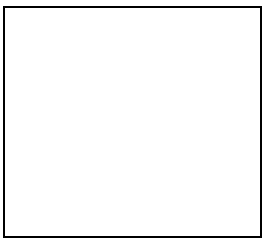
Sebalds Menschenzoo

I. Introduction:

There are very few who have not heard Kafka's tale of Gregor Samsa, the traveling salesman who metamorphosed into an animal of the lowest rank, a vermin. There are many interpretations of this work, but the critique of society's harsh treatment of someone who is different and has become a burden is central. Kafka's literary treatment of animals was not limited to "The Metamorphosis." Kakfa often changed his human characters into animals within a story or simply replaced them from the onset with animals. He was obsessed with animals; he spent much time searching for the animal with whom he most closely identified, and many of these searches became short stories or fables. The critic Mark Harmann refers to this aspect of Kafka's creativity as "Kafkas Menschenzoo" and wrote an article with the same title. Kafka believed that he could better analyze the human condition from the distance that the perspective of an animal provided him (Harmann 370).

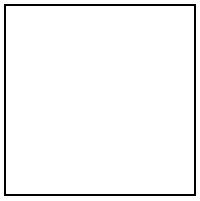
At the Berlin Aquarium he said to the fish: "Now that I don't eat you anymore I can finally look at you in peace" (Harmann 369).



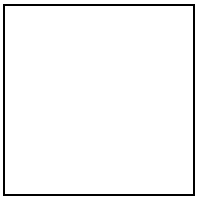
Kafka, a vegetarian, had the ability to empathize with animals whom he considered to be fellow creatures, or *Mitkreaturen.*

W.G. Sebald, writing three-quarters of a century later, has incorporated many animals into his work in much the same manner as Kafka did. In a broader sense, but also within the smaller context of animals, Sebald makes many allusions to Kafka, imitates his style, and even integrates directly quoted passages. Animals are present in all of Sebald's works, but they play an especially important role for the understanding of *Austerlitz*, Sebald's last prose text. Over 25 different types of animals are present in the text and there are also seven illustrations that focus on animals. Already on the third page the reader is confronted by the striking likeness of the eyes of the owl and the eyes of a philosopher that both have an inquiring look, a "forschenden Blick" (Austerlitz 11).

There are many such descriptions of humans that use animal terminology, and of animals with human qualities. For example, in an elevator that is too small Austerlitz comments that the vein of the lady next to him was beating as quickly as a vein in the neck of a lizard, "fast so hastig wie das am Hals einer Eidechse" (215); or inversely Austerlitz anthropomorphizes the face of the stuffed parrot that Gerald often takes out of the box by attributing a human emotion to it. He describes the parrot as having a sad face, "von tiefer Trauer gezeichnetes Gesicht" (126). However, the importance of animals in relation to humans in *Austerlitz* goes far beyond similar physical characteristics. Sebald's Menschenzoo illuminates the following: understanding between animals and humans, reverence for all life, horrific and beatific aspects of life, undesirable traits of modern society, our caged in existence, and the complexity of the role of animals in literature. In what follows I will pursue each of these themes in Sebald's final prose work.



W.G. Sebald
(1944-2001)

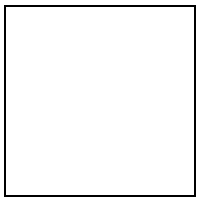


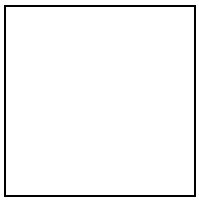
Sebald always had a dog. His last dog was named Moritz.

II. Understanding between animals and humans

Sebald wrote an article in 1986 entitled "Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen – Zu Kafkas Evolutionsgeschichten." In this article, Sebald quoted John Berger, who claimed that an animal watches a human and vice-versa „across a narrow abyss of incomprehension", in spite of the fact that they both are direct relations who are caught in the same process ("Tiere" 198). Both animals and humans are at the mercy of a life regulated by deterioration and the threat of physical or emotional captivity. A comment of Marie's towards the end of their walk through the deserted zoo in the *Jardin des Plantes* plays with this quote. Sebald and Marie had been looking at a deer family that was huddled together beside a stack of hay. Austerlitz relates how the family looked to be in harmony, but at the same time appeared frightened, "in schöner Eintracht und zugleich verängstigt" (375). Austerlitz says then that he will never forget Marie's words

that we or their human audience and the captured animals look across at each other and experience a "brèche d'incomprehension" (Austerlitz 376). There could be several reasons for this moment of understanding between the animals and the two human visitors, but in the context of *Austerlitz*, it is important that these animals are among the few left in the zoo. They are waiting to be taken away, and they lack the ability to comprehend what is happening. This is very similar to how Sebald conveys the situation of Austerlitz's mother---a terrible situation that Austerlitz becomes acquainted with from his research. As his mother had lost all hope, she simply stayed in her apartment waiting for her deportation to an unknown destination. She refused to open the windows and laid immobile in the darkest corner of the salon (254). Sebald presents a situation in which Austerlitz and perhaps also the reader can associate with the animals as victims.

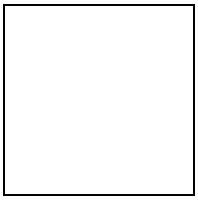

a deer family


in an empty zoo

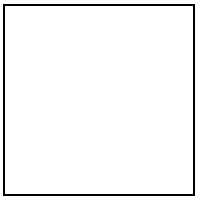
III. Reverence for all life

In an interview from December 6, 2001 with the radio program *Bookworm*, Sebald agreed with the interviewer that he wrote with a tone of tenderness. He stated that he had always been interested in listening to those people who had been sidelined. Sebald described the emptiness that had been in his house as he was growing up and how he felt that this silence or lack of knowledge needed to be filled. Sebald's tender tone reaches beyond the human domain into the realm of the animals. Austerlitz states that most of us don't know very much about moths (135). He then asks himself what type of fear and pain the moths might experience when they lose their way, and whether they might not have dreams and a spiritual life, a "Seelenleben" (141). He also wonders whether the lights will be turned on in the nocturama at night so that the creatures will be able to sleep peacefully (12) and how the squirrels will find their stores after it snows (294). Austerlitz identifies with the possible problems of the animals and shows concern for them, as Sebald does with the characters he creates.

In a Kafka story, "Eine Kreuzung," similar types of questions are addressed by the first-person narrator about his fictional half-cat, half-lamb creature: "Warum es nur ein solches Tier gibt, warum gerade ich es habe, ob es vor ihm schon ein solches Tier gegeben hat und wie nach seinem Tode sein wird, ob es sich einsam fühlt, warum es keine Jungen hat, wie es heißt und so weiter" (Soler 64). Sebald could have written this passage. It expresses the same questioning of well-being and interest in the creature's story that arises in Austerlitz. From Austerlitz's concern for even the smallest of animals to the narrator's interest in hearing Austerlitz's story, one can sense that reverence for life is one of the major themes in *Austerlitz*.



Austerlitz saw in the moth
a "tiny bead of pure life." (1)
-Virginia Woolf



So many have a story they
need to tell.

IV. The beatific and the horrific

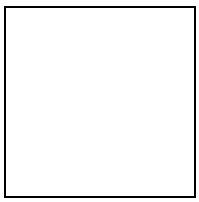
The title *Austerlitz* alludes to the concentration camp Auschwitz, however concentration camp is a term that is not to be found in Sebald's work. Sebald affirmed in his *Bookworm* interview that the other prominent structures such as the nocturama, train stations, forts, insane asylums and libraries in the book can be read as reminders that are sufficient enough to cause people to think of Auschwitz. People have already seen the images of the concentration camps, and Sebald feels that one should approach the atrocities of the Holocaust from an oblique position. In the interview he also referred to Walter Benjamin's idea that the horrific has already happened and doesn't need to be exaggerated. Instead, in order to understand the full measure of the horrific, the author should remind the reader of the beatific moments of life.

Sebald uses a combination of beatific and horrific descriptions of animals instead of humans in order to approach such difficult topics more obliquely. There is an effective balance between descriptions of animals that are peaceful, beautiful, and who seem to be touched by the divine, and animals who are in pain or who have already found their

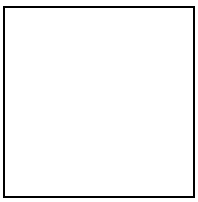
death. For example: Austerlitz describes a pigeon loft or *Taubenhaus* that he sees while on an excursion with Marie during their stay in Marienbad:

> Der Erdboden im Inneren des gemauerten Kogels war bedeckt mit dem unter seinem eigenen Gewicht zusammengepreßten und doch bereits bis zu einer Höhe von mehr als zwei Fuß angewachsenen Taubendreck, einer in sich verbackenen Masse, auf der zuoberst die Kadaver einiger der todkrank aus ihren Nischen gestürzten Vogeltiere lagen, während ihre noch lebendigen Genossen, in einer Art von Altersdemenz in der Düsternis unter dem Dach, wo man sie kaum sehen konnte, leise klagend durcheinandergurrten und ein paar Flaumfedern, in einem kleinen Wirbel um sich selber sich drehend, langsam herabsanken durch die Luft (Austerlitz 310).

This seems to be a metaphor for the pain humans suffer in the present due to the violence of past crimes committed. Austerlitz, for example, does not experience the terrors of the Holocaust directly, but nevertheless is deeply affected as a result of the displacement from his family and home. Germans still struggle today with the issue of collective guilt even though the larger part of the population was born after World War II. The pigeons could also be seen as metaphors for humans awaiting either a violent or natural death or for humans trapped in anything from an inhumane society to a state of existence void of life. Directly following this image of death, Austerlitz describes a small fountain house that is the complete opposite of the preceding image. This is a peaceful, small glassed house in which one can hear the sound of the fountain and is warmed by the rays of light coming in through the many window panes. There is also a photo of this house in the novel which helps to counterbalance the horrific image of the pigeon loft (310). The horrific is acknowledged, but it is counterbalanced by the beatific.



suffering pigeon

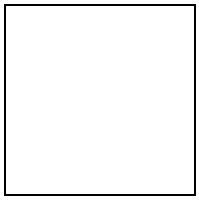


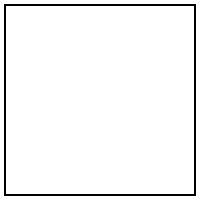
beauty of the sun

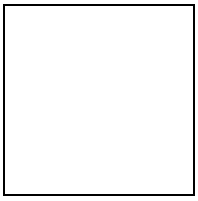
Austerlitz's visit to the veterinary museum is a second example of the horrific that is written in such a manner that the reader can not very easily forget the images. The visit is one of the most terrible experiences of Austerlitz's life, after which he ends up in a sanatorium. He is only slowly able to recover as a result of Marie's visits and the reading of a small book on the topic of natural healing. This visit is so terrible because he is alone in the museum surrounded by death. He sees a small pig whose organs have

been made transparent, a pale blue horse fetus, and skulls and skeletons of various creatures, but most disturbing to him is a life-size figure of a rider on a horse. The skin of both had been pulled off and the muscles and veins prepared so that one could see every fine strand (379-380). Before going to the veterinary museum, Austerlitz had felt a connection with the deer family in the zoo, and after the visit he has the experience of being deeply moved by the music of the circus group due to the presence of the snow white goose (390). The horrific experience is preceded and succeeded by beatific images which makes the museum all the more horrific, but also at the same time touches on the fact of how beautiful moments of life can be.

In the veterinary museum Austerlitz is confronted with the systematic death of animals that immediately brings the systematic killing of humans during WWII to mind. The replacement of humans with animals allows the question of morality to be brought into the foreground. Many people would feel it is not morally wrong to support such a veterinary museum, although it would be on the limits of acceptable to have a museum of human cadavers of the victims of the Holocaust. Could Sebald also perhaps be questioning the limits of what humans consider to be atrocities. Are not these also atrocities against animals? How does it affect the psyche of those whose job it is to prepare the cadavers of animals or to butcher animals?


piglets


factory farm crowding

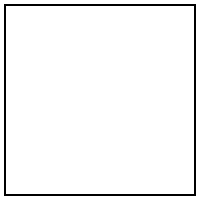

butchering of pig

V. Critique of Modern Society

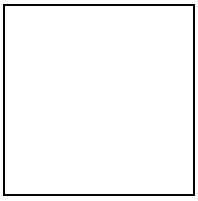
There are many instances in *Austerlitz* in which the animals exhibit traits that we have all but lost in our modern society. In these instances the animals serve to point to the advantages of the animal world. Austerlitz explains how birds don't have the same sense of dissatisfaction or need to continually better themselves that humans to; birds have built the same nest for centuries, "die Jahrtausende hindurch immer dasselbe Nest bauten" (31). The reader begins to long to be like the homing pigeons that would always

return home (117), like the moths who would rest when they were tired (135), or like the cockatoos who bathed and enjoyed themselves in the evening hours and sat in twos with the appearance of being eternally inseparable (123-24). Austerlitz comments that the landscapes along the Rhine had the quality of timelessness and the animals also have this quality, something that we have lost (326). Clocks are not being shot out in our modern era as is done in Sebald's *Austerlitz*.

All of the animals except for man know that the principle business of life is to enjoy it. - Samuel Butler



cockatoos enjoying the evening

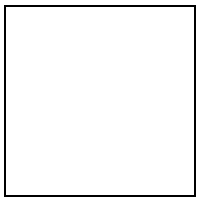


a cockatoo pair

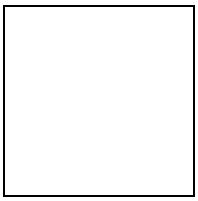
Sebald was a critic of modern society and technology who refused to even have a computer in his office. Many of his points regarding this topic can be found in his 1986 article on the role of animals in Kafka's writings. In this article he agrees with Kafka that every new invention is the beginning of a line of atrocities against nature ("Tiere" 198); that technology has multiplied the rate of downfall, *Verfallsgeschwindigkeit*, for nature, animals, and humans, and that our society is experiencing a post-natural phenomenon (200). In Austerlitz, there are sarcastic reports that there had been plans to begin a squirrel colony in the atrium of the library, "zur Zerstreuung der gelegentlich von ihren Büchern aufblickenden Leser" (Sebald 398). Austerlitz also questions whether the library is a blissful island or a penal colony, whether he is "auf einer seligen Insel oder in einer Strafkolonie" (372). The library is an establishment of learning that is removed from nature in which Austerlitz expierences a loss of contact with the natural environment. Although Austerlitz has access to new worlds of knowledge in the library, he is cut off from the outside world and from contact with other people. Is that natural behavior?

Sebald also critiques the state of modern man in his 1986 analysis of Kafka's story *Bericht an eine Akademie* in which the main character is an ape who is able to reach the education level of the average European within five years. The next step in the

metamorphosis of the "ape" would be from human to machine. Sebald viewed this story as one of the most pessimistic documents of our culture, as every evolutionary step was a necessity and because Kafka lends a skeptical voice as to the positive possibilities that would be newly available to the animal as a human ("Tiere" 198). The humans around the monkey are only greedy, addicted to alcohol, violent, and passive in the presence of the machines to whom they have lent their voices. Austerlitz can often not find solace and healing surrounded by such a modern society, but only in nature. For example, he is able to regain his composure at the beginning of the book when he can make it to the Tiergarten in Berlin (Austerlitz 10) and later in his life he is able to heal himself by working in a botanical garden every day (334), where he is surrounded by delicate life and simplicity.



humanlike ape

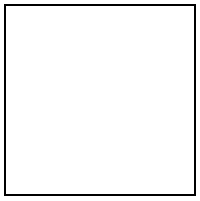


Kafka's drinking ape

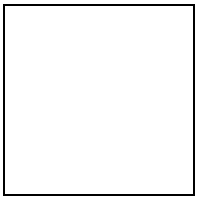
VI. A caged in existence

In Austerlitz there are several examples either of animals or of humans trying to escape the false environment in which they have found themselves. Either they are in the artificial world of society, or in exile and can't find their way home. For example, at the beginning of the work, the narrator observes a raccoon who continually washes the same piece of apple, "als hoffe er, durch dieses, weit über jede vernünftige Gründlichkeit hinausgehende Waschen entkommen zu können aus der falschen Welt" (Austerlitz 10). To the narrator the travelers he sees in the train station appear very similar to the animals he had just encountered in the nocturama. Both seem somehow smaller than one would have expected and have the grief-filled expressions of those who have lost their home or peoples (14). Austerlitz perceives the parsonage of his youth as a type of prison in which it was continually cold and the windows were never opened (70,71,95). The displacement and resulting trapped feelings of these people and animals can only lead to despair or death. For example, the birds in the library plummet to their death because they do not realize that it is a reflective glass wall and not a continuation of the atrium.

They are no longer in their natural habitat and do not have the developed faculties to survive in a new world: "der Todessturz eines einzigen aus seiner natürlichen Bahn geratenen Wesens" (398). Animals and humans experience displacement in a very similar manner, and these and other numerous examples emphasize that all creatures have a similar predicament and fate. We are either without a homeland, feel trapped in our life situation, or are not able to connect with reality, as Austerlitz often cannot.



raccoon in captivity



office cubicle

VII. The complexity of animals in Austerlitz

The role of animals in *Austerlitz* is very complex. The moth, for example, that after losing its way freezes to death is also, like the deer family, reminiscent of Agatha's period of waiting for deportation. The moth is also an allusion to Virginia Woolf's essay entitled "The Death of a Moth," in which she describes the vigour and life encapsuled in the small moth, about whose fate very few cared. Woolf writes that the moth can "show us the true nature of life" (2), and that in observing it she was "conscious of a queer feeling of pity"(1). She describes the moth's heroic fight with death, and also how she knew that it did not "have any chance against death" (3). Woolf wrote this short essay in 1942, and the fight of the moth against an all-powerful death is metaphorical for her feeling of helplessness against the death machine of the two world wars. Thirdly, the moth metaphorically symbolizes memories. Moths settle like memories into the grid of the past, they appear suddenly out of nothingness and fade away leaving only a trace behind them (Austerlitz 135-36, 241). It is perhaps evident from this one example that one could do much further research on the complex role of individual animals in Sebald's œuvre.

In this project I have described how Sebald uses animals to approach difficult topics from an oblique angle; to show how an understanding with or for animals promotes a reverence for all life; to critique the modern human society; and to show the interconnectedness of all beings. It would also be valuable to research further the

influence of Kafka's *Menschenzoo* on Sebald's treatment of animals. For Sebald, it is very important that the research of those who have been sidelined in a history of violence continues. Sebald's metaphorical use of animals in the literary treatment of such a violent history lends a very effective alternative perspective to keep alive the memories of those who have been marginalized.

-Kerstin Gackle, Juni 2006

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