

# 'I COULDN'T IMAGINE ANY WORLD OUTSIDE WALES': THE PLACE OF WALES AND WELSH CALVINIST METHODISM IN SEBALD'S EUROPEAN STORY

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Abstract: This essay explores the vital place of Wales, and Welsh Calvinist Methodism, in Sebald's *Austerlitz*. I argue that to an extraordinary extent Wales, in terms of both a landscape and a site of childhood events, functions as a marker and a point of comparison which echoes during the rest of what unfolds. I also suggest that some of the marks of Welsh Calvinism – such as providentialism, predestination, and fatalism – lie behind the narrative thrust of the novel, as events unfold which happen in ways which Austerlitz cannot easily explain. In this reading, Calvinism becomes one of the keys to the narrative structure of the book and Austerlitz's feeling that he is one the elect resonates with both a Calvinist theology and an Israelite sense of identity. The essay ends by suggesting that the care with which the 'Welsh' section of Sebald's book is constructed reveals Sebald's own 'love affair' with the Welsh landscape. It is worth at least speculating that during his time as a lector in German at The University of Manchester, from 1966 to 1970, Sebald took time to explore the nearby spectacular landscape of Snowdonia which later featured so centrally in his breathtaking novel.

What I want to do in this short essay is to say something about the vital place of Wales, and Welsh Calvinist Methodism, in Sebald's European novel, *Austerlitz*. The fact that Dafydd Elias, as Jacques Austerlitz thought himself to be until nearly the age of 16, was fostered in 1939, aged 4 and a half, by a childless Welsh Calvinist minister, Emyr Elias, and his wife Gwendolyn, who lived in a house in the hills just outside the small Welsh town of Bala (and who had hoped eventually to adopt him), was perhaps not that unusual. Wales was one of the main destinations for children evacuated from London and the Home Counties during World War 2, as well as being regarded as a safe haven for young refugees from further afield in Europe, including young Jewish boys like the young Austerlitz who found themselves there because of the *Kindertransport*.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, what I want to foreground is the way in which Wales, and Welsh Calvinist Methodism, as the context for Austerlitz's formative upbringing and earliest memories, become unusual reference points for his unfolding narrative. I will suggest that, to an extraordinary extent, Wales, both in terms of it as a landscape (and often Sebald / Austerlitz is quite specific in his reference to particular locations), and as a site of childhood events and recollections, functions as a marker, a point of comparison, and a ground bass, which echoes, and is frequently recounted, during the rest of what occurs, to a degree which may well be unique in twentieth-century European literature.

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<sup>2</sup> V. K. Fast, *Children's Exodus. A History of the Kindertransport, 1938–1948* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), 56, 164. C.W.E. Bigsby, *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: the chain of memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 69, recounts how Austerlitz was inspired by Sebald watching a Channel 4 documentary in 2000 about Susie Bechhofer who had been sent to Wales on the *Kindertransport*. In this essay, references to the text are from the 2001 Penguin edition.

Literary critics and cultural historians routinely refer to *Austerlitz* as a 'European' novel, as a book dealing with the trauma of war, and as a study of the workings of the memory.<sup>3</sup> For all these aspects, they highlight, among other things, the broad geographical coverage of the novel, ranging from London to Paris, Brussels, Germany and Central Europe, which not only justifies the designation 'European', but is also related to the themes of war and memory. Oddly, the part played by Wales in any of these features has rarely been emphasised, despite the fact that Wales is the location for more than forty pages of narrative near the start of the novel, and it is the place where the young Austerlitz spends his war-time years. Wales is also a recurring trope in Austerlitz's memory. For example, when in hospital in London towards the end of the novel (325), Austerlitz thinks a great deal about the minister in the asylum in the Welsh town of Denbigh, where he died after a mental breakdown after Gwendolyn's death. As Austerlitz travels through the Rhineland, the sight of the Mäuseturm makes him think of Lake Vyrnwy (319), not far from Bala, and while watching the Bastiani Travelling Circus just outside the Gare d'Austerlitz, among the musical strains he seems to hear is 'a long forgotten Welsh hymn' (383). However, the way in which Wales reverberates throughout the text, and by which Wales itself becomes part of this wide-ranging European novel – so that for Austerlitz it is absolutely natural to compare aspects of Welsh landscape and culture with European landscape and culture – is offset by the fact that Austerlitz later recalls that as a child growing up in wartime Wales, there was no wireless or newspapers in the manse, and the minister and his wife never mentioned the war, leading him to remember that at the time: 'I couldn't imagine any world outside Wales' (78). So there are at least two Waleses in the novel: an enclosed inward-looking Wales and a Wales which plays a part on a European stage.

If the significance of Wales within the text has not been emphasised enough by critics, even more intriguingly from the point of view of a historian of Christianity, the religious dimension of the novel has attracted hardly any comment. Perhaps this is because Austerlitz himself remarks that he has never felt that he 'belonged to a ... religious confession' (177) and so critics have not given much concern to the ways in which religion is portrayed and operates in his story. But this lack of attention to the role of religion in the novel is surprising since the Wales of Austerlitz's childhood, as he remembers it up until the age of eleven, is recollected as being entirely dominated by the Calvinism of his foster parents, making it a complete totality within itself, unaware of the world beyond it, and where the only frame of reference and point of comparison is the Bible. In a graphic moment of bibliocentrism, after identifying with some of the heroes of the Old Testament, Austerlitz remembered thinking that the picture of the Sinai desert, where the Israelites camped during the Exodus, in his Welsh children's bible (and from which he learnt the Welsh language more successfully than from any other source) looked just like the part of Wales where he grew up (77). As he recollected it, Austerlitz actually felt closer to the people in the bible illustration than to what he recalled as the increasingly strange-seeming world in which he lived, and he was particularly drawn to what was going on inside the tent in the middle of the picture with the

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<sup>3</sup> J.J. Long, *W.G. Sebald: Image, archive, modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 151; Scott D. Denham and Mark Richard McCulloch, *W.G. Sebald: history, memory, trauma* (Berlin: W.G. Gruyter, 2006), 4, 109, 133, 234, 236, 24–244, 259; R. Boyers, *The Dictator's Dictation: the politics and novels and novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 200; C. Parry, 'Constructing European Identities in Fiction', in Theo D'haen and Iannis Goerlandt, eds, *Literature for Europe?* (New York: Editions Rodopi, 2009), 279, 280, 289, 291, 292, 295.

cloud of white smoke. This is presumably meant to be a representation of the Jewish tabernacle, although it is not clear whether the white smoke/cloud is meant to signify the burning of incense in the tabernacle or the white cloud God sent to guide the Israelites through the desert. And, from the point of view of the novel more generally, why was the Calvinist-educated young Austerlitz so fascinated by the tabernacle? It may be that he had imbued a Calvinist sense of election and apprehended a connection between this and the Israelite sense of themselves as the chosen people of God but, whatever the precise meaning, in a more general sense it surely underlines the young Austerlitz's self-understanding in purely biblical terms. Only after the end of the war, when he broke his parents' ban on going to the cinema, and when he was sent to a boarding school in Oswestry – which Austerlitz saw as a liberation – did this bibliocentric worldview collapse, and he encountered books other than the Bible, such as geography, history, travel writing and biography (genres and forms which, of course, are used by Sebald within his text). To some extent, then, the entire novel could be read, in almost conventional Enlightenment terms, as the gradual withdrawal of the power and authority of the Bible as it was challenged and replaced by other texts and authorities based on this-worldly and verifiable evidence and experience. In this, the trajectory of the novel as a whole could be envisaged as a move away from the enclosed world of Wales and Welsh Methodism and into a broader European frame of reference.

Nonetheless, neither Wales nor the biblical and religious models and ways of thinking disappear from the text. As I have already noted, Wales continues as a reference point throughout the novel. Additionally, some of the dominant marks of (Welsh) Calvinism – such as providentialism, predestination, and fatalism – lie behind the narrative thrust of the novel as a whole, in that events continue to unfold and happen in ways which Austerlitz cannot easily explain. Calvinism, it could be argued, is one of the keys to the narrative structure of the entire book. Austerlitz himself, early on his story, accounts for the fact that he did not know who he really was on 'an agency greater than or superior to my own capacity for thought, which circumspectly directs operations somewhere in my brain, [which] has always preserved me from my own secret, ... systematically preventing me from drawing the obvious conclusions' (60). There are clear intimations here of a Calvinist God, where the emphasis is on the contrast between divine intelligence and human limitations, and there is something almost like a sense of predestination, since Austerlitz considers he is being directed by an external force.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, Austerlitz admits, in Calvinist fashion, to apprehending that he was one of the elect: 'all that school year I felt as if I had been chosen, and although, as I also know, such a belief in no way matched my uncertain status, I have held fast to it almost my whole life' (103). The contrast he perceived between his personal sense of election and his own unsure position in the world is precisely, according to some historians, what may have attracted certain individuals and social groups to Calvinism in certain periods and places in history, although this is also highly debated, and increasingly historians are wary of making such sweeping connections.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the emphasis on

<sup>4</sup> For an insider-view of Calvinism, see D. N. Steele and C. C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: defined, defended, documented* (Phillipsburg NJ: The Presbyterian Reformed Publishing Company, 1963). These core points have frequently been summarised (not without controversy) under the acronym TULIP, standing for Total depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints. For a modern historian's take on Calvinists and their social history, see P. Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: a social history of Calvinism* (New Haven, Conn: Yale, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> See the account of the issue in Benedict, *Christ's Churches*.

being one of the chosen, but of also being apart from the world, resonates with both a Calvinist sense of being one of the elect but also with an Israelite sense of identity and of being a member of a separate and 'chosen people'.<sup>6</sup>

Austerlitz's memories of his Welsh childhood, and the centrality of religion in it, are notable on a number of accounts. First is the sense of oppression in the unhappy house with its locked rooms, and never-opened windows where he felt 'some kind of captivity', suggesting a feeling of entrapment and suffocation in a confined, closed, and constricted system. These are precisely the points which some critics of Calvinism have made of it since the sixteenth century. Is there also some underlying reference here to the Babylonian captivity of the Jewish people? The minister's wife always seemed to him to be cleaning the house – surely a reference to the protestant / Calvinist work ethic – although she shows none of that pride in conspicuous consumption, or the sense of comfortable calm and order, and inner warmth, suggested to Simon Schama in his analysis of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of Calvinist house interiors.<sup>7</sup> Instead the house was 'cold and silent' (62). The minister himself spent four days a week – in Calvinist manner – preparing his Sunday sermon in his study.<sup>8</sup> Most of the time he seemed in a black mood, until the time came to deliver the sermon, when he became transformed – almost a changed person – and after which he became nearly jovial. The sermon itself invariably dwelt on the Last Judgement, frequently leaving, Austerlitz reminisced, some of the congregation 'as white as a sheet' (64).

Second, Austerlitz recalled that Calvinist eschatology was entrenched in his young mind not so much in any specific doctrine he had imbibed from his religious education but in the *chiaroscuro* – the light and shade – of the minister's moods, and even more in the changing gloom and brightness of the mountainous Welsh landscape where dark valleys could suddenly be covered in sunlight, in what might be termed a 'biblical sky'. Moreover, it was the sight of the furnaces near a small town in south Wales, and the view from the hotel in which he and the minister were staying, which resulted in the minister giving a sermon the next morning on the wrath of God, petrifying the congregation as he warned of the devastation which would occur to the homes of people who refrained from keeping the Sabbath holy. Austerlitz remembered the bomb that fell that afternoon, destroying homes and killing people in their Sunday best, the dead being, as the minister would judge, and the young Austerlitz had already internalised, sinners. Significantly, neither the minister nor the young Austerlitz make any reference to the bomb as an instrument of war, rather they viewed it as an instrument of divine punishment. All this meant that the young Austerlitz was left with an Old Testament sense of retribution, punishment and guilt.

As I have already indicated, memories of his childhood in Wales continued throughout the rest of Austerlitz's life. There were only two sorts of material objects Austerlitz

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<sup>6</sup> For some of the ways in which British Protestants in earlier centuries had understood themselves as a 'chosen people', see P. Collinson, 'The Protestant Nation' in *The Birthpangs of Protestant England. Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 1–27. Tony Claydon and Ian McBride have noted a tension between the Reformed theology's emphasis on the salvation of the *individual* and the idea of an 'elect nation': see their 'The trials of the chosen people: recent interpretations of Protestantism and national identity in Britain and Ireland', in T. Claydon and I. McBride, eds., *Protestantism and National Identity. Britain and Ireland, c. 1650–c. 1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3–32.

<sup>7</sup> S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> For Calvinist sermon preparation, see B. Jackson, "'As a musician would his violin": the oratory of the Great Basin prophets' in R. H. Ellison, ed., *A New History of the Sermon: the nineteenth century* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 498.

remembered in the Welsh manse, and which he kept after the minister's death, and both had links, either obvious or more subtly, to religion. The first and overtly religious document was the *Calendar of Sundays and Church Festivals from 1928 to 1946* published by the Calvinistic Methodist Church of Wales. In this the minister had recorded the places where he preached and on which biblical text, and this was a perpetual reminder to Austerlitz of the minister's hell-fire preaching. This is not a fictional document and I am sure that Sebald actually saw a copy, although I have been unable to locate one.

The other possessions were photographs of the old village of Llanwyddn, which had been submerged by the creation of Lake Vyrnwy in 1888 to provide water for Liverpool.<sup>9</sup> This had been the home village of the minister whose own father had been sub post-master there. Sebald used 'real' photographs in the text: a web-search comes up with several etchings of the old village which are just like the ones he used. The combination of 'fiction' and 'fact' is one of the hallmarks of Sebald's writings and is addressed elsewhere in this collection. Indeed the very fact that the 'Welsh' section of the story is so well illustrated seems to confirm its central position within the novel. The flooding of the village – along with the loss of other villages in Wales and the Lake District in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to make space for reservoirs to provide water for the growing conurbations of Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham – is an extreme example of the ways in which modernity altered the rural landscape. In the case of Llanwyddn (and this is not mentioned in the text), the 'drowning of the village' entailed literally digging up bodies from the graves in the old churchyard and re-burying them in the new village (which seems to mark a literal return of the dead, to echo Carole Angier's essay). In the novel, the flooded village stands for another world, being famous for the football matches that had taken place on the green (and hearing the minister talking about this was the only time Austerlitz remembered him showing warm human emotions). The young Austerlitz imagines the minister as being the only one who was saved from the flood; but he thinks of the other inhabitants still living there literally underwater. This kind of thought leads him to recall Evan the cobbler (Austerlitz calls him a 'visionary' (81)) who had a radically different worldview from that of the judgemental minister, where death was associated with everlasting punishment, and instead the cobbler believed that 'only a piece of silk separates us from the next world' (76), suggestive perhaps of a shadowy, liminal and nearly permeable state between the living and the dead. Evan claimed that he could sometimes see dead people who had been brought back to life and that he could spot them by the fact that they were shorter than most people and their faces seemed to blur at the edges, as if they were still half connected to the world of the dead. If I were to push this a little – and Sebald does not himself make the connection in the text, although he was himself raised a Catholic – Evan's religious world view has some resonances with a Catholic worldview, of praying to saints for intervention, and for souls in purgatory, where the emphasis is on the endless possibility of a connection with, rather than a separation from, the next world.<sup>10</sup> This is another Wales, a Wales of folklore and spirits, which comes to

<sup>9</sup> H. R. Jones, *Lake Vyrnwy: the history of a valley and a submerged village* (Liverpool: D. Marples, 1892).

<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that although Sebald often denounced organised religion, he could not reject Catholicism totally: L. Patt, *Searching for Sebald. Photography after Sebald* (Los Angeles, Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), 67. Patt suggests he was an embodiment of the phrase: 'There is no such thing as a Lapsed Catholic'. For a vivid evocation of the Catholic world view see E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale, 1992).

be a kind of counterpoint to the Calvinist worldview of Austerlitz's childhood.<sup>11</sup> It is also no coincidence that it is Evan's son who is the projectionist in Bala cinema, and who is seen as a representative of imagination and freeing the mind after the straightjacket of Calvinism. This Wales of the imagination perhaps resonates more readily with the world of Austerlitz's birth parents; he was, after all, named 'Jacques' after Offenbach, and his surname was, he discovers, the real surname of Fred Astaire.

If critics would do well to attend to make more of the significance of Wales within this European novel, it is tempting to conclude by speculating why, and how, Sebald was so fascinated by Wales. The fact that one of his prototypes for Austerlitz, Susie Bechhofer, had been sent to Wales on the *Kindertransport* presumably explains why Wales features at all, and its place at the start of the novel. But the precision with which the Welsh landscape is described surely indicates a deeper, more personal engagement with aspects of Welsh geography and culture than this fact can by itself explain. It is surely not reading too much into the narrative to suggest that the care with which the 'Welsh' section of Sebald's book is constructed reveals Sebald's own 'love affair' with the Welsh landscape. It is worth at least considering that, during his time as a lector in German at the Victoria University of Manchester from 1966 to 1970, Sebald took time away from his teaching duties to explore Snowdonia and the Welsh mountains which were only a little over two hours away from the city in which he worked and lived, a city which is itself the subject of another essay in this collection.

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<sup>11</sup> R. Gwyndaf, *Welsh Folk Tales* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1999); Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) examines, among other things, the place of holy wells in post Reformation Wales.