Manichean conceptualizations of good and bad melancholia, the former providing the literary artist with the opportunity to transcend sadness, while the latter relegates them to inertia. Following Cosgrove, this article understands Sebaldian melancholy as existing beyond such a binary. It is both performative discourse and narrative tool, through which the conventionalized expression of subjectivity enables ethical engagement with the past. A form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Sebald’s work thus occurs, according to Cosgrove, through a process of ‘melancholy self-fashioning’.\(^{13}\) This recalls a Romantic emphasis on subjectivity, which finds expression in *Austerlitz* via conventions and tropes reminiscent of the Romantic literary fairy tale. In what follows, new facets of Sebaldian melancholy in *Austerlitz* are brought to light and examined, such that principal narrative stages or conventions of *Kunstmärchen*, as well as many of their aesthetic and stylistic features, are revealed as exerting a significant influence on constructions of melancholy in the narrative of *Austerlitz*. This occurs both on the micro level of particular episodes in the novel and on the macro level of the narrative as a whole.

While it may seem initially surprising, even counter-intuitive, to suggest parallels between Sebald’s deeply serious literary work and the form of the Romantic fairy tale, there are many lines of connection to be drawn between the two. One immediately striking intertextual link can be inferred from the protagonist’s discovery that his mother performed the

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11 Cosgrove, *Born under Auschwitz*, p. 147.
role of Olympia in a production of Tales of Hoffmann (A, p. 234) by the French Romantic composer Jacques Offenbach, to whom Austerlitz owes his first name.\(^{14}\) In Hoffmann’s original tale, Der Sandmann (1806), Olympia, the apparent daughter of the protagonist Nathaniel’s professor, is revealed to be an automaton, hastening Nathaniel’s descent into madness, which resonates to a certain extent with Austerlitz’s physical and mental breakdown.\(^ {15}\) In his literary criticism, Sebald also draws on the tales of the Brothers Grimm, and specifically on the figure of Rumpelstiltzchen, for his analysis of memory and cruelty in the work of Peter Weiss.\(^ {16}\) Moreover, in what constitutes the clearest utterance of Sebald’s novelistic praxis in his literary works, expressed via words given to the character of Max Aurach in Die Ausgewanderten, connections between the Sebaldian and the fairy-tale are explicitly articulated.\(^ {17}\) For Aurach, his investigations of his mother’s memoirs, as well as his engagement with memory of the past more generally, are akin to ‘eines jener bösen deutschen Märchen, in denen man, einmal in den Bann geschlagen, mit einer angefangenen Arbeit, in diesem Fall also mit dem Erinnern, dem Schreiben und dem Lesen, fortfahren muß’.\(^ {18}\) The fairy tale here is presented not only as a distinctly German form, but also one which is essentially evil. Yet, despite the introduction of this moral complication, it is also a revelatory form for Aurach, which insinuates itself into all aspects of the ongoing creative process. It is all-pervasive, and its magic spell makes possible further artistry.

At the conclusion of Austerlitz, Sebald’s narrator recounts the protagonist’s experience of entering a hidden Jewish cemetery in London by using the form of the fairy tale as a reference point: ‘In dem hellen Frühlingslicht, das die frisch ausgeschlagenen Lindenblätter durchstrahlte, hätte man meinen können, sagte Austerlitz zu mir, man sei eingetreten in eine Märchenerzählung, die, genau wie das Leben selber, älter geworden ist mit der verflossenen Zeit’ (A, p. 415). This sentence, with its exemplification of the author’s famed hypotaxis and his narrator’s mediated narrative of another’s story, is quintessentially Sebaldian, recalling the clearly self-conscious mode of narration in the novel. Here, the narrator suggests a heightened

\(^{14}\) This is suggested in Ann Pearson, “‘Remembrance ... Is Nothing Other than a Quotation’: The Intertextual Fictions of W. G. Sebald”, in Comparative Literature, 60:3 (2008), pp. 261–278 (p. 269).
\(^{17}\) The character of Max Aurach was renamed Max Ferber in the English translation of Die Ausgewanderten, after the painter Frank Auerbach, upon whom the character of Aurach was partly based, expressed reservations about being closely identified with the book. For further discussion of this, see Maya Jaggi, ‘Recovered Memories’, in The Guardian, 22 September 2001.
\(^{18}\) Sebald, Die Ausgewanderten, p. 285.
sense of Romantic optimism of being in nature as he recounts Austerlitz’s walk under the newly opening leaves of the trees on a bright spring day, before immediately connecting this with the idea of crossing over a threshold and entering into the world of a fairy tale. This fairy tale is not simply a fixed form, however: it is suffused with melancholy at the inexorable passing of time. This dissolves the Romantic optimism suggested by the bright spring light streaming through the leaves, while simultaneously gesturing towards a sense of ageing and ending that recalls the particular vertiginous historical and literary lateness of Sebald and his works. Here in this single sentence, then, is a microcosmic summary of Sebaldian melancholy as it emerges in Austerlitz. Drawing on Romantic literary forms and conventions, a melancholy aesthetic attitude towards history is established through Kunstmärchen allusions.

Romantic poetics offer a route into a clearer understanding of a metaphysical and subjective – though not superficial – engagement with the present and the past in Austerlitz. A sense of over-determination of individual identity by history is distinctly Romantic and Romantic notions of endless wakefulness, as well as the desire to give life to the voices of the dead, constitute a compensatory response to a reality that is viewed as being insufficient. To recall Novalis, the notion that ‘die Welt muß romantisiert werden’ expresses clear dissatisfaction with reality, which provides the impetus to create new fictive worlds. The narrative of Austerlitz makes multiple references to the notion of a ‘falsche Welt’ or a ‘falsches Leben’ (see, for example, A, pp. 11 and 199) and such utterances are well-documented as references to Adorno’s maxim that ‘es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen’, which is reflected in Austerlitz’s growing sense of unease over the course of his investigations at the moral and ethical falsity of his own life. In this aphorism, Adorno suggests that, following the moral catastrophe of the Holocaust as the apogee of modernity, literature and even life exists beyond what is acceptable. Yet what if the false world or worlds in Austerlitz not only articulate the

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19 For further discussion of this, see, for example Ben Hutchinson, Lateness in European Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 330–341 especially.
21 For further discussion of this, see, for example, Helmut Schmitz, On Their Own Terms: The Legacy of National Socialism in Post-1990 German Fiction (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2004), pp. 296–299. For the original quotation by Adorno, see Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften: Band 4 – Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), p. 43.
difficulties of representing and thereby attempting to come to terms with the past in literature? What if the false world in *Austerlitz* may also reflect a fictional constructed reality that is grounded in artificiality and exhibits allegorical narrator and protagonist figures alongside problematic or uncanny coincidences and quest narratives, which have no clear ending, moral, happy or otherwise. The *Kunstmärchen* is a frequently unredemptive form, and appreciation of the heretofore underdiscussed Romantic fairy tale elements of *Austerlitz* will reveal new insights into the narrator’s melancholy conception of history and the novel’s sense of ever-deferred resolution.

Melancholy fairy-tale constructions in *Austerlitz* are bolstered by a sense of weariness with reality, which echoes a distinctly Romantic exasperation with the modern world. *Kunstmärchen* such as E. T. A. Hoffman’s *Der goldne Topf* (1814/19), for example, often contrast the reality of the everyday with fantastical episodes of an alternative reality. There are two principle evocations of figurations, motifs, and tropes from the *Kunstmärchen*, which this article will explore: first, the key moment of self-discovery in Austerlitz’s story when he crosses the threshold of the Liverpool Street Station, undergoing a physical and metaphorical journey into an underworld to recall for the first time in his life his arrival in London as a four-year-old refugee. Secondly, the narrator’s initial visit to the fortress at Breendonk and his subsequent return to it at the conclusion of the novel. There are discrete instances of *Kunstmärchen* tropes and conventions during the narrative of *Austerlitz*, as well as in the overarching structure of the novel as a whole, which also mirrors the typical narrative shape of the *Kunstmärchen*. In keeping with these Romantic conventions, resolution and conclusion are denied both the narrator and the eponymous protagonist of the novel. Providing the structural underpinning for many German Romantic texts, the *Kunstmärchen* is at its heart an expression of dissatisfaction with the real world of the everyday, a yearning for a new world as a form of aesthetic compensation. The Sebaldian reconfiguration of *Kunstmärchen* conventions and traits in *Austerlitz*, however, draws on these conceptualizations of the Romantic form, but makes the novel’s historical position an intrinsic part of its aesthetics, such that *Austerlitz* may be read as a melancholy *Kunstmärchen* for the close of the twentieth century. Resisting Enlightenment rationalism and reason, while drawing on earlier literary forms and conventions,

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24 Novalis, for example, conceived of this as a ‘Träumbild […] ein Ensemble wunderbarer Dinge und Begebenheiten’ and, for Tieck, the episodes that made up such an ensemble comprised everything that had ‘eine Wirkung ohne eine Ursache’. See Novalis: *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe von Friedrich von Hardenberg Vol. 2.*, ed. by Hans-Joachim Mähl (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1987), p. 696 [emphasis in original] and Ludwig Tieck, *Kritische Schriften* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), p. 65.
both heightens the pathos of the novel’s late historical locatedness and solidifies its melancholy aesthetic attitude.

Before examining the ways in which they emerge in *Austerlitz*, however, it will be helpful to briefly outline some key aspects of the original *Kunstmärchen* form, which itself adapts many metaphors from folk tales, while also adopting similar elements, styles, and themes to give them a particularly fairy-tale quality (*das Märchenhafte*). That said, *Kunstmärchen* tend to be neither so one-dimensional in their narrative form as folk tales, nor so reliant on the stereotypical abstraction of place, time, and character. They frequently provide contextualization regarding persons or events, and characters, as well as their problems, are often psychologized so that inner alterations may be perceived to have taken place alongside external changes of fortune such as typically occur in folk tales. Characters’ morality, furthermore, is often composed of shades of grey as opposed to folk tales’ binary black-and-white categorization of the forces of Good and Evil. Indeed, the world of the *Kunstmärchen* is far from a cheerful place where Good always triumphs. These tales frequently devote themselves to exploring darker aspects of human nature, revelling in melancholy, delusion, and a sense of longing for death. The plot of many *Kunstmärchen* is driven by a protagonist’s inner conflict, which results from a discrepancy between the everyday world and unfulfilled yearning or desire. Though heterogenous in form and style, generally most *Kunstmärchen* narratives offer more than one perspective on events, while stressing a gap between the self and the rest of the world that is unable to be bridged. The protagonist, who is typically male and often associated with artistic or creative pursuits, is displaced and does not belong to a particular community. Isolated and lonely, his goal is to transcend his current existence and to find or even bring into being a new and better world. At the beginning of a *Kunstmärchen*, the protagonist is usually in a distressed or disoriented state, unsure of how to proceed as they are either physically lost somewhere or in an anxious state of existential uncertainty. Following this, a mentor figure is introduced to accompany the protagonist and guide them through a journey of self-discovery. At this point, the protagonist will typically cross a threshold into another world (*Schwellenüberschreitung*) where the natural laws of space and time are

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suspended (Zeitaufhebung) and, indeed, where cause and effect may no longer be entirely logical or even predictable. Following some initial shock or confusion in this new alternative world (Gegenwelt), as well as confrontations with fantastical characters or mythical figures, the protagonist undergoes a form of trial or challenge to test them. After this, they will typically return to their world, but not before a final farewell meeting between the protagonist and their mentor at the tale’s conclusion. There is rarely a happy end to the Kunstmärchen and, should there be one, it typically takes place in an alternative world, heightening the protagonist’s separation from his place of origin. Such narrative elements of the traditional Kunstmärchen, as well as aesthetic and stylistic features have their late echoes in Austerlitz. Through these refashionings the novel’s melancholy is emphasized and compounded by divisions between the self and the world, the creation of false worlds, and journeys into new subterranean realms, both real and metaphorical.

Occurring on both the micro level of individual episodes in Austerlitz’s life story and the macro level of the narrative in its entirety, the reworkings of Kunstmärchen conventions are fundamentally connected to and, indeed, exert great influence on, the melancholy perception of the fundamental gulf between the present and the past articulated in Austerlitz. The narrator’s journey over the course of the novel mirrors Austerlitz’s own. At the opening of the novel, for example, the narrator’s remark that he is driven to travel ‘aus [...] mir selber nicht recht erfindlichen Gründen’ (A, p. 1), foreshadows the similar way that Austerlitz finds himself drawn on in Liverpool Street Station by forces he cannot identify. This is reminiscent of the protagonists of many Kunstmärchen, such as Christian in Tieck’s Der Runenberg (1804) or the student Anselmus in Der goldene Topf, who wander uncertainly, drawn on by something they feel but do not comprehend. Like Austerlitz, the narrator experiences a life-changing meeting in a station, namely his initial encounter with the novel’s protagonist. Later, after a visit to the Breendonk fortress, the narrator feels unwell, just as Austerlitz does upon leaving Liverpool Street Station, which echoes the protagonist’s sense of confusion or upset upon entering an alternative world in the Kunstmärchen. In Austerlitz, this metaphorical crossing of thresholds from one world to another occurs as a transition from one episode of the novel to the next, or from one character’s story to another, all the while encompassed by an overarching narrative that follows a similar structure. Where Austerlitz has guides to help him navigate his way through his false world, or deeper into the depths of the underworld of the past, such as the archivist Teresa Ambrosová, or the antiquarian bookseller Penelope Peaceful, or Marie de Verneuil, a friend from his youth with whom he has an intimate yet fraught relationship, the narrator has only Austerlitz, who is absent when not recounting his investigations of his family
history. As such, the structure of the novel as a whole mirrors the *Kunstmärchen* episodes in Austerlitz’s life story, albeit with a melancholy inflection that yields diminishing returns, as the narrator is left without a guide. The narrator returns to his world, having been submerged in Austerlitz’s story, whereas Austerlitz himself departs, leaving any sense of resolution unfulfilled. In this sense, the conclusion of *Austerlitz* both draws on and reworks traits and conventions of the *Kunstmärchen* in order to reinforce the novel’s melancholy aesthetics.

 Returning to the episode at Breendonk at the beginning of the novel will shed more light on instances of *das Märchenhafte* in *Austerlitz* and how the novel as a whole is structured following the form of the *Kunstmärchen*. Indeed, the *Kunstmärchen* form itself, as exemplified in tales such as Tieck’s *Der blonde Eckbert* (1797) and Hoffmann’s *Der Sandmann*, is highly structured with clear moments of anagnorisis for their protagonists. On Austerlitz’s recommendation, the narrator journeys to Breendonk, the military fortification that was originally built for the Belgian army at the start of the twentieth century. Initially intended as a place of refuge, the *Festung* was used as a Nazi prison camp during the German occupation of Belgium and has since become a national memorial and public museum. Surveying the structure, the narrator declares it to be ‘eine einzige monolithische Ausgeburt der Häßlichkeit und der blinden Gewalt’ (*A*, p. 35). He views the building as emblematic of modern European society, while also being indicative of the final destination of the rationalist procedures of Enlightenment thinking and progress. As the narrator later summarizes when recalling a discussion with Austerlitz in the latter’s office in Bloomsbury about the form of ‘Ordnungszwang’ (*A*, p. 52) prevalent in twentieth century Europe, and particularly expressed, according to Austerlitz, in its architecture, this leads to a ‘Zug ins Monumentale, der sich manifestierte in Gerichtshöfen und Strafanstalten, in Bahnhofs- und Börsegebäuden, in Opern- und Irrenhäusern und den nach rechtwinkligen Rastern angelegten Siedlungen für die Arbeiterchaft’ (*A*, p. 52). The unspoken end-point of this chain of modern edifices is the concentration camp – or perhaps, subsequently, the tourist attraction – where the narrator, and previously Austerlitz, stand in Breendonk.

 The narrator’s description of Breendonk fortress as ‘umgeben von einem Erdwall, einem Stacheldrahtzaun und einem breiten Wassergraben […] fast wie eine Insel im Meer’ (*A*, p. 33) is replete with references to its being shut off from the everyday reality the narrator usually occupies, as if the structure were located in an alternative world. Not only does the narrator perceive the building as monstrous, resulting from violence and ideas of progress, he also struggles to comprehend its form as he draws closer: ‘was ich jetzt vor mir hatte, das war eine niedrige, an den Außenflanken überall abgerundete, auf eine grauvolle Weise bucklig
und verbacken wirkende Masse Beton, der breite Rücken, so dachte ich mir, eines Ungetüms, das sich hier wie ein Walfisch aus den Wellen, herausgehoben hatte aus dem flandrischen Boden’ (A, p. 33). The structure is monstrous and misshapen, and does not conform to the orderly image of a star-shaped bastion that the narrator has imagined following an earlier conversation with Austerlitz. It seems unworldly to him, incomprehensible, as if it had emerged from a subterranean other place. The conventions of the Kunstmärchen are inverted here, because rather than returning to his previous reality, having been submerged in Austerlitz’s story, the narrator’s reality is now forever altered. Having drawn on Kunstmärchen traits in order to refuse resolution and emphasize the melancholy perspective in the narrative, while responding to the legacy of twentieth-century modernity, the narrator reveals again the vestigially Romantic within the modern.

Breendonk is continually presented as an unnatural place that does not belong in the world. As the narrator later admits, the place is so far beyond his understanding, ‘daß ich sie zuletzt mit keiner mir bekannten Ausformung der menschlichen Zivilisation, nicht einmal mit den stummen Relikten unserer Vor- und Frühgeschichte in irgendeinen Zusammenhang bringen konnte’ (A, p. 34). This sensation of being in an unnatural or distorted world continues to grow: ‘je länger ich meinen Blick auf sie gerichtet hielt und je öfter sie mich, wie ich spürte, zwang, ihn vor ihr zu senken, desto unbegreiflicher wurde sie mir’ (A, p. 34). The creeping sense of otherworldliness at Breendonk is not only confined to the narrator’s perception of the building itself; it is also intensified by the weather which is ‘ungewöhnlich heiß’ (A, p. 33). The narrator is furthermore perturbed by ‘das unnatürlich tiefgrüne, fast blaufarbene Gras, das auf der Insel wuchs’ (A, p. 33). Its location on an island further emphasizes the separation of the fortress from the realm of the everyday and, surrounded by what he perceives as the otherworldly strangeness of the local landscape, the narrator confesses that ‘ich scheute mich, durch das schwarze Tor in die Festung selber zu treten’ (A, p. 33). Unlike in traditional Kunstmärchen, the narrator of Austerlitz is without a guide or mentor figure to lead him across the threshold to a state of enlightenment or resolution as he moves into this otherworldly fortress. As he walks through the corridors of Breendonk the narrator makes connections to the lives of prisoners, before ending this episode with the recollection of the letter ‘A’ drawn repeatedly by Gastone Novelli upon his return to his home country after being interned in the concentration camp at Dachau (A, pp. 40–44). The narrator likens this to ‘ein lang anhaltender Schrei’ (A, p. 44), prefiguring Austerlitz’s inability to make a sound during the physical and mental collapse he later recounts. In an enactment of the gulf between past and present, the narration subsequently jumps to the narrator’s next meeting with Austerlitz, leaving his account...
of his excursion in Breendonk unfinished, in much the same way as Austerlitz later remarks, following his epiphany in the Ladies’ Waiting Room of Liverpool Street Station: ‘Ich habe keinerlei Begriff davon, wie lange ich in dem Wartesaal gestanden bin, […] noch weiß ich, auf welche Weise ich wieder nach draußen gelangt’ (A, p. 203). For Austerlitz and for the narrator, these excursions into alternative realities constitute reworked instantiations of the traditional Kunstmärchen features, which lack resolution. Moreover, the instance of threshold-crossing at Breendonk at the opening of the novel has a double significance: it is both a moment of discovery for the narrator and a mark of the beginning of his own journey as he crosses over into the alternative world of Austerlitz’s investigation into his past.

The narrator in Austerlitz is distanced from his reality, from the world of the everyday, and this is also inflected by his late historical position. His descent into the dungeon chambers of the fortress are likened to crossing a threshold into a separate world, and his perspective on these events, as he recounts them from a future date, emphasizes this separation. Once inside the fortress, ‘zwischen Portal und Ausgang’ (A, p. 38), it becomes even clearer that the narrator feels as if he has crossed from one world into another:

‘Die Erinnerung […] hat sich in mir verdunkelt im Laufe der Zeit, oder vielmehr verdunkelte sie sich, wenn man so sagen kann, schon an dem Tag, an welchem ich in der Festung war, sei es, weil ich nicht wirklich sehen wollte, was man dort sah, sei es, weil in dieser nur vom schwachen Schein weniger Lampen erhellten und für immer vom Licht der Natur getrennten Welt die Konturen der Dinge zu zerfließen schienen’.

There is a sense of dread evoked at the unknown horrors that await him in this new place in which he finds himself and, indeed, the darkness below ground acts as a metaphor for the inhumane events that occurred in the fortress in the past. The hypotaxis of the narrator’s sentences, his accumulation of clauses, and his use of the subjunctive mood all contribute to the growing sense of distance and separation, of entering a different reality or an unnatural world which, as the narrator declares, is cut off from the light and where the clear outlines of the everyday world are blurred and unclear. Even when the narrator returns to Breendonk thirty years later at the end of the novel, there is a sense of sustained irresolution. Sitting at the fortress, the unnamed narrator comes to the end of a chapter of the book he is reading, Heshel’s Kingdom by Dan Jacobson, a former colleague of Austerlitz. Significantly, however, he does not finish reading the book before he sets out on his way back to the nearby town of Mechelen, arriving ‘als es Abend wurde’ (A, p. 421). Walking away into gathering darkness, the novel ends inauspiciously with a narrator haunted by the story he has inherited and by his and
Austerlitz’s inability to reconcile their present with the past. The unfinished book, Austerlitz’s unfinished history, and the inauspicious sense that, given their distanced and late historical positions, the narrator and Austerlitz are condemned to walk towards a setting sun that keeps sinking but never quite sets stand in decidedly crepuscular contradistinction to the ‘strahlende[r] Frühsommertag’ (A, p. 9) on which Austerlitz begins. However, the various journeys undertaken over the course of Austerlitz, as well as the narrative’s structure as a descent into the underworld of Austerlitz’s story of his past, are prefigured on the very first page of the novel with the narrator’s remark that ‘als der Zug […] in die dunkle Bahnhofshalle hineinrollte, war ich ergriffen worden von einem Gefühl des Unwohlseins’ (A, p. 9). The melancholy of the novel’s lack of resolution, and the sustained gulf between present and past, are thus fully inflected by Romantic elements from the outset.

Such works bring German national literature into a modern consciousness through a co-operation of both the natural and artificial, the naïve and the self-conscious. For Michael Minden, for example, the specifically Romantic form of the Kunstmärchen is singled out as a form that ‘blurred the boundary between philological exactitude and modern Romantic creativity’. For Romantic literature such a modern affirmation of self-consciousness is a guarantee of authenticity, which draws on the notion of Romantic irony. Said irony involves a perpetual awareness of artificiality understood as being a natural property of the human mind. As a result, any authenticity in the Romantic sense is guaranteed since self-conscious awareness of literary artificiality and invention precludes any naïve sense of closure. Sebald’s final novel resists closure, conjecture replaces certainty, and playful Romantic irony becomes weighed down by the burden of the past and an elegiac melancholy. Historical difference and contingency thus emerge as essential components of Austerlitz’s reworked Romantic elements, re-enforcing the narrative’s lateness and enhancing the melancholy view of history in the novel. Both the narrator’s and the protagonist’s metaphorical crossings into other worlds demonstrate how the sense of melancholy disconnection in the novel between the narrator’s millennial present and the past stems from a sense of historical and literary lateness. Through this emerges an outlook on the traumatic and complex events of twentieth-century European history that is fundamentally imbricated with a Romantic sensibility. Via its self-reflective transformations and reconfigurations throughout German literary history, the Kunstmärchen form offers moral and political critiques of society. As Jack Zipes remarks, the German obsession with the fairy tale over the centuries is at its core ‘vital and dynamic’, offering writers and readers ‘a means

to participate in a dialogue and discourse about specific social conditions’, which ‘express a German proclivity to seek resolutions of social conflicts within art’.²⁷ Austerlitz, with its protagonist’s quest to uncover the past and its narrator’s respectful mediation of Austerlitz’s story, falls into the category of such works. Indeed, the assemblage of stories and information in Austerlitz has artistic and methodological parallels with the purported approach of the Brothers Grimm towards gathering folk tales. As Minden summarizes, ‘not only did they edit and prepare the “found” materials they collected for publication, but these materials themselves were by definition examples of spontaneous artifice: inscrutable blends of individual and collective expression’.²⁸ While the narrator’s meticulous artifice in Austerlitz can hardly be called spontaneous, exhibiting as it does something rather more akin to an artificial spontaneity in its staged coincidental encounters, a closer examination of the Kunstmärchen form and of its echoes in the novel reveals how Austerlitz’s growing awareness of living in a false reality is compounded and nuanced by reworkings of das Märchenhafte.

In spite of this growing awareness, narratorial ambiguity, even confusion, still remain essential elements in the traditional Romantic Kunstmärchen. It may never become clear, for example, whether protagonists are to be trusted, since they may be either in some way verirrt or under the influence of a form of enchantment. In Austerlitz, however, metaphorical crossings from one ‘world’ to another offer less a sense of a complete loss of reality and heightened delusion than another way of perceiving the reality occupied by the narrator and the protagonist, which is tinged with lateness and melancholy. In a key episode of Austerlitz’s story in the centre of the novel, aspects of the Kunstmärchen are reconfigured in the establishment of an alternative world or ‘falsches Universum’ (A, p. 199) where time and space are altered or undone, in order to attempt a reconciliation with history. Plagued by insomnia and distanced from society, Austerlitz has fallen into the habit of wandering London during the night and claims to be irresistibly drawn back to Liverpool Street Station. Later, he recalls for the first time in his life his arrival at this station with a Kindertransport from Europe, waiting for his new foster parents. This catalytic revelation gives him the impulse to travel to the city of Prague where he was born, and hunt for further clues as to his family’s lives and fates, but instead of resolution this leads only to his physical collapse and further melancholy separation from the events of the past. Entering the Liverpool Street Station underground, Austerlitz describes it as ‘einer der finstersten und unheimlichsten Orte von London, eine Art Eingang

²⁸ Minden, Modern German Literature, p. 39.
zur Unterwelt’ (A, p. 188). Crossing the threshold into this station leads to a strange other world and in his recollection of this hellish place, Austerlitz draws particularly on the convention of katabasis, a journey down into an underworld. Although this convention has its origins in Antiquity, it also finds itself reworked in literary fairy tales, such as in Christian’s disappearance into a mountain in *Der Runenberg*. Alan Itkin argues that Sebald repurposes katabasis not just as a classical trope for engaging with the relationship between the past and the present, but also as a means of conceptualizing history as destiny.  

Sebald’s mobilization of katabasis posits a continuity for Itkin between the era of Western expansionism, colonialism, and the Holocaust. Furthermore, Sebald’s ‘epic technique manages to bridge the gap and give new relevance to the classical tradition in the wake of the Holocaust’, as Itkin outlines intertextual connections between *Austerlitz* and Homer’s *Odyssey*.  

Here, however, Austerlitz’s katabatic entry into the alternative world in Liverpool Street Station is understood as resonating with the Germanic tradition of the *Kunstmärchen*, as well as with Adorno’s aforementioned theorization of a false world. This reading of a Romantic threshold-crossing is borne out by the way the laws of time and space appear altered in *Austerlitz*. Such distortions of space, and of Austerlitz’s own perspective, suggest a transition into an alternative world as the moment of katabasis occurs in the novel.  

Consistent with the form of the *Kunstmärchen*, the protagonist undertakes this journey into what appears to be another realm, following his unconscious desire, which will lead to a transformative confrontation with the fantastical. In the case of *Austerlitz*, this is the protagonist’s shocking and epiphanic moment of self-knowledge through the sudden recollection of himself as a young boy with his foster parents that he later experiences upon coming back to the Ladies’ Waiting Room which is no longer in use (A, pp. 200–203). Having entered the underworld of the station, Austerlitz’s katabasis has already begun, but this sense of otherworldliness intensifies as he draws closer to the Waiting Room where his as-yet-unremembered past awaits him. Having followed the enigmatic figure of a station cleaner (A,
p. 196), he stands before the door and remarks, ‘Ich zögerte, an die Schwingtür heranzutreten, aber kaum hatte ich meine Hand auf den Messinggriff gelegt, da trat ich schon, durch einen im Inneren gegen die Zugluft aufgehängten Filzvorgang, in den offenbar vor Jahren bereits außer Gebrauch geratenen Saal’ (A, p. 197). Drawing on the convention of Schwellenüberschreitung to articulate his exploration of the past, Austerlitz not only evokes the idea of crossing into another world, but also recalls the narrative’s sense of historical lateness, since the room beyond the curtain has fallen into disuse. Time, indeed, in this waiting room seems to no longer function as in the everyday world, as Austerlitz observes: ‘es mögen Minuten oder Stunden vergangen sein, während derer ich, ohne mich von der Stelle rühren zu können, in dem, wie es mir schien, ungeheuer weit hinaufgehenden Saal gestanden bin’ (A, p. 197). The vertiginous height of the ceiling further emphasizes the sense of lateness of the narrative here, since it metaphorically recalls the distant historical position from which the novel is written at the end of the twentieth century. Not only is the ceiling dizzyingly high, it is ‘ungeheuer’ – monstrously so – as if of another world. The space he has entered appears disorienting for Austerlitz, and it appears to him as if the reality in which he has now found himself is becoming increasingly unreal. He recalls ‘das eisgraue, mondscheinartige Licht, das durch einen unter der Deckenwölbung verlaufenden Gaden drag und einem Netz oder einem schütteren, stellenweise ausgefransten Gewebe gleich über mir hing’ (A, pp. 197–198), which adds to the mystical otherworldly atmosphere of the waiting room. When Austerlitz’s moment of epiphany finally arrives, he not only seems to stand outside of everyday reality, but also outside of history:


In the narrator’s account, Austerlitz, dazzled by his otherworldly environs, imagines himself in a form of endgame, the last confrontation of his life. This is to be played out in the station waiting room, the site of his shocking epiphanic realization, which he continues to perceive in unworldly terms.

In this episode, the reworking of the Kunstmärchen trope of crossing from one world into another heightens the novel’s sense of melancholy not only via the protagonist’s entry into a perceived alternative reality, along with his growing understanding of the falsity of his own. His interactions with the fantastical denizens of the underground Gegenwelt in which he finds himself add to the melancholy and the pathos of his katabatic journey. Crossings from one
world into another occur not only in one direction in Liverpool Street Station, however. As Austerlitz is drawn into the underworld of the station concourse, the passengers milling around him are imagined as ghosts of the dead from the past rising up towards him. He describes how ‘in dieser ewigen Düsternis, die erfüllt war von einem erstickten Stimmengewirr, einem leise Gescharre und Getrappel, bewegten sich die […] ungezählten Menschen in Strömen’ (A, p. 189). Connecting these milling crowds of passers-by with a feeling of being unreconciled with the passing of time, he remarks how he felt ‘dieses andauernde Ziehen in mir, eine Art Herzweh, das, wie ich zu ahnen began, verursacht wurde von dem Sog der verflossenen Zeit’ (A, p. 190). These crowds of people are brought together as one anonymous mass, gathering at the entrance to this other world as Austerlitz enters, ascending as he descends, attempting to acquire some secret knowledge just as he is. It is not just the protagonist of this Kunstmärchen who is seeking resolution, however. This becomes clearer as Austerlitz progresses on his journey, observing ‘Stege und Zugbrücken, die die tiefsten Abgründe überquerten und auf denen winzige Figuren sich drängten, Gefangene, so dachte ich mir, sagte Austerlitz, die einen Ausweg suchten aus diesem Verlies’ (A, p. 198). Yet there is no escape for these ghosts of the past, and no reconciliation with his own story for Austerlitz, only the shock discovery of the buried memory of his arrival in London and his resultant collapse. It is not possible, Austerlitz comes to realize, for him or for the ghosts of the dead to bridge the gulf of time and be reconciled with one another. Although threshold-crossing is attempted in both directions here, the Kunstmärchen form is reworked and no resolution is reached for either party, while time continues to pass by.

The moment of anagnorisis in the Ladies’ Waiting Room of Liverpool Street station constitutes a key turning point in Austerlitz’s life, a critical discovery at the centre of the novel which acts as confirmation of his growing awareness of living in a false world. Indeed, as he states earlier when entering the station, he feels ‘wie ein Schauspieler […], der auf die Bühne hinaustritt und im Augenblick des Hinaustretens das von ihm auswendig Gelernte mitsamt der Rolle, die er so oft gespielt hat, unwiderruflich und restloß vergißt’ (A, p. 197). It is only by crossing the threshold into the alternative reality, or false world, of the waiting room that he is able to realize that his everyday life is one in which he simply plays a role. As he steps on to the metaphorical stage within this new Gegenwelt in Liverpool Street Station, he recognizes the performative artificiality of his wanderings. The new revelations and perspectives he has on his life occur, he now realizes, ‘wie das nur in einem derartigen falschen Universum möglich war’ (A, p. 199). Crucially, it is through the reconfiguration of the Kunstmärchen in the narrative and in particular the convention of crossing out of the everyday world into an
alternative reality, that Austerlitz’s own reality is revealed to be false. He is able to undergo a sense of coming to consciousness about the falseness of his reality through a reworking of the Kunstmärchen convention of entering another universe, an imagined false world. For Austerlitz, encountering the dead only leads to a sense of melancholy dispossession and lack of reconciliation with the past as opposed to any reconciliation with or ownership of the ghosts of history. Although his journey brings him some insights into the circumstances of his flight from Europe as a child, along with a sense of commonality with the ghosts of the dead, he is nevertheless left with a sense of melancholy incompleteness.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the station building in which this metaphorical crossing into another world takes place is itself a monument to Enlightenment progress, a relic of the era of European colonialism and imperialism. The industrialization required to construct what Austerlitz perceives as a hellish underworld of modernity entailed massive destruction of human habitation, the remains of whose victims lie beneath the station’s foundations, as Austerlitz recounts (A, p. 192–195). The skeletons of the corpses of Bedlam patients that have been unearthed in the course of an archaeological dig in the station undermine the myth of historical progress represented by the station, signifying those left behind by the project of modernity. Furthermore, this instance of anagnorisis in the station proves not to be the endgame for Austerlitz, since he continues to exist beyond what is seemingly acceptable or natural, which reinforces the sense of melancholy lateness in the narrative. In response to this imagined endgame, however, the narrative draws implicit links to Romantic sensibilities. The station’s archaeological strata reveal the ravages of modernity, encapsulating the negative dialectic of the Enlightenment, whereby the notion of progress contains already within it the seeds of destruction and devastation.32 Arriving in Prague later in the novel, Austerlitz’s perception of living in a false world has grown, and the crossing of borders between worlds appears to occur everywhere he goes, ‘als gäbe es überhaupt keine Zeit, sondern nur verschiedene, nach einer höheren Stereometrie ineinander verschachtelte Räume, zwischen denen die Lebendigen und die Toten, je nachdem es ihnen zumute ist, hin und her gehen können’ (A, p. 269). Even when, after further investigation, he discovers the identity of his parents, their ultimate fates remain unknown. Narrative melancholy is never resolved, only extended, with the past and the present remaining separated while reworkings of elements of the Romantic fairy tale play a crucial role

32 This is a very brief and slightly crude rehearsal of Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument in their work on the ‘dialectic of Enlightenment’. For the original argument, see Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, ‘Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente’, in Max Horkheimer, Gesammelte Schriften: Band 5 – ‘Dialektik der Aufklärung’ und Schriften 1940-1950, ed. by Alfred Schmidt and Gunzeln Schmidt Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1987).
in determining the denial of closure or reconciliation in Sebald’s final novel. *Austerlitz* thus emerges as a late and melancholy iteration of the *Kunstmärchen* for the end of the twentieth century and the turn of the twenty-first, which has, moreover, become older with the passing of time.

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