Another time, another place

It may or may not be fiction, but WG Sebald's wartime narrative, Austerlitz, provides a hypnotic sense of the power of history

Austerlitz
WG Sebald
Hamish Hamilton £16.99, pp415

I first came across the writings of WG Sebald by accident. I was browsing the shelves of the Travel Bookshop in north Kensington, looking for books that might help me plan a walk on the north coast of Norfolk with my nine-year-old son, when I came across a book, The Rings of Saturn, whose typography and quality of production so intrigued me that, although it could by no possible stretch of the imagination be described as a conventional guide, I took it away with me.

I was immediately hypnotised by the curious prose style, so flat and ostensibly inconsequential, which describes a kind of meditative interior monologue, not at all the world as it is seen and described by an ordinary person, but a view of the world seen through a glass darkly and refracted through the strange and sometimes uncomfortable imagination of a dyspeptic and exceptionally knowledgeable, middle-aged professor of German literature, whom one presumes has never been married and who decides to take a long and entirely purposeless walk round the shores of East Anglia meditating on aspects of its history and what he sees en route.

It included, by one of those coincidences of which Sebald is so fond, liking the accidental conjunction of history and chance, an account of a photograph of Edward FitzGerald, the translator of the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, which was shortly afterwards offered as a gift to the National Portrait Gallery.

Austerlitz is, in many ways, another literary tour de force, using the same language of extended and ostensibly inconsequential melancholy to describe the life of someone whom he first meets in the railway station in Antwerp studying the architecture of its waiting room.

It is impossible to tell how much of this narrative, if any, is true, although it is illustrated, as was Rings of Saturn, with out-of-focus, grey photographs of people and places, which lend it veracity, most of all the picture of the narrator himself, with his distinctive wavy hair, looking out inqusitively at the photographer and dressed as for a fancy dress party in Prague just before the war.

The narrative, if it is true, is a remarkable one. The hero of the book, or more properly the anti-hero since he essentially does nothing especially useful with his life, was born in Prague, the son of a moderately successful opera singer and the manager of a small slipper-making factory who was also active in left-wing politics.

The rise of the Nazi party in Germany and the subsequent German invasion of Czechoslovakia meant that his father had to flee to Paris, never to be seen or heard from again, his letters to his family confiscated by the German authorities. His mother managed to arrange for her son to be sent on a Kindertransport to London. He was adopted by a Nonconformist preacher and his wife, near Bala in North Wales.

The boy was clever, went to a minor public school which he intensely disliked, apart from making friends with a younger boy, and was encouraged by his history teacher to go to Oxford. After studying the classification of nineteenth-century official architecture at the Courtauld Institute, he obtains a teaching post at an establishment whose name is never quite clear, while living in a small terrace house in Alderney Street (actually, from a subsequent description of its proximity to the Jewish cemetery, it must be Alderney Road) in the East End.

The basis of the fiction, if it is a fiction, is that the author and narrator periodically meet, not only in Antwerp, but also in the bar of the former Great Eastern Hotel in Liverpool Street Station, London, and in a café in Paris.

By way of long, gloomy, maundering accounts of his life which sometimes have the character of shaggy dog stories, the narrator builds up a sense of his persona which is essentially a deeply melancholy one, bereft of any friendships, save for that of a girl in the library who takes pity on him and goes on holiday

with him to Marienbad, and later a librarian in the Bibliothèque Nationale who goes to visit him when he is confined to hospital with a nervous disorder induced by the discovery of the circumstances of his youth.

What are we to make of this? In some ways, the account is emblematic of many ostensibly ineffectual lives, of an academic intelligence wasted in a grandiose intellectual project that requires years of taking notes but never leads to the grand book that should have resulted from it, until the narrator decides to burn all the accumulation of material in a small bonfire in the garden of his terrace house. But, at the same time and in a way that is highly distinctive, the book provides a strangely transcendent and hypnotic sense of the power of history and of the relationship between an individual and the accidents of their life.

I have never read a book that provides such a powerful account of the devastation wrought by the dispersal of the Jews from Prague and their treatment by the Nazis. Austerlitz fails to make sense of his brutalised young life while wandering round the concentration camp at Terezen, where his mother was confined, which causes him to break down when he later remembers what happened.

And I have read few books that provide such an intense sense of place and the relationship of buildings to their history, including, for example, a hypnotic description of how Austerlitz discovers the streets where he was born, as well as of particular places, from Antwerp railway station to Tower Hamlets cemetery.

Sebald describes a universe which is peculiar but recognisable, the way experience of the world can be shaped by a strongly academic and historical intelligence. I can't really comprehend his prose style, so distinctive in the length of his sentences and the slight archaism of manner, the monotony of its cadences probably due to the fact that it was originally written in German and then translated. But I would strongly recommend anyone who has not experienced his writing to do so, because it succeeds in communicating issues of great importance concerning time, memory and human experience.

Not least I would recommend reading Austerlitz's account of trying to find out what happened to his father in the new Bibliothèque Nationale and failing to do so because its design appears calculated to frustrate the aspirations of its readers, such that one realises that the mentality which led to the concentration camp at Terezen is perfectly capable of designing comparable buildings in the present.

Inhumanity does not cease. Is what Sebald writes true? It does not matter. It is the most powerful fiction.

The Observer, Saturday 29 September 2001