

MAX FERBER AND THE PERSISTENCE OF PRE-MEMORY IN MANCUNIAN EXILE

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Abstract: This essay considers Sebald's writings about Manchester, notably in the Max Ferber section of *The Emigrants*, the prose poem *After Nature*, and the 'Bleston' sequence in the 2008 collection, *Über das Land und das Wasser*. Sebald's Manchester is a city of ruins, dust, deserted streets, blocked canals – a city in terminal decline. The Ferber story covers a period of about fifty years, and although the post-war scenario was certainly rather bleak, the city's regeneration in later years is barely registered. The same negative and depressing account of the city appeared in the earlier poems too. It has been suggested that Sebald's personal unhappiness during his early years in Manchester coloured his view of the city, and perhaps explains why he was drawn to its marginal areas and its 'neo-Dickensian aspects'. Sebald's contemporary reading of Michel Butor's novel, *L'emploi du temps* – another characterisation of the city as dirty, 'hateful', and even evil – no doubt fed into his own view. My suggestion, though, is that Sebald at some level is not really writing about Manchester at all. Rather, the melancholy which pervades his cityscape is the displaced memory of aspects of his own German past. Looking at Sebald's other work, and the places where he records his complex attitude to his birthplace, it is possible to identify a kind of 'pre-memory' – a hopeless nostalgia for an ideal, pre-lapsarian Germany, forever (for him) contaminated by the events of the Third Reich. It is this that translates into a world-view in exile.

When I think of Germany, it feels as if there were some kind of insanity lodged in my head.²

Max Ferber is the fourth and last person whose story is told in Sebald's *The Emigrants*. An artist living in Manchester, he arrived in England as a fifteen-year-old refugee from Germany in 1939. His parents were deported and died in Riga. After three years at a minor public school in Margate, Ferber decided to move to Manchester in 1943, and lived there for the rest of his life. The narrator – more or less Sebald himself – meets Ferber during his own stay in Manchester in the mid-1960s, and briefly resumes his contact with him twenty years later, in 1989, after coming across his work in the Tate Gallery. It is on this visit that Ferber tells the narrator stories about his life and emigration, and hands him his mother's memoir, written between 1939 and 1941 and telling, in its turn, stories about her own life. Reading this inspires the narrator – who is also a German living in England – two years later to visit the towns in which Ferber's mother Luisa had lived. In Bad Kissingen he spends hours in the Jewish cemetery. Soon after this, he hears that Ferber is dying in Withington Hospital, and pays him one last visit, and the story ends with the narrator in his Manchester hotel on that occasion.

This three-layered account of generations of Germans – two Jewish, one not – provides the occasion for complex reflections on Germany, past and present, and, in the case of the

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² W.G. Sebald, 'Max Ferber', *The Emigrants*, tr. Michael Hulse (London: The Harvill Press, 1997).

two living protagonists, reflections on the meaning of Germany to those in exile. I am interested in the way in which, despite themselves, the fictional and the real characters involved are unable to leave behind the memory of Germany. The traumatic memory of Nazism – or, in the case of those, like Sebald, of the later generation, the inherited memory of that trauma – is shadowed by what I will here call the ‘pre-memory’ of a more innocent German past, which manifests itself throughout the text and, indeed, throughout Sebald’s work.

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As Sebald has told us, the first three characters in *The Emigrants* are based on ‘almost a one-to-one relationship between these lives and the lives of people I knew’.³ Max Ferber, however, is a composite figure, based partly on a landlord Sebald had had in Manchester in the 1960s (referred to by him in interviews as D.) and partly on the artist Frank Auerbach. Both were Jewish refugees from Germany. D. escaped from Munich in 1939 at the age of fifteen; the story of Ferber’s parents is D’s story.⁴ Auerbach came to England on the Kindertransport in 1939, at the age of 9; his parents did not survive the Holocaust.⁵ As far as I know, he had no particular connection with Manchester. Auerbach himself objected to this too-obvious identification with the fictional character, and as a result Sebald changed the character’s name when the book was translated into English, from Max Aurach to Max Ferber. He, or his publishers, also removed two of the images in the German edition which too clearly identify Ferber with Auerbach, the first a portrait sketch by Auerbach, and the second a close-up of Auerbach’s own eye.⁶ As always with Sebald, what we should make of details of the story, or of the images which interrupt the narrative, is not obvious. Sebald has said about his work that the big events are true, while the detail is invented, to give the effect of the real.⁷ He has also said that ‘ninety percent of the images inserted into the text could be said to be authentic’ (though perhaps it is not entirely clear what ‘could be said’ means, or, indeed, ‘authentic’).⁸

Reading the Max Ferber story again, I found myself less concerned with these questions about the ‘true’ identity of the protagonists, or even of the narrator, than with the account of the city. The Manchester described by Sebald, as experienced both by the narrator and by Max Ferber, bore little relation to the city in which I was born and grew up (and in which I now live once again). Sebald’s Manchester is a city of ruins, dust, deserted streets, blocked canals, a city in terminal decline, and this across the more than fifty years the story covers.

³ E. Wachtel, “Ghost hunter” in L.S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 38.

⁴ C. Angier, “Who is W.G. Sebald?” in Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory*, 73. (Originally appeared in *The Jewish Quarterly*, Winter 1996–97).

⁵ See biographical note in S. Compton, ed., *British Art in the 20th Century: The Modern Movement* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag and London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1986), 419.

⁶ W.G. Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten: Vier lange Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994), 240 and 265. In the German edition, the eye illustrates this passage, in which the narrator has come across an article about Ferber in a Sunday colour supplement: “I studied Ferber’s dark eye, looking sideways out of a photograph that accompanied the text, and tried, at least with hindsight, to understand what inhibitions or wariness there had been on his part that had kept our conversations away from his origins, despite the fact that such a talk, as I now realized, would have been the obvious thing.” (178).

⁷ M. Jaggi, “Recovered memories”, *The Guardian Profile* (22 September 2001).

⁸ Wachtel, “Ghost hunter”, 41.

Ferber arrives in the 1940s, the narrator in the 1960s, and the final visit and encounter is in the early 1990s (though the structure of the story means that the urban descriptions are not chronological). Actually Ferber does not say much about how the city struck him on arrival in 1943 (other than a reference to the ‘black façades’).⁹ The narrator, arriving in 1966, when the story begins, gives a gloomy view of run-down houses, doors and windows boarded, wastelands and, in general, a city ‘that had once been the hub of one of the nineteenth century’s miracle cities but, as I was soon to find out, was now almost hollow to the core’.¹⁰ On his return, in 1989, he finds that ‘everything in Manchester had essentially remained the same as it had been almost a quarter of a century before. The buildings that had been put up to stave off the general decline were now themselves in the grip of decay, and even the so-called development zones, created in recent years on the fringes of the city centre and along the Ship Canal... already looked semi-abandoned’.¹¹ Although it is the case that some of the post-war inner-city developments failed, and the loss of manufacturing jobs had continued into the early 1980s, this does not sound like the Manchester of the late 1980s, with a newly developing service sector, other major planning initiatives, and the beginnings of a thriving cultural scene.¹² But even in 1966, ten years after the Clean Air Act mandated smokeless fuel, the city’s regeneration had to some extent begun. And certainly this comment, at the very end of the Ferber story, about the narrator’s stay in the Midland Hotel (1992), suggests a perverse determination to distort the reality and insist on ruin and decline where there is none:

Today the Midland is on the brink of ruin. In the glass-roofed lobby, the reception rooms, the stairwells, the lifts and the corridors one rarely encounters either a hotel guest or one of the chambermaids or waiters who prowl about like sleepwalkers. The legendary steam heating, if it works at all, is erratic; fur flakes from out of the taps; the window panes are coated in thick grime marbled by rain; whole tracts of the building are closed off; and it is presumably only a matter of time before the Midland closes its doors and is sold off and transformed into a Holiday Inn.¹³

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In an earlier work, his prose poem *After Nature*, Sebald portrays Manchester in equally bleak terms. The third and last poem of the book is autobiographical, one section addressing the author’s time in Manchester. This is the Manchester of his memory:

.... Often at that time
I rambled over the fallow
Elysian Fields, wondering
at the work of destruction, the black
mills and shipping canals,
the disused viaducts and
warehouses, the many millions
of bricks, the traces of smoke,
of tar and sulphuric acid.¹⁴

⁹ Sebald, “Max Ferber”, 192.

¹⁰ Sebald, “Max Ferber”, 151.

¹¹ Sebald, “Max Ferber”, 179.

¹² S. Hylton, *A History of Manchester* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co. Ltd., 2003), 215–217.

¹³ Sebald, “Max Ferber”, 233.

¹⁴ W.G. Sebald, *After Nature*, tr. Michael Hamburger (New York: Modern Library, Random House Inc., 2002), 97–98.

It is true that, as later in the case of the narrator of ‘Max Ferber’, Sebald seems to choose the more derelict areas of the city:

Once, while searching
for the star-shaped Strangeways
Prison, an overwhelming
panoptic structure whose walls
are as high as Jericho’s, I found
myself in a sort of no-man’s-land
behind the railway buildings, in a terrace
of low houses apparently due
for demolition, with shops left vacant.¹⁵

But nowhere is the living city manifest, the buildings in use, the denizens engaged in their active lives. Instead, the ghosts of earlier generations appear to the author, who recalls Manchester’s Victorian glory (from ‘among the previous century’s ruins’) and somehow sees the war-time volunteers, haunting the rubbish dumps.¹⁶ These latter images, Sebald goes on, ‘often plunged me into a quasi/sublunary state of deep/melancholia’.¹⁷ But I wonder (perhaps in defence of my native city) whether it makes more sense to reverse this causality, and to say that the writer, the ‘anatomist of melancholy’ as he has been called, projects his malaise onto the urban scene.¹⁸ Susan Hill has asked this question about Sebald:

Over all his writing is a sort of miasma of existential despair. Is it that he chooses to visit places which are in deep shadow, hold memories of a terrible past, are bleak and run-down, poor and seedy and out of date, or is it that this is his permanent mood, a mood that somehow infects and alters places?¹⁹

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In a long biographical essay, Richard Sheppard suggests that Sebald’s unhappiness during his time in Manchester (1966–68 and 1969–70) coloured his perception of the city. As the following quotation makes clear, the decay and desolation portrayed in ‘Max Ferber’ did not match the reality of the city. (Sheppard refers to Sebald throughout as Max, the name by which he was known to friends and colleagues.)

Max’s low spirits help to explain why he was particularly drawn to ... the ‘idiosyncratic and skewed’, ‘neo-Dickensian’ aspects of the city that would feature in ‘Max Aurach/Ferber’. Objectively, the ruinous cityscapes described by Max were disappearing thanks to the Manchester Development Plan that had been approved in 1961 by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government. Subjectively, such unwonted scenes became the correlatives of his inner sense of melancholy, alienation and exile in a strange land.²⁰

Of course *The Emigrants* was not written until many years later – first published in German in 1993 – and *After Nature* appeared in 1988. By then, Sebald had been teaching at the

¹⁵ Sebald, *After Nature*, 100–1.

¹⁶ Sebald, *After Nature*, 97 and 99.

¹⁷ Sebald, *After Nature*, 99.

¹⁸ R. Görner, ed., *The Anatomist of Melancholy: Essays in Memory of W.G. Sebald* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2003).

¹⁹ S. Hill, “Sebald” in *Howards End is on the Landing: A Year of Reading from Home* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 144.

²⁰ R. Sheppard, “The Sternheim years: W.G. Sebald’s *Lehrjahre* and *Theatralische Sendung* 1963–1970” in J. Catling and R. Hibbitt, eds., *Saturn’s Moons: A W.G. Sebald Handbook* (London: Legenda, 2011), 66, 68. The phrases in quotation marks are taken from letters to the author from Professor David Blamires, a colleague of Sebald’s at Manchester.

University of East Anglia for many years, having moved there in 1970. As Sheppard tells it, these were much happier years for Sebald – or, at least, he recalls him in the early 1970s as ‘a far less troubled person than, according to his Manchester friends, he had been there’.²¹ And several of his interviewers in later years comment on his wit and his sense of humour.²² But I think Sheppard’s point is that Sebald’s experience of Manchester, recalled later in his stories, was the bleak exteriorisation of his subjective state at the time. Sheppard tells us that during his stay Sebald was reading Michel Butor’s novel, *L’emploi du temps* (translated as *Passing Time*), and that cannot have helped. The novel, written in diary form by a Frenchman, Jacques Revel, sent to spend a year as a clerk at an export firm in a northern English city, is part mystery, part psychological drama, part romance, with many pages also devoted to descriptions of paintings, tapestries and stained glass windows. The fictional town is called Bleston – Butor even provides an invented map as a frontispiece – and it may or may not be based on Manchester. At one point the narrator says Bleston is very like other cities, including Manchester, perhaps suggesting it is not in fact Manchester.²³ But the book was published in 1957, only a few years after Butor himself spent two years (1951–3) teaching at Manchester University – as Sebald himself was to do in the following decade. It is generally read as a novel about, or at least set in, Manchester.²⁴ And Manchester does not come off very well. Throughout, the city is construed as the ‘enemy’ of the protagonist, at best unpleasant, at worst actively hostile. At the start of the book, as the diarist looks back on his arrival months earlier, he writes:

Then I took a deep breath, and the air tasted bitter, acid, sooty, as heavy as if each droplet of its fog were laden with iron filings.....

I sniffed the air, I tasted it, knowing I was now condemned to breathe it for a whole year, and I realised that it was laden with those insidious fumes which for the past seven months have been choking me, submerging me in that terrible apathy from which I have only just roused myself.²⁵

A little later, he says ‘the gigantic insidious sorcery of Bleston overwhelmed and bewitched me, leading me astray, far from my real self, in a smoky wilderness’. Bleston is called a ‘hateful town’, an ‘evil city’, with a ‘horrible river’.²⁶ And before he is rescued from his depressing first lodgings, he recalls the dangers averted:

I should gradually have accepted my fate.... My eyes would have succumbed at last to the smoke, the fog, the boredom, to winter and its mud, to all the ugliness and monotony; total blindness would have crept over me unawares; the curse would have been fulfilled; what would have been left of me?²⁷

²¹ Sheppard, “The Sternheim years”, 92.

²² Sheppard refers to his ‘developed and irreverent sense of humour’ (“The Sternheim years”, 92). Arthur Lubow says “In person, Sebald was funnier than his lugubrious narrators. He was celebrated among those lucky enough to hear him as a witty raconteur.” (“Crossing boundaries”, in Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory*, 170). According to Maya Jaggi “His sombre reserve is relieved by a kindness, deadpan wit and occasional flashes of laughter”. (Jaggi, “Recovered memories”).

²³ M. Butor, *Passing Time*, tr. Jean Stewart (London: John Calder, 1961), 36.

²⁴ For Sebald, it clearly was read as such, as is clear from his sequence of poems, “Bleston: a Mancunian cantical”. W.G. Sebald, *Across the Land and the Water: Selected Poems 1964–2001*, tr. Iain Galbraith (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011), 18–22.

²⁵ Butor, *Passing Time*, 8.

²⁶ Butor, *Passing Time*, 29, 195, 224 and 142.

²⁷ Butor, *Passing Time*, 110.

But these are, clearly, the ravings of a neurasthenic, whose debilitated psychological state produces monsters in the environment. By the time the narrator is challenging the city head-on, we have long since realised that none of this is about an actual city – Bleston or Manchester – of which, in fact, there are no physical descriptions at all (quite unlike the Manchester of ‘Max Ferber’). Two (of many) quotations make this quite clear:

From the very first I had felt this town to be unfriendly, unpleasant, a treacherous quicksand; but it was during these weeks of routine, as I gradually felt its lymph seeping into my blood, its grip tightening, my present existence growing rudderless, amnesia creeping over me, that I began to harbour that passionate hatred towards it which, I am convinced, was in part a sign of my contamination by it, a kind of personal animosity.²⁸

And, as his departure approaches:

And at the same moment I saw the town itself in a new light, as though the wall alongside which I have been groping ever since my arrival, here and there less opaque, had suddenly grown thinner, disclosing forgotten depths, so that my shrinking courage returned and I felt once again, thanks to this unfamiliar light, capable of defying the town and protecting myself from it, of resisting it more strongly until the time comes, at the end of September, for me to leave it.²⁹

If Sebald, already in ‘low spirits’, was reading Butor in Manchester, at the same time choosing the more abandoned city sites to explore, it may not be surprising that the city we discover in ‘Max Ferber’ (and in *After Nature*) is a depressing, run-down, hopeless kind of urban space. His poem ‘Bleston: A Mancunian cantical’, written in January 1967 – that is, during his period in Manchester – is a complex work with fragments of French and Latin and classical, biblical and other allusions. Amongst all its other references and associations, it foregrounds Butor’s name for the city and foreshadows Sebald’s own later bleak interpretation in phrases like ‘soot-covered trees’, starlings ‘huddled together sleepless on the sills of Lewis’s Big Warehouse’, and ships offshore ‘waiting in the fog’.³⁰

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In fact, though, my irritation with this bleak view, and my defensiveness about the city, are quite misplaced, because the story may not really be about Manchester at all. (In one way, it is so little about Manchester that Ferber’s statement that ‘Manchester has taken possession of me for good. I cannot leave, I do not want to leave, I must not’³¹ is lifted more or less wholesale from Auerbach’s ‘I hate leaving London’).³² Nor is it especially about the actual lives of German-Jewish refugees in Manchester. (For example, the reality for most of them of internment for at least a year as ‘enemy aliens’ is not mentioned in the text).³³ I want to suggest that Manchester itself fades into insignificance in relation to another important geographical, phantasmic and persistent presence, which is Germany. Sometimes this is

²⁸ Butor, *Passing Time*, 36.

²⁹ Butor, *Passing Time*, 237.

³⁰ W.G. Sebald, *Across the Land and the Water*, 18, 20.

³¹ Sebald, “Max Ferber”, 169.

³² M. Harrison, *Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties* (London: Merrell Publishers Ltd., 2002), 28.

³³ See, amongst other texts, C. Chappell, *Island of Barbed Wire: The Remarkable Story of World War Two Internment on the Isle of Man* (London: Robert Hale, 1984); R. Stent, *A Bespattered Page? The Internment of ‘His Majesty’s Most Loyal Enemy Aliens’* (London: André Deutsch, 1980); P. and L. Gillman, *‘Collar the Lot!’ How Britain Interned and Expelled its Wartime Refugees* (London: Quartet Books, 1980); F. Lafitte, *The Internment of Aliens* (London: Libris, 1988. First published 1940).

explicit. Ferber remarks that on his arrival Manchester struck him as very like Germany, with its mix of German and Jewish immigrants: ‘I imagined I could begin a new life in Manchester, from scratch; but instead, Manchester reminded me of everything I was trying to forget.... and so, although I had intended to move in the opposite direction, when I arrived in Manchester I had come home’.³⁴ More generally, though, the story (as well as the other stories in *The Emigrants*) is pervaded by the memory of ‘Germany’ – actual biographical memories as well as the inescapable memory of the period of the Third Reich. These unavoidably provide the background, and often the focus, of the narration. And alongside these, less clearly articulated, is a deeper sense of cultural and national identity. I think that the melancholy which is translated into descriptions of a decaying urban scene comes from elsewhere.

Marianne Hirsch has introduced the concept of ‘postmemory’ in discussing the ways in which children of Holocaust survivors are marked by their parents’ experience and also, as she puts it, because ‘it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences’.³⁵ Although it is a notion about which I have some reservations, it has the great advantage of raising the question of generations and the persistence of trauma in different forms. I think we could benefit too from a concept of ‘pre-memory’ – not so much to distinguish generations, but to acknowledge the time before the traumatic break, and its continuity into the present. I find it unhelpful to operate with strict dichotomies and categories here – before/after 1933 (or 1939, or 1942 – the Wannsee conference), German/Jewish (as if the ‘Germanness’ of German Jews is eradicated), even ‘German’ as somehow unequivocally on the dark side (Daniel Goldhagen, some readings of Klaus Theweleit).³⁶ The pre-memory of Germans in exile – or voluntarily expatriated³⁷ – German and Jewish, war or post-war generation, is visible (and audible) in many ways. Indeed, it may emerge even when the moment of trauma, which supercedes it, is blocked by the familiar psychic mechanisms which trauma mobilises. Among refugees it is not difficult to find examples. Thomas Mann, in exile in California, said ‘Where I am, is Germany’.³⁸ The artist Harry Weinberger, who died in September 2009 – he was born in Berlin in 1924 and arrived in Britain on the Kindertransport in 1939 – was well aware of retaining aspects of his ‘Germanness’. Throughout his career, he painted in expressionist, fauvist style, and in the 1980s he told an interviewer: ‘As much as I have an accent in my language I have an accent in my painting.... The majority of English people find my paintings too emotive, too direct.’³⁹ (The pre-memory of those who were forced to leave their homeland is movingly engaged, sixty years after exile, in Artur Żijewski’s 2003 video ‘Our songbook’, in which

³⁴ Sebald, “Max Ferber”, 191–192.

³⁵ M. Hirsch, “Mourning and postmemory” in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 21–22.

³⁶ D.J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Random House, 1996); K. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

³⁷ In the English edition of *The Emigrants*, the narrator says that he and Ferber discussed, amongst other things, ‘our exile in England’ (181). The German original, less controversially, refers to ‘das englische Asyl’ (Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten*, 269).

³⁸ A. Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America from the 1930s to the Present* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983), 306.

³⁹ M. Berghahn, *German-Jewish Refugees in England: The Ambiguities of Assimilation* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), 94–5. The book was reissued with the title *Continental Britons: German-Jewish Refugees from Nazi Germany* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007).

elderly Polish-Jewish refugees, now living in Israel, recall at the artist's request – and with more or less success – the songs of their childhood in Poland.)⁴⁰

The question of pre-memory of Germany and of German culture for non-Jewish Germans is, I think, much more complex, and here it is the second generation in which this has been particularly evident – in that sense, there is a certain asymmetry with the generational structure of victims.⁴¹ The inheritance of guilt seems to bring with it a need for a more radical break with that culture, including for some physical emigration. At the same time, this separation cannot be complete. Sebald has spoken in several interviews about his relationship to the crimes of his parents' generation. In a radio interview in 1997 he said 'I feel you can't simply abdicate and say, well, it's nothing to do with me. I have inherited that backpack and I have to carry it whether I like it or not'.⁴² More unequivocally, he has also said that he knows Germany is his country.⁴³ I suspect that the debate about Sebald's ethics in his devastating account of the firebombing of German cities misses a key point.⁴⁴ I cannot myself see why his critics have accused him of suggesting moral equivalency with the crimes of Nazism, or of ignoring the actual reasons (or at least the rationale) for the bombing, given his other writing and the views expressed in his many interviews.⁴⁵ I wonder, though, whether behind the desire to give voice to atrocities so far barely recorded in literature (in this case atrocities committed by the Allies) lie the pain and the melancholy which are the product of an ineradicable attachment to the country of his birth. The pre-memory – in this case not of the historic moment before the trauma but rather of the time of innocence before the shock of knowledge – thus persists in exile. (Sebald has spoken about his early ignorance about recent German history, and the moment at which, as an adolescent, he first learned the facts.)⁴⁶ Will Self, in the January 2010 annual Sebald Lecture, suggested that Sebald's 'elegant, elegiac and haunting prose narratives reinstate the prelapsarian German-speaking world', and I think this may be a useful way of thinking about the residue of uncomplicated attachment to his homeland that we detect in his writing.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Żmijewski's 'Our Songbook' (2003), an eleven-minute video projection, was included in a survey of his work at the Cornerhouse, Manchester, November 2009–January 2010.

⁴¹ The pre-memory – even nostalgia – of the survivors themselves is rather uncomplicated; their children, having no memory of living in Germany, can only experience this at second hand (Hirsch's post-memory), and it appears far outweighed by the indirect memory of the trauma itself (the Holocaust). In the case of Germans, it is the second generation, especially those who reject Germany (its history and culture, and, for émigrés, the country itself), who bring with them memories – either the stories of their parents, or their own lives before, like Sebald, they developed an awareness of events of the 1930s and 40s. See E.L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990) for a psychoanalytic account of the problem of mourning for Germans after the Third Reich.

⁴² Wachtel, "Ghost hunter", 51. See also Jaggi, "Recovered memories": "It's the chronological continuity that makes you think it is something to do with you".

⁴³ Wachtel, "Ghost hunter" 50. In his acceptance speech on his election to the German Academy in 1996 he spoke of being 'only a guest' in England, and of his dream (fear?) of being 'unmasked as a traitor to my country'. 'Acceptance Speech to the Collegium of the German Academy' in *Campo Santo* (London: Penguin, 2006), 217.

⁴⁴ W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, tr. Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003).

⁴⁵ See R. Franklin, "Rings of smoke" in Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory*.

⁴⁶ For example, in his interview with Jaggi, "Recovered memories".

⁴⁷ W. Self, "Sebald, the good German?", edited version of annual Sebald Lecture, British Centre for Literary Translation at University of East Anglia, delivered 11 January 2010. *Times Literary Supplement* (January 26, 2010). Accessed online 1 February 2010 at: http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article7003221.ece

When Sebald writes about his place of birth (Wertach im Algäu in Bavaria, southern Germany), or records his return there, as in the section ‘Il ritorno in patria’ in the 1990 *Vertigo* (published in English in 1999), we find moments of pleasure quite absent in the encounter with Manchester. Arriving in the region in November 1987, after an absence of thirty years, he records his impression:

At a hairpin bend I looked out of the turning bus down into the depths below and could see the turquoise surfaces of the Fernstein and Samaranger lakes, which, even when I was a child, on our first excursions into the Tyrol, had seemed to me the essence of all conceivable beauty.⁴⁸

In the section of the autobiographical poem in *After Nature* which addresses his early life, Sebald describes an idyllic scene:

In a Chinese cricket cage
for a time we kept good fortune
imprisoned. The Paradise apples
grew splendidly, a good mass of gold
lay on the barn floor and you said,
one must watch over the
bridegroom as over a
scholar by night. Often
it was carnival time
for the children....⁴⁹

And yet these moments are surrounded by other, more anxious and negative observations – ‘other people’s misfortunes’ in *After Nature*,⁵⁰ the troubles of neighbours described in *Vertigo*, and always the shadow of what is unspoken – Germany’s mid-century history. When Sebald claims, as he often does, a certain nostalgia for his home country (or rather, for he differentiates here, for the particular area of southern Germany where he grew up), he always immediately cancels this with a critical reaction. On the return in 1987, he walks in the hills and mountains, ‘all of them paths I had walked in my childhood at my grandfather’s side and which had meant so much to me in my memory, but, as I came to realise, meant nothing to me now’.⁵¹ In answer to a question about how he feels about Germany, he says: ‘I still suffer from homesickness, of course. I take the train from Munich, and it turns the corner southwards, near Kempten, and I feel ... and then as soon as I get out of the railway station I want to go back. I can’t stand the sight of it’.⁵²

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I suppose I must confront the fact that the mission I seem to be on to defend Manchester from W. G. Sebald’s gloomy interpretation relates to my own pre-memory. After more than forty years away from the city, I have returned with a perhaps exaggerated devotion to the place. I had already left by the time Sebald arrived in 1966, and although I returned often, even while living overseas, I only learned to know the contemporary city when I began to live here again in 2006. There is a great moment in Ibsen’s play, ‘Enemy of the People’

⁴⁸ W.G. Sebald, “Il ritorno in patria”, *Vertigo*, tr. Michael Hulse (London: Vintage Books, 2002), 176.

⁴⁹ Sebald, *After Nature*, 93.

⁵⁰ Sebald, *After Nature*, 94.

⁵¹ Sebald, “Il ritorno in patria”, 210.

⁵² Angier, “Who is W.G. Sebald?”, 67.

(sometimes translated as ‘A Public Enemy’), in which Dr. Stockmann talks about the enthusiasm of the native, returned from exile:

I’ve loved my native town as deeply as any man can love the home of his childhood. I was still young when I went away, and separation, memories, and homesickness cast a kind of enchantment over the town and its people....And when, at long last, fate granted me the great happiness of coming home again, it seemed to me, my friends, that there was nothing else I wanted in the whole world! At least, there was just one thing: I had an urgent, tireless, burning desire to work for the good of my native town and its people.⁵³

‘Pre-memory’ is not quite the right term here – there was no trauma, abrupt moment of departure, or prelapsarian version of the city. But my desire to engage with Sebald’s (mis)representation of Manchester, despite the dutiful marshalling of counter-evidence and of more up-beat ‘facts’, is certainly to some extent the not-so-objective product of psychic investment on the part of another kind of exile. Perhaps my Manchester is no more ‘real’ than Sebald’s.

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I think, returning to the story of Max Ferber, that it is neither surprising nor accidental that, back in the supposedly disintegrating Midland Hotel, we actually finish our narrative, through three lives and several decades, in Germany – or rather in a fantasised Germany. Sitting in his room after his last visit to Ferber, the narrator seems to hear a voice remembered from the 1960s, the tenor known as Siegfried, singing arias from Wagner’s *Parsifal*.⁵⁴ At the same time, he recalls an exhibition he had seen a year earlier in Frankfurt, of photos of the Polish ghetto of Litzmannstadt (Lodz). The story ends, not in Manchester and not with Ferber, but with a description of a photograph of three young women working on a carpet-making loom.⁵⁵ The juxtaposition of the doomed ghetto – and, most likely, doomed women – with the Wagnerian tenor encapsulates Sebald’s complicated relationship to his country and its history. For Max Ferber and the narrator (and, I would argue, Sebald himself) exile is always accompanied by the pre-memory of Germany.

⁵³ H. Ibsen, “A public enemy” in *Ghosts and Other Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 182.

⁵⁴ Sebald, “Max Ferber”, 234–5. In *After Nature*, Sebald’s memory of his wanderings around Manchester recalls instead that ‘a radiantly blue-eyed, /down-and-out heroic tenor, who always wore a winter coat/too long for him and a Homburg hat/sang *Tannhäuser* arias accompanied/by a Wurlitzer organ’. *After Nature*, 100.

⁵⁵ Sebald, “Max Ferber”, *The Emigrants*, 237.