

## ‘UTTER BLACKNESS’: FIGURING SEBALD’S MANCHESTER

John Sears<sup>1</sup>

Abstract: This essay explores the tropes and figures deployed by Sebald in the opening pages of the ‘Max Ferber’ narrative of *The Emigrants* (1997), in order to scrutinise this narrative’s representation of the city of Manchester. Key tropes of movement and fixity, circulation and linearity, illumination and obscurity, movement and transposition delineate the urban space; these relate to the narrative’s concern with the aesthetics of the painter Frank Auerbach (on whom the narrative is based) and its connections to those of R.B. Kitaj. The symbolic functions of trees in the narrative are related to Deleuze-Guattarian notions of the rhizomic and the territorial; this, in turn, is connected with Kitaj’s notion of Diasporism and Levinasian concepts of migration and errancy, to explore the ‘destinerrant’ tendencies of Sebald’s narrative. Ferber’s walks around Manchester provide a concluding set of movements through which the essay examines the narrative’s debts to works by Auerbach and their painterly development from the ‘grids’ of modernist aesthetics to the ‘utter blackness’ that haunts *The Emigrants*.

*The Emigrants* (1997) is W.G. Sebald’s second novel. It was originally published in German, as *Die Ausgewanderten*, in 1992, and comprises four narratives that map out different experiences and consequences of migration. Each narrative is named after its central protagonist. A text structured by the tensions between different kinds of movement – selected, imposed, forced – and different experiences of fixity, *The Emigrants* offers varieties of lines of flight or movements from and towards different experiences of constraint, represented as figures of an underlying tension between individual desire and historical pressure. The book concludes with ‘Max Ferber’, a long, meditative and semi-autobiographical narrative of migration and settling that begins with a version of Sebald’s own ‘migration’, from his home village in Germany, to take up an academic post in Manchester, a city that exemplifies a particular set of recurrent concerns in Sebald’s writing. An industrial capital whose historical prime has subsequently declined into a shabby but still momentarily imposing grandeur, Manchester embodies double constructions of movement and fixity, achievement and disaster, safety and suffering, artistic and non- or anti-aesthetic, and human and mechanical, pairings that organise so many of Sebald’s narratives. This essay will focus on the opening pages of ‘Max Ferber’ in order to explore a series of insistent tropes deployed in the narrative’s representation of Manchester. Noting their connections to a pictorial rhetoric deployed by the painter on whose life ‘Max Ferber’ is in part based, it will explore their effects and significances for a wider comprehension of Sebald’s writings and in particular their relations to rhetorical and ekphrastic applications that figure in word and image the symbolic texture and thematic concerns of *The Emigrants*.

‘Max Ferber’ opens with the narrator’s experience of migration from Germany. This is represented as a linear movement, a direct night flight ‘from Kloten airport to Manchester’ that introduces to the narrative a series of tropes concerning lines, circulations, networks and

---

<sup>1</sup> Senior Lecturer in English Literature, Department of English, Manchester Metropolitan University. Email: J.Sears@mmu.ac.uk

grids that mark traces of movements.<sup>2</sup> These will organise the narrative's dynamism, offering versions of the geometric figures that deeply structure the entire novel's narratives of lines of flight from horror to potential escape. Their counterpoint in this section of the book is found in the image of the tree which, as we shall see, signifies a symbolically rich and tradition-anchored experience of fixity and rootedness, a signifier of presence rather than of the trace of absence. In the first view presented by the narrative of the 'different world' of England we read of a 'network of lights that stretched from the southerly outskirts of London to the Midlands' (*E* 149). Sebald arrives in Manchester, 'one of the nineteenth century's miracle cities' which now seemed, in an echo of Conrad's Marlow apprehending Kurtz, 'hollow to the core' (*E* 151); in Conrad's words, the city might be, like Kurtz himself, 'a shadow darker than the shadow of the night'.<sup>3</sup> Manchester epitomises what Anthony Vidler, discussing architectural history, labels as 'dark space'. Vidler describes the Foucauldian conception of Enlightenment fears of 'darkened spaces, of the pall of gloom which prevents the full visibility of things, men and truths'. Such darkening, Vidler argues, leads to a conception of space that has 'operated as an instrument of monumental dissolution'.<sup>4</sup> It is the processes and effects of this 'monumental dissolution' that concern 'Max Ferber' and make it exemplary of Sebald's writing.

A rhetoric of circulation around putative geographical centres, indicated by terms like 'outskirts' and 'Midlands', counterpoints the linearity of the opening flight and the criss-cross structure of the crucial image of the network. Narrative repetitions insist on the symbolic significance of these forms. The narrator's circulation through the streets of Manchester, first in a taxi that 'drives around a little' (*E* 151), echoes the 'looping [...] curve' (*E* 150) of the arrival of his flight into the city's 'Ringway airport', its name extending its significance. The 'strings of streetlights' that 'gradually peter out into the dark' are repeated in the 'rows of uniform houses' of the city and are balanced by 'the disc of the moon' in the sky over the city (*E* 150). 'Just keep ringing' (*E* 151), his taxi driver's advice at the door of the Arosa Hotel, is an instruction that translates the rhetorical circulation into a symbolic action (another repetition). It is also a description of the narrative's linearity and of the narrator's circulation, movements that affect the narrative's construction of Manchester itself as a particular kind of 'centre', 'the city from which industrialisation had spread across the world' (*E* 156).

The Arosa Hotel, the narrator's destination in these opening pages, exemplifies how Sebald's prose embeds onomastically significant terms into its textures, in this case offering a named building that itself embodies circulations and orbits. Its name suggests connections with 1304 Arosa, an outer-belt asteroid discovered by Karl Wilhelm Reinmuth on May 21st 1928, and with the Arosa municipality in Graubünden in Switzerland (linking this narrative with the concluding lines of the first narrative of *The Emigrants*, 'Dr Henry Selwyn', in which the narrator, travelling across Switzerland, reads of another circular 'return', the rediscovery of the body of a lost Alpine guide [*E* 23]). The name 'Arosa', with connotations of both distance and isolation as well as circular repetition and the implicitly colonial enterprise of discovering and naming new territories and objects, enacts also an embedded intratextual

<sup>2</sup> W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), 149. Subsequent references by page number following quotation.

<sup>3</sup> J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 117.

<sup>4</sup> A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 168–9, 173.

circulation that binds ‘Max Ferber’ to other moments in *The Emigrants*. The hotel itself, a ‘maze of dead-end corridors’ (E 153), offers a further embedded metaphor of the orbits and trajectories with which the opening of ‘Max Ferber’ is concerned. In these figures Manchester itself is delineated as an infernal space ‘petering out’ into darkness, perceptible as ‘a faint glimmer, as if from a fire almost suffocated by ash’ (E 150). This image of darkness engulfing luminescence is repeated in Ferber’s own recollections of the city momentarily ‘lit up [...] as if by firelight or Bengal flares’ (E 168). Such images indicate a spiralling decline of light into darkness and fire to ash, and suggest the allegory of modernity’s destructive decline that ‘Max Ferber’ will both establish and, through its concern with artistic creation, resist.

Sebald’s journey to Manchester in 1966 in ‘Max Ferber’ (‘Max Aurach’ in the German version) transposes into its narrative of migration another, historical migration through a fictional account of meetings with the German-born emigrant painter Frank Auerbach (b. 1931). Renamed ‘Max Ferber’ in the English translation, the painter is given Sebald’s familiar name ‘Max’ and, incongruously, the surname of American popular novelist and second-generation Hungarian émigré Edna Ferber (1885–1968), author of the novel on which the James Whale film *Show Boat* (1936) is based. Auerbach, in reality a firmly London-based painter who has rarely left Britain since his arrival in 1939 as a refugee child in the Kindertransport programme (a theme Sebald later explores in *Austerlitz* [2001]), is fictionalised by Sebald as a figure of post-migratory fixity who functions in marked contrast to the circular and linear dynamisms of the opening of the narrative. This fictionalisation also contrasts with the deeply emotional ‘manuscript’ (E 193) of Luiza Lansberg, a historical narrative of home and violent displacement that Ferber subsequently bequeaths to the narrator. Ferber symbolises a kind of adoptive, domesticated *heimliche*, a deliberately rooted sense of the self’s location, in which the actions of living, working and producing art are organically combined in images of stasis. He remarks, we are told, that ‘nothing should change at his place of work, that everything should remain as it was, and that nothing further should be added but the debris generated by painting’ (E 161). Settlement, of people and of ‘debris’ and ‘dust’, is the recurrent trope associated with Ferber and those around him. It is repeated in the description of the Maasai cook at the Wadi Halfa who, arriving in Manchester from Kenya, ‘soon learnt the rudiments of local cooking and, giving up the nomadic life, had settled into his present trade’ (E 163). This set of figures offers what we might see as a constructive or assimilative version of the otherwise largely destructive, fragmentary trope of margins encroaching on central spaces, of the collapsing of difference in the gradual entropy of decline or reduction of everything to what, in Ferber’s studio, is described as ‘the dust of decades’, ‘the encrusted deposit of droppings, mixed with coal dust’ (E 161).

An extensive and elaborate rhetoric of flows and fixities, movements and transpositions, nomadic wanderings and subsequent settlements is thus counterpointed in ‘Max Ferber’ by an alternative rhetoric of stasis closely associated with the artist Ferber and his settling in Manchester. Arrival, circular itinerancy and eventual establishment complement and contrast movements and displacements, constructing a fictional city structured and deconstructed by flows, circulations, arrivals, settlements and departures, criss-crossed by lines of emigrant movements towards settling. These movements are not restricted to the spaces of the city, but expand to encompass the whole of eastern England in Sebald’s later return to Manchester from East Anglia, ‘a six-hour train journey that criss-crossed the country’ (E 178). The ‘criss-cross’ here prefigures another trope, that of the grid, to which we will shortly

return. The movement embedded in displacement, integral to the narratives of *The Emigrants*, is furthermore, as the train journey suggests, also a geographical trans-position like that which structures the fictional elements of 'Max Ferber'. The 'real' artist's 'real' location, London, is transposed into the darkened, Gothic other of a Manchester characterised now by 'motionlessness and deathly silence' (E 166). In a book relating narratives of emigration, lines of flight from horror, historical displacements and escapes, Auerbach / Ferber's narrative figures a particular anti-dynamic, a vortex of the fixed within the migratory, focussing not on movements (of people, in 'real' history) but on accumulation (of 'debris' and 'dust', the waste products of his particular processes of painting, to which we'll return). The narrative offers through this a particular sense of space concerned with painting's 'prime concern to increase the dust' (E 161), a complex aesthetic process situated and performed within the monumental yet decaying solidity of the city. These tropes of movement coalesce at key moments with insistent imagery of suffocating light and encroaching darkness, a combination Sebald seems to derive in part from the tonal qualities of Auerbach's paintings. Robert Hughes, describing Auerbach's *St Paul's Building Site c. 1955*, notes, in language that Sebald's text echoes, that 'a black criss-cross of lines ploughed through the leathery darkness, relieved only by a small flare of Indian red and a patch of nearly submerged ultramarine'.<sup>5</sup> This pictorial combination of grid-like structures and the visual tropes of darkness illuminated by momentary gleams or 'small flares' of light, typical of Auerbach's paintings in this period, also characterises Sebald's constructions, in language, of the urban and surrounding landscapes of north-western England.

The recurrent trope of encroachment represents the apparently gradual and again circulating movement or expansion from margin to centre of a liminal darkness. This is apprehended, if not 'seen', in what the narrative describes as 'The darkness that had gathered in the corners' of Ferber's studio and in the studio's 'entire furniture', which 'was advancing, millimetre by millimetre, upon the central space where Ferber had set up his easel' (E 160–1). The 'central space' here is seemingly immobile except in its apparent expansion by accumulation of darkness, an expansion which, the text intimates, is also an occlusion or erasure, thus confirming the symbolic import of this particular process of encroachment as a version of the cultural and moral benightedness of the contemporary that Sebald's writings insistently diagnose. This movement is repeated, furthermore, in Ferber's later description of his youthful perception of the city of Manchester. Seen from 'a last bluff' on 'the fringes of the moorlands', the city seems to comprise both 'crammed and interlinked rows of houses' and, at its centre, 'one solid mass of utter blackness' (E 168). In its complex relation to the illuminating creativity of art, Ferber's studio figures the dark centre of these opening pages of Sebald's narrative. Its centrality is repeated or reflected, but also resisted and deflected, in this Gothic vision of the city's 'utter blackness', a vision which draws heavily on a series of embedded allusions to and ekphrastic elaborations of paintings by Auerbach (who objected to the inclusion of two images in the German edition of *The Emigrants*, which were removed from the English translation).

The narrator arrives at Ferber's studio via a sign, 'TO THE STUDIOS', which alludes to Auerbach's 1977 painting 'To the Studios', a predominantly dark red and umber urban

---

<sup>5</sup> R. Hughes, *Frank Auerbach* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990), 85. *St Paul's Building Site, Winter* (1955) can be viewed at <http://www.jameshyman.co.uk/pages/artistsingle/2209.html>

landscape of criss-crossed lines and grids representing closely constructed and crowded flights of steps, walls, rooftops and eaves reminiscent of Sebald's 'crammed and interlinked rows of houses'. He finds, following this sign, 'a cobbled yard in the middle of which, on a patch of grass, an almond tree was in blossom' (E 160), the first appearance of a tree as a symbol of rootedness amidst the movements and displacements of the narrative. This symbolic fixity is enforced by repetition when, years later, returning to visit Ferber, he finds 'the cobbled yard was unaltered. The almond tree was about to blossom' (E 179). Sebald's description of Ferber's studio owes much to Hughes' description of Auerbach's studio in Mornington Crescent and to Hughes's analysis of Auerbach's sources.<sup>6</sup> Sebald adds to Hughes's account the image of the Manchester 'almond tree', which gestures forwards to the painting on which Ferber is working at their second meeting, an overpainting of Courbet's *The Oak of Vercingetorix* (1864), a painting reproduced in *The Emigrants* (E 180). Sebald's writing alludes also to other trees painted by Auerbach, including *Tree on Primrose Hill* (1984/5) and *Tree in Mornington Crescent* (1991–2), both paintings that situate trees as central to their landscapes, as jagged but fixed features of scenes that otherwise remain implicitly mobile and dynamic as an effect of the painting's dramatic line and movement.<sup>7</sup>

These various pictorial trees embody a conception of painting that is subtly counterpointed, in Sebald's prose, with writing. Ferber's reworking of Courbet expresses a particular, constructively destructive relation to tradition – an 'exercise in destruction' (E 180), 'overworked to the point of being unrecognisable' (E 179), says the narrator – an obliteration that, 'Max Ferber' (and Sebald's writing more generally) implies, is appropriate to the kind of post-Holocaust art Sebald's writing consistently seeks out. Such an aesthetic corresponds rhetorically to the allegory of 'irreversible decline' (E 181) signified in the 'utter blackness' of Manchester. Ferber's extreme aesthetic practice, his 'overpainting' and putative erasure of the aesthetic and of the tradition signified by Courbet's tree, defines in the context of this narrative a version of the space of the image that counterpoints the deconstructed, circular or wandering movements of Sebald's narrating voice. In doing so, it also effaces the image itself, opening the space for its momentary resurrection in the narrative's tropes of illumination and obfuscation, moments of ekphrastic intensity that recur in Sebald's writing and which that writing paradoxically finds in the paintings that Ferber produces out of the effacement of older images.

In words and images, 'Max Ferber' offers competing conceptions of space through the symbolic force of the tree as image and as prose symbol, in order to explore the different efficacies of image and writing in relation to the demands of post-Holocaust art. These different versions of space resonate throughout Sebald's writing in its complex use of images to counterpoint text. The space of the image, argues Jean-Luc Nancy, represents a kind of sacral exile, a representational space 'always sacred [...] set aside, removed, cut off'.<sup>8</sup> It invokes a segregated order, a separated space which is resisted and encompassed by the ekphrastic working of writing in its seeking to textualise the image as symbol. Sebald's

<sup>6</sup> See Hughes, *Frank Auerbach*.

<sup>7</sup> Courbet's *Oak at Vercingetorix* can be viewed at <http://www.kunst-fuer-alle.de/deutsch/kunst/kuenstler/kunstdruck/gustav-courbet/6482/189/58357/the-oak-of-flagey-called-vercingetorix/index.htm>; *Tree on Primrose Hill* can be viewed at <http://collection.britishcouncil.org/artist/artist/30783/18373/object/40628>; *Tree in Mornington Crescent* can be viewed at [http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot\\_details.aspx?intObjectID=5221618](http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=5221618)

<sup>8</sup> J.-L. Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. by Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 1.

writing tends to construct different spaces from those typically represented in Auerbach / Ferber's paintings: not fixity but movement, not settlement but displacement, characterise his prose. Such mobility is characterised by Deleuze and Guattari, in a term that links these different writings and images together, as 'rhizomic'.<sup>9</sup> 'Rhizomic' movement, a particular version of the lines of flight which dynamise the opening of 'Max Ferber', suggests the spreading, mobile roots of words in etymology and grammar; processes of narrative filiation and anastomosis (one of J. Hillis Miller's figures for narrative lines of connectivity) offering narrative lines of flight and the sense-making connections between elements of language and their histories.<sup>10</sup> Trees offer the painter, in contrast, the symbolic value of rootedness as fixity, the offer of escape from history in the fixed security of the tree's symbolic force. In 'Max Ferber', trees signify fixity and rootedness within that painterly tradition implied by the connotation of Ferber's surname, which implies the German word *Färber*, a dyer. But Sebald's mixing of words and images makes this apparent opposition of tree and root, fixity and mobility, rather more complex. The tree, written into the text, perhaps also marks the ambivalent space of the text. Migrant and rooted, errant and grounded, a form of image within the text that differs from the images reproduced or described in Sebald's texts, the tree may also offer an image of the 'book' which, Deleuze and Guattari argue, 'forms a rhizome with the world'.<sup>11</sup> Tree becomes root; its symbolic force roots the narrative of 'Max Ferber' within the traditions of rootlessness that *The Emigrants* attempts to relate, suggesting a complex symbolic expression of conflicting, irresolvable tensions wholly characteristic of Sebald's writing.

Reinforced by Ferber's reworking of Courbet's oak, Sebald's 'Almond Tree' identifies an aestheticised still space within the city that further connects this narrative to those diasporas and writerly and painterly traditions most pertinent to Sebald's ideological projects. R.B. Kitaj, another migrant painter closely connected to Auerbach and fellow member (with Leon Kossof and Francis Bacon) of the so-called 'School of London', writes, in his *First Diasporist Manifesto*, of another almond tree:

I always keep a picture tacked to my wall, of the gorgeous little painting of the Almond Tree which Bonnard was working at on his last day, to remind me of another fate, a more sublime and fixed one than that of Jews or my own peculiar Diasporism, where painting marks on canvas may spell peripatetic danger instead of peace in the sun. In fact, I return this day to a tiny picture of a False Messiah I thought I'd finished, taking up Bonnard's little tree, to infuse my Messiah with hopeful white paint, befitting the End of Days, prolonging its poor prospects and smothering the negative constraints of Diaspora for a moment; those negative aspects by the way, which in traditional interpretations are due to be resolved in the messianic end of time. I just came across a Biblical allusion to the flowering almond interpreted as the white head of an old man ... so my poor Messiah can be aged and maybe even something more than false.<sup>12</sup>

Kitaj refers here to Ecclesiastes 12.5 ('The almond tree blossoms'). His Diasporism defines the artist 'who lives and paints in two or more societies at once', a condition 'enacted under

<sup>9</sup> G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 1–21 and ff.

<sup>10</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 144–222.

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> R.B. Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 119. Bonnard's *Amandier en Fleurs* (*Almond Tree in Bloom*) (1945–7) can be viewed at <http://nga.gov.au/Bonnard/Detail.cfm?IRN=122444>

peculiar historical and personal freedoms, stresses, dislocation, rupture and momentum<sup>13</sup> – a condition clearly relevant to the emigrant experiences narrated in Sebald’s text, and descriptive of the situations of Sebald’s narrator and Max Ferber. For Kitaj, the almond tree embeds fixity and rootedness (in art or in one’s ‘chosen’ locale), the grounding of migrancy in a kind of symbolic settlement located principally and most effectively for the artist in the avowal of ideological and aesthetic allegiance to painterly tradition. In the section of the *Diasporist Manifesto* that follows this description of Bonnard’s painted almond tree, a section titled ‘ERROR’ and citing as its epigraph Abraham’s ‘I am a stranger and a sojourner’, Kitaj elaborates his Diasporist notion of the necessary errancy of the migrant artist within this tradition:

Having thought up the term Diasporism for painting, I now think it may be a name for the unnameable. It concerns me that my own painting modes, once I ‘identify’ with the worldly mode of dispersion, and in half-flight from the habits of my aesthetic hosts, shall lead to a place of no rest. Matisse wanted to achieve a place of rest (of composure?). But Cézanne? I hope not ... there is evidence enough he did not wish to conclude pictures with impunity, evidence pointing to what Maurice Blanchot (b. 1907) called ‘the infinite migration of error’. Then Blanchot explains me and my painting to myself: ‘Error means wandering, the inability to abide and stay. ... The wanderer’s country is not truth, but exile; he lives outside’.<sup>14</sup>

Kitaj quotes Blanchot’s comments on Kafka’s ‘Land Surveyor’, where Blanchot writes that ‘in this land of error one is never “here”, but always “far from here”’.<sup>15</sup> Kitaj and Blanchot together invoke literary tradition, paralleling the painterly one Kitaj has earlier invoked and which is also deployed in Sebald’s prose. ‘Surveying’ the land is, of course, a key activity of Sebald’s itinerant narrators; the narrator of ‘Max Ferber’ offers in the opening pages of the narrative a cognitive mapping of a particular version of Manchester, couched in modernist aesthetic terms, a description of the city around which we are circling and to which we will return shortly. What Kitaj, following Blanchot, perceives as the artist’s errancy into ‘a place of no rest’ suggests the movement into error of the exile, who is errant, displaced into wrongness. It implies Derrida’s ‘destinerrance’, a failed but necessary movement within the conflicting constraints error and errancy, inheritance and tradition, destination and destiny.<sup>16</sup> Destiny and errancy interlink in Sebald’s narrative: the narrator walks Manchester ‘with no particular destination in mind’ (*E* 156) and Ferber feels that in Manchester ‘I found my destiny’ (*E* 169).

Sebald’s characters, in their destinerrant migrations, inhabit the Diasporist territory of error that Kitaj’s ‘almond tree’ momentarily roots in the movement of tradition, a space of endless displacement in which ‘here’ is never ‘home’. Emmanuel Levinas also draws on Blanchot to articulate this space and to elaborate the kind of errancy with which Sebald’s writing concerns itself. In *Proper Names* Levinas writes that ‘Art, according to Blanchot, far from elucidating the world, exposes the desolate, lightless substratum underlying it, and restores to our sojourn its exotic essence – and, to the wonders of our architecture, their

<sup>13</sup> Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto*, 121.

<sup>15</sup> M. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 77.

<sup>16</sup> J. Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now: Seven Missiles, Seven Missives”, trans. by Catherine Porter & Philip Lewis, *Diacritics* 14–2 (Summer 1984), 20–31.

function of makeshift desert shelters'.<sup>17</sup> 'Desolation' and 'lightlessness' are, of course, expressions of the migrant experiences that organise Sebald's fictional extraterritorial spaces, liminal spaces bordering a grim relentless darkness, of which Manchester is the example in 'Max Ferber'. Ferber himself, in turn, exemplifies Kitaj's Diasporist painter, inhabiting like the other 'Emigrants' the space of his adopted home as an 'unknown' place and experiencing a radical displacement from his historical home. This displacement renders any notional origin as a distant, unfamiliar space lost even to memory, retrievable only through the most strenuous effort, symbolised in this narrative in the aesthetic processes available to the painter and the writer and embodied, for the narrator, in the diary of Luiza Lansberg.

The written and painted texts that each produce help the construction of specific kinds of space in the narrative. Both are characterised by an emphasis on surface. This is particularly true of Ferber's paintings (which, as we have seen, correspond to Auerbach's), with their excessively encrusted, almost three-dimensional facture, their dense layers of paint heavily applied with the palette knife. The image and its textual rendition in Sebald's prose share qualities of texture and facture that connect them to experimental modernist art. Joseph Conte draws on Deleuze and Guattari to argue that a particular kind of text, which he calls 'striated',

may be marked by the continuity or discontinuity of apperception, a mellifluousness or harshness in enunciation, a laminar or disturbed surface. One can evaluate the consistency or fragmentation of authorial voice, the hypotactic or disjunctive qualities of syntax, regular or irregular rhythms, the presence and variety of source materials, and the relative constraint by or liberation from formal devices.<sup>18</sup>

Ferber's paintings, modernist in conception and execution, exemplify the pictorial equivalent of such a text. Their heavily striated surfaces enact a representational effacement that (despite their autobiographical content) corresponds to the 'fragmentation of authorial voice', and the disjunctive structures of lines and grids in paintings like *To the Studios* imitate in pictorial terms the 'disjunctive qualities of syntax' and rhythm that Conte describes. Ferber's paintings construct through such devices an aesthetic space that the narrative connects to the fixity of belonging. They originate in his aesthetic response to the inscribing of the settled emigrant-artist into the cityscape, which he then strives, through the production of disturbed, disjunctive or 'striated' image-texts, to represent aesthetically 'take possession of'. The city, in turn, inhabits him: 'Manchester has taken possession of me for good' [*E* 169]).

Such modernist striation, a complexity of patterning on the surface of the text, is connected in Deleuzian thought with the condition or experience of coming-to-rest, of settlement. The spaces constructed by striation are organised, structured, regulated by the inscription of power into their surfaces, and performed here in the violence of Ferber's painting practice. Sebald's writing, in *The Emigrants*, moves relentlessly towards an imitation of striated painterly space in its seeking of kinds of fixity as places of rest; it imitates in its production the striated surfaces of Ferber's paintings. A closer examination of how these images are described in the prose reveals how Max Ferber's paintings typify painterly

<sup>17</sup> E. Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. by Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1996), 137.

<sup>18</sup> J. Conte, "The Smooth and the Striated: Compositional Texture in the Modern Long Poem", *Modern Language Studies* 27 (Spring 1997), 57–71, at <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jcontc/SmoothStriated.htm>.

versions of modernist striated texts that Sebald's prose, in its efforts to 'do justice to' them (*E* 230), comes to imitate. Ferber's canvases are products of a technique that Sebald describes in terms again echoing Hughes's descriptions of Auerbach's working methods. We're told that 'he applied paint thickly, and then repeatedly scratched it off the canvas as his work proceeded' (*E* 161). The action of scratching defines the striated text and connects it to the similar action, the 'scribble' (*E* 230) of writing. It results in a construction of painterly facture that is almost three-dimensional, producing a wholly striated modernist surface which Sebald's narrative displaces onto its by-product, the pile of dust and encrusted paint gathering on the studio floor: 'This, said Ferber, was the true product of his continuing endeavours and the most palpable proof of his failure' (*E* 161).

Later, Sebald's narrator describes – literally – his own act of writerly erasure in his efforts 'to do justice' to the narratives and documents Ferber has passed on to him: 'I had covered hundreds of pages with my scribble, in pencil and ballpoint. By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions' (*E* 230). Here writing imitates painting's version of the striated spaces of the city-becoming-home, its 'destructive' impasto, its thick or lumpy application of paint, or deep intense heavy brush marks. The qualities are constantly reworked by Sebald's narrative into a textual surface as writing imitates and redefines the striated spaces of Ferber's images in producing the textualised nomadic prose space constructed by the narrative 'Max Ferber'. 'Doing justice' in writing to Ferber's art corresponds to the artist's sense of his own 'palpable [...] failure', which we might define as a failure adequately to settle. The acts of destruction necessary for creation imply an aesthetic of negation, the rule of violent and displacing erasure or 'overpainting' over production, the enforced imposition of striated surfaces over the now historically distant surfaces of tradition and belonging, that Sebald identifies everywhere in his writing. Above all, the striated surfaces of Ferber's art invite a haptic response, a desired 'touching' which is a product of the overworking of the image's surface, and that affects the viewer in ways that Sebald's prose seeks to mimic. This, again, connects Ferber to the real painter on whom he is modelled: 'I wanted to make a painting that, when you saw it, would be like touching something in the dark', says Auerbach, introducing into painting the haptic implications of such striated spaces.<sup>19</sup> 'Touching something in the dark' returns us to the imagery of darkness and illumination noted earlier, figures of the spaces of urban destruction that Sebald's narrative relentlessly elaborates and which it finds figured in the final, paradoxically effective symbol of Ferber's striated acts of aesthetic destruction, the figure of the network or grid.

The narrator of 'Max Ferber' wanders around a Manchester dominated by gridlike traces of removed lives. In this space, 'Whole square kilometres of working-class homes had been pulled down by the authorities, so that, once the demolition rubble had been removed, all that was left to recall the lives of thousands of people was the grid-like layout of the streets' (*E* 157). This image recalls the 'interlinked rows of houses' seen earlier at the edge of the 'utter blackness' of Manchester, alongside Auerbach's deeply striated paintings of London demolition sites, which imitate in their characteristic facture the effective striation by building work and, earlier, by bombing, of the London landscape. Hughes writes of Auerbach's London building site paintings being 'furrowed and mucky but still insistently linear',<sup>20</sup> a

<sup>19</sup> Hughes, *Frank Auerbach*, 86.

<sup>20</sup> Hughes, *Frank Auerbach*, 150.

linearity we can see in paintings like *Maples Demolition Site* (1960), where the image, with its suggestions of grids and frames, is scored vertically by a deep striation, presenting a damaged surface that connotes a joist or structural beam awaiting installation. It is evident too in later paintings like *Mornington Crescent* (1967) where the image, freed up in terms of colour and range, becomes almost Mondrian-like in its deployment of grid-like structures to represent objects and constructions in the urban landscape which become virtually abstracted in their reduction to networks of lines.<sup>21</sup> Sebald's narrator discovers in post-industrial Manchester, the city he makes his temporary 'desert shelter', a similar space that the narrative seeks implicitly to connect to Auerbach's paintings of post-war London, a deterritorialised and heavily striated landscape of destroyed homes which recalls the 'firmer structural grid' found in Auerbach's later North London Landscapes.<sup>22</sup> It also recalls (as any visitor to Auschwitz-Birkenau knows) the grid-like, monstrously striated organisation of the concentration camps.

The grid, a recurrent figure in aesthetic modernity, is 'a place out of reach of everything that went before', as Rosalind Krauss puts it. For Krauss, 'the grid declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic'.<sup>23</sup> For Sebald, in contrast, the grid figures a profound and destructive connectivity, the implication of the aesthetic in the orchestration of genocide by bureaucratic modernity. The 'grid' of Manchester's streets offers the trace of demolished homes in Hulme, a grid prefigured in the 'network' of lights that earlier signify the geographical totality of England. Its presence as a ghostly trace left by a displaced class of people ('working-class homes') binds Ferber's Manchester and, by extension, Auerbach's London to the industrial horror enacted in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz-Birkenau, indicating the political critique suggested by the notion of striated space as violently organised, inscribed by the agency of social power. Later in 'Max Ferber' this binding links Manchester, via the exhibition of photographs in Frankfurt, to 'the Polish industrial centre of Łódź' (*E* 235), returning us, in this narrative's relentless circulations, to another historical 'centre'. As it does with the rhetoric of centres and circulations, Sebald's writing insistently draws us back to the grid as a historically-laden socially symbolic form, a figure of connectivity and organisation, through which Manchester becomes, figuratively, a version of the striated spaces ultimately associated in *The Emigrants* with the Shoah. Like the chimneys beneath which Ferber 'serves', or the 'exemplary organisation' of the 'war effort' evident in the photographs of the Lidzmannstadt Ghetto (*E* 172, 236), the grid is a menacing model of industrial efficiency, a figure connecting containment and destruction, a paradigm of the organised destructive potential of modernity.

Ferber's paintings, ekphrastically rendered or formally imitated in the narrative, are the aesthetic markers of this figurative connectivity. They seem to evolve, like the narrative's characters, 'from a long lineage of grey, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper' (*E* 162), where 'presences' signifies the persistence of history as 'trace'. Like the traces of the Emigrants and their pasts in Sebald's writing, the trace of the grid of Hulme's streets echoes these 'ghostly presences', an echo perceived as 'the very strangest of petrified or crystallised forms' that rhizomically imitate 'the growth

---

<sup>21</sup> *Maples Demolition Site* (1960) can be viewed at [http://www.terminartors.com/artworkprofile/Auerbach\\_Frank-Maples\\_Demolition\\_Site](http://www.terminartors.com/artworkprofile/Auerbach_Frank-Maples_Demolition_Site); *Mornington Crescent* (1967) can be viewed at <http://usa.artsgrantsfinder.com/tag/hayward-gallery/>

<sup>22</sup> Hughes, *Frank Auerbach*, 160.

<sup>23</sup> R.E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 10.

patterns of Nature' (*E* 230). Similarly the 'ash' inscribed in images and writing in Ferber's paintings and in the narrator's written version of Luiza Lansberg's memoir, described at the end of the tale as 'a thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched' (*E* 231), constitutes a striated text resembling, finally, the obliterated, overpainted tree, 'overworked to the point of being unrecognisable', that the narrator finds on Ferber's easel. This is yet another figure of the inexorable movement of life and art towards 'utter blackness', the movement that haunts *The Emigrants*.