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Between the "Roman-Essay" and the "Essay-Roman": Jean Améry's *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch* and W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

Introduction

Recently, literary critics have been applying labels such as "novel-essay/essay-novel", "essayistic novel", "novelistic essay", and "narrative essay" to emerging forms of contemporary literature which combine storytelling techniques with philosophical reflections and cut across the generic boundaries between the novel and the essay.[1] To better study the development of such forms, this article will consider two Germanophone texts, *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch. Roman-Essay* [*Lefeu or the Demolition: Novel-essay*] (1974) by Jean Améry and *Austerlitz* (2001) by W. G. Sebald.[2] As we will seek to demonstrate, both works can be considered as representative of two different, even opposing, ways of understanding the relationship between the novel and the essay in two specific historical moments.[3]

Jean Améry, after a long career as an essayist, decided to try his hand at a *Roman-Essay*, following a then recent trend of critical studies on concepts such as *Essayismus*, the *essayisticher Roman*, and the *Roman-Essay/Essay-Roman*.[4] These studies had examined novels such as Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (1930 – 1942), Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924) and *Doctor Faustus* (1947), and Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers* (1930 – 1932).

1 For a general discussion of these and other similar labels, also in relation to other genres of contemporary literature (autofiction, biofiction) see Rizzante (2012), Palumbo Mosca (2014), Ivanovic (2017), Nünning/Scherr (2018), Marchese (2018) and (2019), Gallerani (2019), Aubry – Morici (2021), and Cavalloro (2021).

2 *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch* was never translated into English. Some translations used here are based partly on those given by Markus Zisselsberger in his article on *Lefeu* (Zisselsberger 2011). Unless otherwise indicated, the translations given here of German or Italian texts are ours.

3 Both authors, despite spending their entire lives far from their countries of origin, continued to reckon with the German and Austrian literary world.

4 See Berger (1964, 127 – 136), Haas (1966, 127 – 147), Rohner (1966, 565 – 593), Bachmann (1969, 131 – 192), and Frisé ([1960]1987). As Ivonn Kappel (2009, 105 – 129) has pointed out, *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch* is one of the first texts to use the subtitle "Roman – Essay" together with *Die Reise The Trip* (1977) by Bernward Vesper.

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More recent scholars have identified such texts as the principal exponents of the novel-essay, a genre defined by the integration of narration and reflection. Stefano Ercolino wrote that the novel-essay "presents the organic fusion of two distinct forms, the novel and the essay" which "reached its highest formal complexity in Austria and Germany, during the interwar period".[5] By taking on this literary form at a time when it had already gained solidity, Améry sought to resist contemporary experiments in the German *Neue Literatur* and the French *Nouveau Roman*.[6] His decision to undertake a novel as an essayist in that specific period is also significant, since his writing appeared at the threshold of postmodernism, when the great period of essay writing was already beginning to wane in Europe.[7]

Conversely, *Austerlitz* emerged within a literary context which, despite its variety of forms, was rooted in the dense intertwining of narration and reflection and in the combination of factual and fictional elements. This work took its inspiration particularly from the pioneering models of documentary literature in post-war Germany, namely Alexander Kluge and Walter Kempowski, who were faced with the necessity of "coming to terms with the past" [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*], meaning Nazism.[8] Sebald's text can thus be associated with those genres of contemporary literature that distanced themselves from the novel without abandoning narration itself, such as the personal essay, the narrative essay, and historical non-fiction.[9] In *Reality Hunger*, David Shields reinforced this tendency towards the essayification of the novel by including Sebald among the contemporary writers who made "a necessary postmodernist return to the roots of the novel as an essentially Creole form, in which 'nonfiction' material is ordered, shaped, and imagined as 'fiction'".[10] According to Donnarumma,[11]

5 Ercolino 2014, XV. Recent studies addressing the novel – essay in similar terms also include Mazzoni (2011, 313–338), Graziano (2013), Marchese (2018), and Cavalloro (2021).

6 For an overview of the *Neue Literatur* in the German literary context and its significance for *Lefeu*, see Zisselsberger (2011, 156–160). For an interpretation of the "Roman – Essay" in contrast to the *Nouveau Roman*, see Kappel (2009, 77–129).

7 As Paolo Zanotti (2011, 21–24) has pointed out, the 1960s correspond to one of the most flourishing periods for the essay in Europe, starting with the success of this genre in France. For a historical overview of the essay as a genre, see Schärf (1999), Macé (2006), and Zima (2012).

8 Wolff 2014, 45.

9 Lorenzo Marchese (2018, 154) and (2019, 83–84) defined the narrative essay as a nonfictional first – person text in which narration and reflection alternate. On this topic, see also Palumbo Mosca (2014, 187–252).

10 Shields 2010, 14.

11 Donnarumma 2014, 152.

Sebald's writing is even "hypermodern" [*ipermoderno*], and one of the first attempts to overcome postmodernism.

Lefeu and *Austerlitz* can thus be placed at the limits of a literary tendency which privileges the novel in its most exuberant forms of fictionality. In the pages below, we shall discuss how the two authors use symmetrical and contrasting techniques to integrate narration and reflection in their texts; where Améry dissimulates the essay in the context of the crisis of this genre, Sebald dissimulates the novel in the period of its essayification.

1 Jean Améry's "Roman-Essay": Dissimulating the Essay

In 1974, Jean Améry published his first work of fiction: *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch. Roman-Essay* [*Lefeu or the Demolition: Novel-essay*]. By that point, Améry could boast of a long career as a journalist and essayist; he was well-known especially for a collection of autobiographical essays, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (1966), which focused on his experience in Nazi concentration camps. His return to fiction, forty years after a first aborted attempt at a novel,[12] arose above all from a desire to distance himself from the image that had been established and achieve public and critical recognition as a novelist.[13] Indeed, the novel-essay represented the most appropriate form for uniting his "desire to tell a story" [*Wunsch zu erzählen*] with a drive "to climb to a higher level of reflection, to reach a critical precision of a new order" [*eine höhere Reflexionsebene zu erklimmen, kritische Präzision einer neuen Ordnung zu erreichen*], as Améry explains in the self-critical commentary that makes up the last chapter of *Lefeu*[14]. As he claims, the project to write a "novel-essay or essay-novel" [*Roman-Essay* oder *Essay-Roman*] was also inspired by the principal exponents of the novel-essay, identified by contemporary critics

12 This first attempt at a novel, *Die Schiffbrüchigen* [*The Shipwrecked*], dates to the 1930s; it remained unpublished until the publication of Améry's *opera omnia*, for which, see Améry (2007a).

13 In a 1971 letter to his friend Ernst Mayer, Améry had already confessed that he was planning to write "a novel – essay or essay – novel", as he realised that he "was not destined to be a pure thinker but rather a thinking storyteller [*denkenden Erzähler*]" (Améry, 2007d, 384; translation by Zisselsberger 2011, 152). See also Heidelberger – Leonard (2007, 668).

14 Améry 2007c, 484.

with Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus*, and Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*.[15]

Despite having tried his hand at a work of fiction, Améry continued to prioritise the essay over the novel and authorial discourse over fiction, unlike his models. We can deduce the importance that Améry attributes to the essay from his terminology. Although the two terms "Roman-Essay" and "Essay-Roman" are typically used as synonyms, Améry chose to identify his work with the former, which would be more properly translated with the expression "novelistic essay".[16] By contrast, he used the second term "Essay-Roman" (also translatable as "essayistic novel") to refer to the earlier masterpieces of modernism.

Another element to consider is the relationship between plot and reflective digressions. The overturning of the hierarchical relationship between these two elements is one of the principal results of the "essayistic turn" which, according to Mazzoni, led to the emergence of the novel-essay between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth[17]. As Ercolino has claimed, "the irruption of the essay into the novel powerfully challenged the reasons of the plot".[18] Such a situation also manifests in Améry's "Roman-Essay"; however, his point of departure, as well as that to which he attributes greater importance, remains the essay, again in contrast to his literary models. As explained by Améry in the outline of his project "Konzept zu einem Roman-Essay", he sought to recount the "story of the painter Lefeu", a character inspired by his friend the painter Erich Schmid, by combining "essayistic and narrative elements". Yet, in opposition to the events of the plot, he also wanted to afford "clear predominance" [*klares Übergewicht*] to "essayistic reflection", the latter assuming the task of "driving" the whole work.[19]

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15 See Améry 2007c, 482, 484–485.

16 In the term "Roman – Essay", the word "Essay" occupies a position of priority from a grammatical point of view and is the element that confers meaning to the entire locution, since, in German, the head of a compound word is usually placed at the end of the sequence (Nurmi – Schomers 2005, 146, no. 3). Guido Mattia Gallerani (2019, 146–153) also uses the term "novelistic essay" for Améry's later "Roman – Essay" *Charles Bovary, Country Doctor: A Portrait of a Simple Man* (1978), in which the author camouflages a work of criticism about Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as a work of fictional rewriting.

17 Mazzoni 2011, 336.

18 He continues: "Resoundingly stunting the flux of narration, the introduction of a non – narrative, atemporal form (the essay), into a narrative and temporal one (the novel) constituted a formal exorcism of the new pressure of historical time". (Ercolino 2014, 40; see also: Graziano 2013, 42)

19 Améry 2007b, 649; translations based on Zisselsberger 2011, 154.

The work is thus structurally organised into "essay units" [*Einzelessays*][20], in which the philosophical reflections of the "thinking painter" [*denkender Maler*][21] Lefeu – in the form of a monologue or dialogue with other characters – prevail over the effective development of the story, even though they are tightly connected to the plot.[22] The last two chapters, on the other hand, are dedicated solely to the relevant narrative event and its consequences, that is, the moment of epiphany in which Lefeu remembers his German origins (his real name is Feuermann) and recalls the murder of his parents in the Nazi camps.

As Améry[23] himself later recognised, this integration of essay and novel is not easily digestible, insofar as the narrative and the reflections are continuously immersed in Lefeu's monologues, or more rarely, in those of other characters. Additional aspects that make it difficult for the reader to identify the speaker are the absence of any typographical markers for direct discourse, *verba dicendi*, or even words of self-consciousness, and the almost total disappearance of the narrator's participation in the narrative. Such textual complexities provoked negative responses from Améry's contemporary critics and likely represent the reason for the work's continued lack of success.[24] Even recent scholars have complained about the Austrian author's inability to satisfy the basic conventions of the novel form. Susan Nurmi-Schomers, for instance, has gone so far as to define *Lefeu* as an imperfect "attempt at a novel" [*Romanversuch*].[25]

Nonetheless, Améry's work can be understood as the product of two opposing pressures. The priority of the essay corresponds to an opposing attempt to technically dissimulate the essay itself, emphasising those aspects of the novel-essay that seem more typical of fiction, such as the frequent recourse to the protagonist's quoted or narrated monologue. A clear indication of this is represented by Améry's conception of character, which he outlined in the previously mentioned "Konzept":

> Since the characters, including Lefeu himself, are anything but characters in the usual sense (i. e. they are not characterized by external features, do not speak their own languag-

20 Améry 2007b, 652.

21 Améry 2007c, 345.

22 The titles of the first four chapters refer to the topics addressed in the reflections: I. "Verfall" [*Decay*]; II. "Erfolg" [*Success*]; III. "Die Wörter und die Dinge" [*Words and Things*]; IV. "Die Jasager, der Neinsager" [*The Yea – sayers, the Nay – sayer*].

23 Améry 2007b, 496 – 497.

24 Marcel Reich – Ranicki's disparaging review was particularly noteworthy, as the critic complained of a lack of clarity in the text's literary representation (Reich – Ranicki, 1974). For the reception of the work, see Heidelberger – Leonard (2007), and Kappel (2009, 18 – 48).

25 Nurmi – Schomers 2005, 145.

> es and are not at all precisely individualized), they are all bearers of the essayistic reflection with equal rights. They [...] partly adopt the essayistic style of the author [*essayistische Sprache des Autors*], if necessary. [...] The relative anonymity of the characters does not intend to testify that "in this epoch there can be no more individuals"; it is the consciously developed stylistic device [*das bewußt entwickelte Stilmittel*] that seems to the author to be appropriate for the novel- essay.[26]

By establishing distance from traditional characters, Améry situates himself within the same line of modernist novel-essays whose characters face a loss of singularity.[27] Even if the reflection is primarily entrusted to the protagonist Lefeu (Améry's alter ego), "the essayistic style of the author" is also adopted by other characters. An example of such attribution occurs in the reflection carried out by Jacques, an art gallery director and friend of Lefeu, during a conversation with one of the German gallery owners trying to convince Lefeu to show his paintings in Germany. In this passage, Jacques moves beyond essayistic reflection, outlining a conceptual opposition between two types of universalizable attitudes, the "nay-sayer" [*Neinsager*] represented by Lefeu and the "yea-sayer" [*Jasager*] incarnated by Jacques himself:

> The yea-sayer [*Jasager*] who abandons himself to the epochs and fashions or, more precisely, to the "currents" – whereby he must always sense the end of such currents and the influx of new ones in good time, so as not to look like the fool in front of himself, which he does not want to be at any price – has a more dangerous position than the nay-sayer [*Neinsager*]. [...] The man who says "no" is free in the unfreedom of his bindings: he claims the freedom to set irrational values, remains subservient to them, and hereafter acts self-importantly within the realm of his presuppositions or illusions. The man who says "yes" is unfree in freedom: he voluntarily accepts – *il assume!* – the word of reality as the last one, and thus renounces the very sovereign self-positing [*Ichsetzung*] that is the nay-sayer's ultimate refuge and his security.[28]

The essayistic dimension of this passage is even more evident when compared with another of Améry's essays, *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation* (1968), in which the author takes up a similar line of thinking:

> Our aging person has to sit back and watch as the processes of formation, popularization, and devaluation roll off at an increasingly rapid tempo. [...] For him the logical question whether the acceleration should be called progress is not even under discussion. Since

26 Améry 2007b, 652.

27 The disintegration of the characters' identity in the novel – essay belongs to the approaching crisis of the novel between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth; see Graziano (2013, 42), and Marchese (2019, 82).

28 Améry 2007c, 391–392.

> he does not withdraw to the definitely unassailable but hopeless position of the intransigent conservative, for whom cultural events once and for all found their climax and end point in his individual system, with everything coming after only delusion and fool's play, he has to recognize the acceleration as an authentic phenomenon, unless he wants to be a stupidly proud nay-sayer from another world [*als Hinterweltler zum dummstolzen Neinsager werden*].[29]

In this context, the author presents the *Neinsager* as "a stupidly proud nay-sayer" – as Jacques describes Lefeu in the "Roman-Essay" –, that is, a man growing old who does not want to adapt to new fashions and literary currents, in contrast to Jacques, who describes himself as a "yea-sayer [*Jasager*] by definition".[30]

Although in *On Aging* the author carries out the reflection himself, he occasionally introduces a hypothetical character to incarnate different expressions of the "aging human being".[31] This character is indicated with the symbol *A*, "both the most mathematical and abstract specification imaginable and one that leaves to [the] readers the most extensive free space to think imaginatively and concretely".[32] As observed by Alfred Andersch, Améry's essays often use a mode of exposition where "a described third person alternates with a reflecting first".[33] We could say that, *mutatis mutandis*, in Améry's essay, the relationship between author ("reflecting first person") and hypothetical character ("described third person") retraces the type of mediation found in a work of fiction where an external narrator recounts the events of his characters in the third person while commenting on them in the first person and from the author's point of view. Using Franz Karl Stanzel's terminology, we could define this as an "authorial narrative situation".[34] Thus, to distance himself from such a situation, that is, to dissimulate the essay, Améry chooses to attribute reflection directly to his characters in his "Roman-Essay". Despite using the "essayistic style of the author"[35],

29 Améry 1994, 96 and 2007e, 133.

30 Améry 2007, 390.

31 "The aging human being – the aging woman, the aging man – we will frequently meet such persons here, presenting themselves to us in many variants, in many different kinds of dress. At one point, we will recognize an aging person as a figure well known to us from a work of literature; in another place she will be a pure abstraction drawn from the imagination; finally, he will be revealed in his contours as the author of this series of essays" (Améry 1994, 1).

32 Améry 1994, 2.

33 Andersch 1977, 26.

34 Stanzel 1971, 22–58.

35 Améry 2007b, 652.

he takes this option over that of the external narrator, by way of quoted monologues and dialogues in a prevalently "figural narrative situation".[36]

Ultimately, the attribution of this "essayistic style of the author" to Jacques also serves to conceal an autobiographical identification between Améry and the work's protagonist.[37] Beyond the fact that the *Neinsager* Lefeu shares with Améry the same Holocaust survivor experience, the painter's philosophy of negation corresponds to Améry's own thinking. Grounded in Sartrean existentialism, Améry's philosophy consists in refusing to internalise his Auschwitz survivor trauma while at the same time continuing to resent his torturers, a position which he attempts to problematise in his essays.[38] This subject lies at the heart of *Resentments*, an essay part of *At the Mind's Limits*, in which the negation of the torturer becomes the sole act able to counterbalance the self-negation experienced by the victim. Améry writes:

> I do not want to become the accomplice of my torturers; rather, I demand that the latter negate themselves and in the negation coordinate with me. The piles of corpses that lie between them and me cannot be removed in the process of internalization, so it seems to me, but, on the contrary, through actualization, or, more strongly stated, by actively settling the unresolved conflict in the field of historical practice.[39]

The Austrian writer develops this awareness even further in his "Roman-Essay", through the character of Lefeu; his philosophy of negation, which ultimately also negates itself, is destined for failure and thus self-destruction. Such self-awareness emerges in the book's finale, when the protagonist begins to suspect that his own "aesthetics of decay" [*Verfallsästhetik*][40] and his protest against the commodification of art and capitalism are nothing more than vain attempts to logically justify the destruction of his subjectivity caused by trauma. With respect to the models of the novel-essay, Améry's "Roman-Essay" has lost faith in the ability to contemplate a possible future, in conjunction with the decline of the essay as a form offering a valid philosophy for concrete political action. Such a stance,

36 Stanzel 1971, 22–37, 92–120. The external narrator's position in the "Roman – Essay" is marginalised and more focused on Lefeu; it is limited to either summarising the protagonist's thought processes or marking the introduction of another character's perspective.

37 Améry (2007c, 482) himself suggested this autobiographical identification.

38 For Améry's relationship to Sartre's work and its relevance for *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch*, see Heidelberger – Leonard (2004, 109–147, 158–166) and (2007, 671–675), and Kappel (2009, 346–367).

39 Améry 1980, 69.

40 Améry 2007c, 504.

at the threshold of postmodernity, seems to anticipate the crisis of utopia that Lorenzo Marchese (2018) has attributed to contemporary novel-essays.[41]

2 W.G. Sebald's Fictional Prose: Dissimulating the Novel

W.G. Sebald's last work, *Austerlitz* (2001), was published several months before his untimely death in a car accident. Because of its themes and formal choices, it is seen as his most ambitious text.[42] Just like *The Emigrants* (1992), the work that gave him international fame, this work of fictional prose deals with the theme of Holocaust survivors and is based on true accounts. However, unlike the rest of Sebald's previous prose, which lacked a structured plot, *Austerlitz* comes closest to being a novel thanks to the presence of a single character driving the narrative development of the story.[43] The book is centred around a fictional character, the architectural historian Jacques Austerlitz, whose story is inspired by the real life of Susi Bechhöfer, a woman who was brought to Britain as a child on a so-called "children's transport" [*Kindertransport*] to escape Nazi persecution.[44]

As such, *Austerlitz* has been considered as a Holocaust novel, even though Sebald himself refused the generic label of "novel". He preferred the term "prose book" instead, which he used for all his works.[45] Early on, Sebald had worked primarily as an academic critic, then, starting with *Vertigo* (1990), he inaugurated a new form of prose, in which he achieved a synthesis of essayistic and literary impulses. In this unconventional form of writing based on broad documentary research, he combined narration with reflection as well as factual and fictional elements, thereby distancing himself from both academic writing and the novel form. As he stated in an interview:

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41 According to Marchese (2018, 165–167), the ability to contemplate a possible future, based on a Musilian "utopia of essayism" (Musil 1996, 267) was a typical element of the novel – essay until modernism.

42 The English translation appeared almost simultaneously with the German original, underlining Sebald's status as an internationally renowned author (Wolff 2017, 48).

43 Sebald's former PhD student Uwe Schütte (2020, 385) views *Austerlitz* as a step backwards in comparison with his previous book, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), which he regards to be the German writer's highest prose fiction achievement.

44 An architectural historian and colleague of Sebald's served as a further model for the book's protagonist. See Sebald's interview with Martin Doerry and Volker Hage in *Der Spiegel* 11 of 12 March 2001, now in: Sebald (2012a, 196–197).

45 Sebald 2012a, 199.

> Historical monographs cannot produce a metaphor or allegory for the collective course of history. It is only in this process of metaphorization that history becomes empathetically accessible. [...] This of course does not mean that I am making a case for the novel. I find all cheap forms of fictionalization horrific. My medium is prose, not the novel.[46]

Another peculiar feature of Sebald's prose is the homodiegetic narrator, who often seems to share characteristics with the author himself, as he alternates reflections and events according to the flow of his mental associations, while visiting historical sites, contemplating natural landscapes, or following the traces of emigrants. Despite its stronger narrative character with respect to earlier works, *Austerlitz* adopts the same expository approach grounded in the process of association. However, in this case, Sebald entrusts this digressive mode to the protagonist Austerlitz, in the form of reported speech maintained throughout the entire text. After meeting the narrator on a trip to Antwerp, Austerlitz converses with him on different occasions. During these meetings, Austerlitz recounts his search for traces of his parents, who had been deported and then killed in a Nazi concentration camp; however, he also launches into lengthy historical and philosophical digressions in which an essayistic discourse emerges concerning architectures of power.

Austerlitz thus plays the same role as Lefeu, the protagonist of Améry's "Roma-Essay", driving both narration and reflection and moving beyond simple characterisation. Because of this and the many intertextual connections with *Lefeu*, Susan Nurmi-Schomers has even considered *Austerlitz* as an implicit "rewriting [*Nachdichtung*] of Améry's text", through which Sebald achieved "a poetic redemption [*Rettung*] of the novel-(essay)".[47] By placing "essay" in parentheses, Nurmi-Schomers emphasised the greater literary success of Sebald's text, both in terms of quality and with respect to novelistic conventions. Yet, in contrast to Améry's "Roman-Essay," Sebald employs a series of techniques which, due to their attribution to a fictional character, have the goal of dissimulating the form of the novel. The homodiegetic narrator, who shares many traits with the author himself, has the function of testifying to the truth of the story; he collects Austerlitz's testimony directly from his conversations and becomes the guardian of his photographic archive, to which images are said to belong throughout the book.

Beyond this attempt to dissimulate the work's fiction, the Austerlitz character even appears to be modelled after Lefeu. They are both tormented by the death of their parents in a concentration camp, of which fact they become

46 Sebald 2012b, 85; translated by Wolff 2014, 98.

47 Nurmi – Schomers 2005, 167.

aware during episodes of involuntary memory. Both Austerlitz and Lefeu are thinker-characters and represent the "epitome of the existential experience" of victims of the Holocaust.[48] This correspondence between them is further reinforced by a network of intertextual connections, as Irene Heidelberger-Leonard has recently shown.[49] A first indication of this connection appears in the opening pages of *Austerlitz*, where the narrator recalls that the nocturnal animals in the Antwerp Zoo "had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed, inquiring gaze [*unverwandt forschenden Blick*] found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking [*vermittels der reinen Anschauung*] and thinking [*und des reinen Denkens*]".[50]

Accompanying this discussion are four photographs depicting four sets of eyes, belonging to two different species of owls and two men, Ludwig Wittgenstein and the German painter Jan Peter Tripp, the latter a friend of Sebald's.[51] The gaze of the nocturnal bird of prey used as a metaphor for illuminating the truth comes from the title of one of Sebald's essays, "Mit den Augen des Nachtvogels" [*Through the Eyes of the Night-Bird*] (1987),[52] which the author had indeed dedicated to analysing Améry's novel-essay. In this essay, Sebald alludes to the book's tragic epilogue, "Nachtflug" [*Nocturnal Flight*], in which the painter Lefeu identifies himself with the "Oiseau de malheur" [*The Bird of Ill-Omen*], the subject of one of his self-portraits and the symbolic representation of his misfortune.[53] Indeed, the equivalent German term *Unglücksvogel* indicates both the bird of ill-omen, of which the owl is one possible incarnation, and a person tormented by misfortune.[54]

48 Heidelberger – Leonard 2005, 128.

49 Based on such intertextual elements, Heidelberger – Leonard (2005) has referred to *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch* as an "Urtext" for *Austerlitz*.

50 Sebald 2001, 7 and 2018, 3; see Heidelberger – Leonard 2005, 122–123.

51 See Sebald / Tripp 2003.

52 Now in Sebald (2003). The English translation by Anthea Bell loses track of this intertextual relationship: "Against the Irreversible: On Jean Améry"; in Sebald (2004).

53 The fictional painting is inspired by an Erich Schmid work entitled *Oiseau de malheur* (1956), which Améry himself owned. In this painting, the artist depicted himself with the features of a bird. See Améry (2007c, 502).

54 Sebald's interpretation refers above all to this second meaning. The link with the owl is further suggested by one of the last lines uttered by Lefeu on his deathbed: "Owls howl high from the tower" (Améry 2007c, 479).

This implicit juxtaposition between Austerlitz and Lefeu reappears elsewhere in Sebald's text with another reference to Wittgenstein,[55] to whom the narrator of Sebald's fictional prose compares the protagonist:

> And now, whenever I see a photograph of Wittgenstein somewhere or other, I feel more and more as if Austerlitz were gazing at me out of it, and when I look at Austerlitz it is as if I see in him the disconsolate philosopher [*den unglücklichen… Denker*], a man locked into the glaring clarity of his logical thinking as inextricably as into his confused emotions, so striking is the likeness between the two of them […].[56]

The terms used to describe Wittgenstein produce a convergence between the gaze of the "disconsolate philosopher" [*den unglücklichen Denker*] Austerlitz-Wittgenstein and that of the *Unglücksvogel* Lefeu, another thinker tormented by the calamity of his fate as a Holocaust victim.

In Sebald's text, this identification between Austerlitz, Lefeu, and Améry as victims of the Holocaust is further suggested by several explicit references to the Austrian writer's life. References to Fort Breendonk, the fortress where Améry was tortured by the Nazis, play an important role as a symbol which opens and closes Sebald's book. The fort is first mentioned in one of Austerlitz's many historical architectural digressions, where he attempts to construct a catalogue of the architectures of power, expressions of human violence which carry "the marks of pain which […] trace countless fine lines through history".[57] Austerlitz's reflection focuses on the perverse logic that governs the construction of oversized buildings such as fortresses:

> The last link in the chain was the fortress of Breendonk, said Austerlitz, a fort completed just before the outbreak of the First World War in which, within a few months, it proved completely useless for the defence of the city and the country. Such complexes of fortifications, said Austerlitz, […] show us how, unlike birds, for instance, who keep building the same nest over thousands of years, we tend to forge ahead with our projects far beyond any reasonable bounds.[58]

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55 References to Wittgenstein's philosophy and his reception in the field of Neo – positivism are frequent in *Lefeu*, especially in the third chapter "Die Wörter und die Dinge" [*Words and Things*]. See Heidelberger – Leonard (2007, 683 – 685).

56 Sebald 2001, 60 and 2018, 56.

57 Sebald 2018, 16. *Austerlitz* offers descriptions of various buildings with direct or indirect connections to the Holocaust or other expressions of human violence, such as colonialism; apart from the concentration camp in Theresienstadt, these include train stations, the Great Library in Paris, and the Antwerp nocturama (Cowan, 2010). For a detailed analysis of the relationship between architecture and Nazism in the works of Sebald, Primo Levi, and Roberto Bolaño, see Cinquegrani (2018, 19 – 23).

58 Sebald 2018, 22 – 24.

After these considerations and his first encounter with Austerlitz, the narrator visits the fort himself, and describes the site as "a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence", which he is "unable to connect with anything shaped by human civilization".[59] During this visit, the narrator returns to the same locations described by Améry in his essay *The Torture*, part of the collection *At the Mind's Limits*.[60] As the narrator approaches the bunker where the Austrian writer had been tortured, his memory begins to waver:

> Even now, when I try to remember [...], when I look back at the crab-like plan of Breendonk [...] the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on.[61]

Sebald's writing is born precisely from this need to not forget the history of those who lived through the same experiences as Améry. In other words, his work emerges from both his faith in narrative as an effective means of transmitting these stories and his necessity to adhere as much as possible to the truth by establishing distance from the novel. In contrast to Améry, who camouflages as a character to convey his reflections in order to dissimulate the essay, Sebald dissimulates the novel, making himself known in the figure of the narrator-character and marking the distance that exists between himself and the other, the Holocaust victim. This is how Sebald enacts an "archaeological" search for the origins of suffering within a metaphysical vision of history.[62] Such a search shares a strong existential character with Améry's writings, even if it no longer displays a direct link to this earlier philosophical current, which nevertheless remains alive in Améry's "Roman-Essay".[63]

59 Sebald 2018, 25 – 26.

60 In his retrospective account of his visit to the fortress of Breendonk, the narrator declares that he had only read Améry's book several years later (Sebald 2018, 33 – 34).

61 Sebald 2018, 30 – 31.

62 Sebald 2012c, 259 – 260; see also Niehaus/Öhlschläger 2006.

63 Regarding the connection between philosophy and literature in contemporary novel – essays, Lorenzo Marchese (2018, 155 – 160) has referred to an "interrupted ménage" between the two spheres.

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