



Melilah
MANCHESTER JOURNAL
OF JEWISH STUDIES

*Memory, Traces and
the Holocaust in the
Writings of W.G. Sebald*

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MEMORY, TRACES AND THE HOLOCAUST IN THE WRITINGS OF W.G. SEBALD

Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Janet Wolff

Introduction

By now, we should have been able to make out the sprawling mass of Manchester, yet one could see nothing but a faint glimmer, as if from a fire almost suffocated in ash. A blanket of fog that had risen out of the marshy plains that reached as far as the Irish Sea had covered the city, a city spread across a thousand square kilometres, built of countless bricks and inhabited by millions of souls, dead and alive.¹

Thus the narrator of one of the four short stories which make up *The Emigrants* relates his arrival in Manchester. We know that W.G. Sebald was a German language assistant at the University of Manchester in the mid 1960s and that, in total, during two separate periods of residence, he spent a little over two years in the city. Manchester, birthplace of industry, symbol of modernity, the very city in which Friedrich Engels gained the first-hand experience of the working classes he recorded in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, city of red bricks, of bright lights, but also a symbol of industrial decline and illusory fresh starts, this city which does not seem to hold much meaning for the European imagination any longer, can be read as the starting point of the author's adventure in the realm of fiction. Sebald's point of arrival in England, Manchester, marked both the end and the beginning of a journey for the author. German-born, Sebald refused to live in Germany, as did so many other members of the postwar, post-Nazism generation, a generation of "innocents" who could never reconcile themselves to living in the land of the guilty. Giving the lie to the smug self-image of the Federal Republic of Germany, to the economic and political miracle of the Bonn Republic, more than one million West Germans would emigrate during the years of the postwar boom. Among them was Sebald, who explained, in a series of carefully measured interviews given following his meteoric rise to literary fame, that it was in Manchester that he discovered Jews, in particular German Jewish refugees from the 1930s. He explained that his landlord was a German Jewish emigrant who had arrived in 1933.

The last story is based on two figures, on a well-known contemporary painter and on a landlord I had in Manchester who was an émigré and came to Manchester in 1933 (...) And this was for me quite a momentous experience, this whole Manchester business, because growing up in Germany you do perhaps learn the odd thing or did at the time... I mean, one didn't really talk about the Holocaust, as it is called, in the 1960s in schools, nor did your parents ever mention it, God forbid, and they didn't talk about it amongst themselves either. So this was a huge taboo zone (...) And so I go to Manchester. I didn't know anything about England nor about Manchester nor about its history or anything at all. And there they were all around me, because Manchester has a very

¹ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* (London: The Harvill Press, 1996), 150.

large Jewish community, and very concentrated in certain suburbs, and the place where I lived was full of Jewish people.²

This education in exile, following the same path, albeit in far less painful circumstances, as his Jewish compatriots thirty years earlier, led him to construct a literary universe in which the theme of German Jewish names frequently recurs. Thus, towards the end of what is perhaps his greatest work, his novel *Austerlitz*, Sebald, who is and is not the narrator of his long peregrination across Europe, finds himself in Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris:

For instance, one curiously gloomy morning recently I was in the Cimetière de Montparnasse, laid out by the Hospitallers in the seventeenth century on land belonging to the Hôtel de Dieu and now surrounded by towering office blocks, walking among the gravestones erected in a vaguely segregated part in memory of members of the Woelfflin, Wormser, Mayerbeer, Ginsberg, Franck and many other Jewish families, and I felt as if, despite knowing nothing of my origins for so long, I had lingered among them before, or as if they were still accompanying me. I read all their euphonious German names and retained them in my mind...³

Yet Sebald does not allow his German Jewish émigrés a comfortable and fulfilled existence in England. They are prisoners of lost memories which the author valiantly, but usually unsuccessfully, attempts to return to them (except, perhaps, in *Austerlitz*, a novel in which the hero effectively rediscovers fragments of his past). The city of Manchester, even if it appears only rarely in his writing, can be read as the seminal site where one can learn how to read traces of the past, but also as that of the trace's destruction. The urban landscape of this industrial metropolis, in decline since at least the end of the nineteenth century, no doubt lends itself to this role. Yet Sebald's text can also be read as a palimpsest, as an accumulation of cultural, literary and chronological strata to be sifted through and enjoyed by the reader. In his description of the city are to be found echoes of another temporary member of staff at the same university who had arrived a few years before Sebald and taught in the French department. Michel Butor, one of the leading lights of the French *nouveau roman*, had devoted a whole book to Manchester, which he renamed "Bleston", with his novel *L'Emploi du temps*⁴ (translated as *Passing Time*).⁵ Various passages in Sebald's writings on Manchester are highly reminiscent of Butor, such as the author's account of his arrival in the city quoted above, but more generally in the morbid fascination exerted by the Lancashire metropolis. Just as Butor speaks of Manchester's "spell", Sebald's character Max Ferber seems fatally entranced by the city:

As I expected, I have remained in Manchester to this day, Ferber continued. It is now twenty-two years since I arrived, he said, and with every year that passes a change of place seems less conceivable. Manchester has taken possession of me for good. I cannot leave, I do not want to leave, I must not. Even the visits I have to make to London once or twice a year oppress and upset me.⁶

This collection of essays emerges from the symposium held in Manchester on 5 February 2011. Scholars from several departments in the University of Manchester and the

² "Interview with Joseph Cuomo", in L.S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory. Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 104–6.

³ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 360.

⁴ M. Butor, *L'Emploi du temps* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957).

⁵ *Passing Time*, trans. by Jean Stewart (London: Faber & Faber, 1961).

⁶ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 169.

Manchester Metropolitan University (with a colleague from Oxford Brookes) gathered and brought together their readings of Sebald. Most of the contributors, as residents of Manchester, were drawn to Sebald's time in the city and his writing on it, in particular the themes of architecture, urban planning, *flânerie* in the city, the canals, the ruined warehouses, the mills. As many of the writers of this volume are also "transplants" from elsewhere, there is inevitable identification with Sebald's arrival in the city, even if we arrived in Manchester years after his time there. Manchester is also an important presence in Sebald's works, where it is described as a seminal place and a moment of discovery, somehow recalling the small town in the Bavarian Alps where the writer was born. Strangely enough, it was in Manchester that Sebald truly came to terms with the Third Reich and the Holocaust. The theme of displacement and its expression through art also seems to originate from the city. While some of the essays in this volume dwell on Sebald's time in and writing about Manchester, another explores his treatment of a nearby region, Wales. Besides Manchester, the idea of "traces" is another vital thread running through the volume. Traces of the Holocaust are of course present throughout all these contributions but the authors go beyond Holocaust memory to analyse how Sebald wrote and read traces of the past, whether air raids over Germany or personal relations. Some contributors allow themselves to write more personal, impressionistic responses to the style of Sebald, rather than a purely intellectual analysis of it. However, these impressionistic moments and reactions are always thoroughly interrogated at a scholarly level.

This volume does not pretend to be a collection of essays by Sebald specialists. In this sense, the reader should not see it as an addition to the ever-growing number of theoretical and highly specialised works devoted to the author. It is rather a series of attempts at readings, attempts at moving around a text which constantly asks to be shifted. The contributors are drawn from varied disciplines and most are not literature specialists, apart from John Sears, Monica Pearl and Carole Angier, author of a biography of Primo Levi and one of W.G. Sebald's first interviewers following the publication of *The Emigrants*.⁷ Angier examines the return of the dead in the author's writings, a frequently recurring theme found throughout his work, and especially in his text *Campo Santo*, which deals with representations of death in Corsica.⁸ Jean-Marc Dreyfus, a historian of the Holocaust, describes the function of the fragments of history and memory of the Shoah in Britain in the construction of Sebald's *Austerlitz*. Monica Pearl, a specialist in American literature, analyses Sebald's prose as a process of continual movement: "When I refer to the peripatetic nature of Sebald's writing," she writes "I am referring to an impression. I am referring to how it feels to read Sebald; how it has always felt to me reading Sebald is that one is taking a very long walk with him." Jeremy Gregory, a historian of Protestantism in eighteenth-century England, presents a highly original reading of the significance of Methodism within *Austerlitz*, which he reads as one of the fundamental underpinnings of the novel as a whole. John Sears brings us back to Manchester, where he teaches literature, for his post-structuralist analysis of the major peripatetic and also pictorial themes of the city, in particular through the paintings of Frank Auerbach, whom Sebald renames Max Ferber. Also focusing on Manchester, Janet Wolff, a sociologist and art historian, uses the notion of "pre-memory" to re-read Sebald's

⁷ "Interview with Carole Angier", in *The Emergence of Memory. Conversations with W.G. Sebald*.

⁸ W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, trans. by Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2005).

representations of the city of her birth. The art historian Helen Hills offers an innovative analysis of how Sebald views architecture. Her contribution interrogates the rich and ambiguous relationship between word and image, approaching Sebald's work, especially *Austerlitz*, as a potentially productive challenge to architectural history. Finally, literature specialist Muriel Pic shows how Sebald uses the genre of crime fiction to structure his search for the trace.

‘AND SO THEY ARE EVER RETURNING TO US, THE DEAD’: THE PRESENCE OF THE DEAD IN W.G. SEBALD

Carole Angier¹

Abstract: This article follows a winding path, like the paths in Sebald’s great walking book, *The Rings of Saturn*. It begins in the mysterious images of ‘Dr Henry Selwyn’: in the narrator struggling to imagine how people can have oppressed others, barely hidden behind thin walls; and in the image of the dead returning, in the famous last line. It becomes clearer in ‘Max Ferber’, in which the narrator links the dead of the Holocaust to himself through his birthday, and through the pattern woven by the doomed Jewish girls, like the one in his home. And it ends in *Austerlitz*, which is one long search for the dead; and in which once again the dead of the Holocaust are linked to the narrator, through his visions of home in the fortress of Breendonck, and through his birthday again, and his name. The path leads from the dead of the Holocaust to the narrator, and through him to the author, Sebald himself.

My title comes from the last lines of ‘Dr Henry Selwyn’ in *The Emigrants*, which are perhaps the most beautiful of all the many beautiful lines that W.G. Sebald wrote.

Altogether, for me, ‘Dr Henry Selwyn’ is perhaps the most beautiful thing Sebald ever wrote, and contains in microcosm and in mysterious hints all the rest of his work. It is like one of his great images of art, the swift, watery sketches of Turner and of Great-Uncle Alphonso in *Austerlitz*, which render one of his dominating ideas about truth: that it can only be approached glancingly, fleetingly, without trying to pin it down and make it definite and clear. Typically, however, he also has an opposite idea of both art and truth, which is summed up in the lovely image of the model of the Temple of Solomon, in ‘Max Ferber’ in *The Emigrants*, and again in André Hilary’s history lesson in *Austerlitz*: that it takes ‘an endless length of time’ (A 100) and records every detail in miniature. (I am very glad that he also has this definition of art, as you will understand if you see the size of my own books.) He himself does both kinds, the long and detailed kind in *Austerlitz*, the glancing sketch kind in ‘Dr Henry Selwyn’. I’m going to start with ‘Dr Henry Selwyn’, and then move through ‘Max Ferber’ to *Austerlitz*. That way I hope to move from glancing mystery to detail, if not clarity, on our subject, which is traces of the Holocaust in Sebald.

*

‘Dr Henry Selwyn’ starts with the narrator, and at first sounds completely solid and normal: ‘At the end of September 1970, ... I drove out to Hingham with Clara in search of somewhere to live.’ (E 3).² But it soon becomes very unsolid and strange, i.e. very Sebald. I won’t go into all the strangenesses – Dr Selwyn the hermit living in his own garden, Elaine the whinnying cook who never cooks, the dreamlike structure of the empty house. I want to note just two especially strange – and wonderful – things.

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² W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* (London: The Harvill Press, 1996).

First of all, the servants' staircase, which opens off the wide corridor leading to the narrator and Clara's flat. Across this corridor is a door to 'a dark stairwell', which leads to 'hidden passageways' on every floor,

running behind walls in such a way that the servants, ceaselessly hurrying to and fro laden with coal scuttles, baskets of firewood, cleaning materials, bed linen and tea trays, never had to cross the paths of their betters. (E 9).

You may remember this. It is hard to forget.

'Often I tried to imagine,' Sebald continues, 'what went on inside the heads of people who led their lives knowing that, behind the walls of the rooms they were in, the shadows of the servants were perpetually flitting past' (E 9). This image is like the actual images, the photographs, in *The Emigrants* – detailed and convincing, yet uncanny and often improbable, so that we wonder if they are, as they seem, real, and if not, what they mean. Perhaps this image is about the oppression of servants, as it seems to be. But Sebald is not political. He is always on the side of the weak, and he is deeply disturbed by the alienating effects of capitalism and industrialisation; but he doesn't write about 'the workers'. So what else, or what also, might the extraordinary servants' staircase mean?

The second mystery is about the dead man who returns in 'Dr Henry Selwyn': Johannes Naegeli, the Alpine guide with whom Dr Selwyn spent the summer of 1913 climbing in the Bernese Oberland. We never hear any more of Dr Selwyn's parents, sister or uncle, with whom he came to England in 1899, nor of his favourite teacher, the beautiful Lisa Owen, although the older generation – perhaps including Lisa – must be dead by now. Nor do we hear of any of the family whom they left behind in Lithuania, who must eventually have been swallowed up in the Holocaust. We learn of only two attachments of Dr Selwyn's: to Elli, his wife, from whom he has drifted apart; and to Johannes Naegeli. To this man he has, by contrast, felt closer and closer over the years; and Naegeli's death in 1914, a year after their friendship, had plunged him into a deep depression, though he had known him for only a few weeks, and was by then in a completely new life, thousands of miles away.

Again history may enter: 1913 was the last year of peace before the first of two terrible European wars, and the last year of happiness for both Amos Adelwarth, in the chapter bearing his name, and Luisa Lanzberg, in 'Max Ferber'. Perhaps that is what Naegeli represents, and why Dr Selwyn mourns him. But again this political explanation, like the one of the servants' staircase, doesn't seem enough to account for the emotional weight of Naegeli's death and return – not only for Dr Selwyn, but for us, through the power of Sebald's writing. Once again, some extra mysterious meaning seems to lie in those lines: '*At times they come back from the ice more than seven decades later, and are found at the edge of the moraine, a few polished bones and a pair of hobnailed boots*' (E 23, my italics).

Let us move, then, from the mysterious watercolour sketch of the first chapter of *The Emigrants* to the fuller oil painting of the last one, 'Max Ferber' (with a glance or two at the chapters between). Now several details begin to emerge. First of all, Ferber says something strange and interesting about time, when the narrator has been away from Germany as long as he himself had been when they first met. Time, he says,

is an unreliable way of gauging these things, indeed it is nothing but a disquiet of the soul. There is neither a past nor a future. At least, not for me. (E 181).

Time has stopped for Ferber since the separation from his parents in 1939, which he feels he ought not to have survived; as time had stopped for his mother Luisa when her fiancé Fritz died in 1914, and again when her second love, Friedrich, also died a few years later. She does not know how she got over these losses, or, as she says in her journal, whether she ever did. Nor does Ferber know if he has ever grasped the fact of his parents' deportation and death, two years after they put him on an aeroplane to England. For twenty-five years – that is, up to two years before he and the narrator first meet – Ferber managed not to think about or remember his loss, and sometimes he succeeded 'in maintaining a certain equability' (*E* 191). But really, as he tells the narrator, the tragedy of his youth was too deeply rooted in him, and it has spread a 'poisonous canopy' over him in recent years (*E* 191).

This is, of course, very like what has happened to all three of the other emigrants as well. We do not know how long Dr Selwyn kept his origins secret from his wife, or whether he ever managed to forget them; but he withdraws further and further from life, until he shoots himself with a hunting rifle. Paul Bereyter too manages not to think about or remember the loss of his home in the 1930s until the last ten years of his life; when he finally recognizes that he belongs 'to the exiles, and not to the people of S' (*E* 59), he kills himself. Ambrose Adelwarth does not lose Germany, but seems unambiguously glad to escape it; what he unbearably loses is his Johannes Naegeli – his friend and probable lover Cosmo Solomon. Like (we must imagine) Paul Bereyter and Dr Selwyn, he longs for 'an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember' (*E* 124); and he achieves it, by submitting himself to electric shock treatment – German electric shock treatment, in fact – until he is destroyed.

Of the four emigrants, Ferber – though he suffers quite as much as the rest – is the only one who does not kill himself. The only difference between them is that he alone of the four turns his suffering into art. It is an extraordinary art, extraordinarily described by Sebald: an 'art of destruction' (*E* 180) as much as creation, in which he scrapes away as much paint as he puts on, and creates his portraits out of the ghosts of all the previous ones he has scraped off and destroyed. This is the last idea of art in *The Emigrants*: an art of constant self-doubt and self-laceration, constant scratchings out and revisions; which is exactly the art of the narrator in writing this portrait of Ferber; as he himself describes it: 'By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions' (*E* 230).

The narrator shares something else with Ferber, and with his mother Luisa: the sense that ordinary time does not exist; or an ability to move between times, and to see, in certain states, the past and the dead. So Luisa sees her two dead loves, Fritz and Friedrich, in a delirium, while Ferber sees his parents' drawing room in a dream, 'though he cannot say whether by day or by night' (*E* 175). And the narrator sees Ambrose and Cosmo in a dream in 'Ambrose Adelwarth'; and in the last pages of 'Max Ferber', even though he is awake he slips between the present (1991), the past (1966), and photographs from an exhibition he had seen a year before, of the Polish ghetto of Łódź in the 1940s, in which he sees three women, one of them called – possibly – Luisa.

Like the writer Friederike Halbleib, whose grave he sees in the same cemetery as the Ferber family, and whom he feels he himself has lost, even though she was a stranger, and died thirty years before he was born (*E* 224) – like Friederike Halbleib, this Luisa, even if she is or represents Ferber's mother, is not in reality his own personal loss. And yet the last lines of 'Max Ferber', in which she appears, are as grief-stricken and moving as the last lines of 'Dr Henry Selwyn'.

This strange sense of connection to an unknown dead person is shared with Ferber, who feels ‘a sense of brotherhood’ (*E* 167) with the desperate and brilliant philosopher Wittgenstein, with whom he has no link apart from the coincidence of having lived in the same lodgings in Manchester, thirty-six years later. ‘Doubtless,’ Ferber says, ‘any retrospective connection with Wittgenstein was purely illusory, but it meant no less to him on that account’ (*E* 166). The narrator’s connection with the Luisa in the picture, and Dr Selwyn’s connection with Johannes Naegeli, are similarly illusory; but they mean no less to them on that account.

By the end of ‘Max Ferber’ we know that the narrator is just as much an exile from Germany as Ferber; that as a young man at least he felt equally isolated (*E* 153–4); and that as an artist he is equally tormented – and equally brilliant. What he says of the painter also applies to the work we are now reading: ‘Time and again... I marveled to see that Ferber, with the few lines and shadows that had escaped annihilation, had created a portrait of great vividness’ (*E* 162).

There are two more links between the narrator and Ferber’s story. The first is a pair of coincidences to do with the narrator’s birthday, the 18th of May (*E* 224) – Sebald’s own birthday. First, Ferber’s parents put him on the plane on the 17th of May; which means that the first day of Ferber’s exile falls on the same date as the first day of the narrator’s life (and Sebald’s). And second, in the same Jewish cemetery in which the narrator finds the graves of the Lanzbergs and of Friederike Halbleib, he also sees, ‘with a shock of recognition’, the grave of Maier Stern, ‘who died on the 18th of May, my own birthday’ (*E* 224). Both of these are, as I have said, mere coincidences. But we know from the coincidence of Ferber’s living in the same lodging house as Wittgenstein that coincidences carry a mysterious significance in *The Emigrants*. And not only in *The Emigrants*, as we shall see.

The last link comes right at the end of ‘Max Ferber’, in the desolate and lovely last lines about the three young women in the Łodz ghetto. They are working at a loom, because, as the narrator seems to hear them say, ‘Work is our only course’, if they want to survive. And, he writes, ‘the irregular geometric patterns of the carpet they are knotting, and even its colours, remind me of the settee at home’ (*E* 237). All the goods produced in the Jewish ghettos, like all the goods the Jews once owned, did in fact end up in German homes like the narrator’s: and though the carpet the young women are weaving did not end up in his home, this similarity carries the same ‘shock of recognition’ as the coincidence of Meier Stern’s death date with his own birthday, and Sebald’s.

*

We come, finally, to *Austerlitz* – literally finally, since it was the last of his books published in Sebald’s lifetime. It was also the culmination of the central themes we are exploring, and the culmination altogether, I think, of Sebald’s art. It is his Temple of Solomon (*E* 176), his André Hilary history lesson, recording ‘in some inconceivably complex form...who had perished, who survived, and exactly where and how’ (4100–1).³

Austerlitz explores in detail the theme of the unreality of time. We know from the study of history that the layers of time co-exist in fact: that under Liverpool Street Station the original meadows still lie, and the priory of St Mary of Bethlehem, including its infamous hospital

³ *Austerlitz* (London, New York: Penguin, 2002).

called Bedlam (*A* 183); that under the vast soulless new Bibliothèque Nationale⁴ still lies the Austerlitz-Tolbiac depot, in which the impounded possessions of the Jews of Paris were stored and pillaged (*A* 401–3).

We know this rationally, but Austerlitz longs to experience it, as Luisa Lanzberg often experienced it, describing her childhood in her journal in the dark days of 1940, and feeling ‘as if it were still going on, right into these lines I am now writing’ (*E* 207). Austerlitz does sometimes feel it, ‘in quiet places where nothing has changed for decades’. ‘It seems to me then’, he says,

as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last, just as when we have accepted an invitation we duly arrive in a certain house at a given time. And might it not be... that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak? (*A* 359–60)

That is, of course, what he does in the course of this book, and what the narrator does in the course of all Sebald’s books. But the actual experience of the simultaneity of times is rare, and not only desirable. When it happens to James Mallord Ashman in *Austerlitz*, for example, the owner of Iver Grove – one of those quiet places where nothing has changed for decades – ‘it wouldn’t have taken much... to upset his reason’ (*A* 153); and when Cosmo Solomon experiences the co-existence of events in space in ‘Amos Adelwarth’ – ‘[seeing] clearly, in his own head’ the Great War in Europe, even though he is thousands of miles away in America – it does upset his reason, and brings on his first breakdown, from which he only temporarily recovers when the war ends (*E* 95–7).

This is not surprising, since it is clear that this way of thinking, or being – experiencing distant times and spaces as though they were one’s own – is closely allied with two things: with art, but also with madness. And Austerlitz himself is clear that this vision – ‘that time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously’ (*A* 144) – is not only his most fervent hope, but also ‘opens up the bleak prospect of ever-lasting misery and never-ending anguish’ (*A* 144). For if all moments are equally present, then we can eternally re-experience the moment of loss, of ‘rejection and annihilation’ (*A* 322), as well as the moment before, when ‘everything [is still] as it once was’.⁵ The deep ambivalence of Austerlitz’s desire is summarized in the two images of art which bracket the book: the painting of a skating scene at the start, in which a lady has fallen, and shall always have fallen, ‘and nothing and no one [can] ever remedy it’ (*A* 16); and the ‘moment of rescue’ perpetuated forever in the sculpture of a hero on horseback scooping up a girl ‘already bereft of her last hope’, which Austerlitz sees towards the end, in the Antikos Bazar in Terezin (*A* 276–7).

Of course the reason why Austerlitz longs to ‘turn back and go behind’ time – and why Dr Selwyn and Max Ferber may also long for this, and why Luisa Lanzberg does – is to

⁴ Or not quite under it, as Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Sarah Gensburger have established, but near it. See Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Sarah Gensburger, *Des Camps dans Paris* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 290.

⁵ This is close to Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal recurrence, which is surely at least part of what lies behind Austerlitz’s (and Sebald’s) vision: the idea that we should live in such a way that we could face the prospect of every moment in our lives eternally recurring.

re-find the people in it, the lost and the dead. And in *Austerlitz* we learn that the desire is mutual: the dead want to return, and do return, especially those who have died violently, or before their time. Austerlitz learns this from Evan the cobbler, with whom he spends every free moment of his childhood, though he doesn't realise why at the time. 'Evan told tales of the dead who had been struck down by fate untimely,' Austerlitz tells the narrator, 'who knew they had been cheated of what was due to them and tried to return to life' (*A* 74–5). And they do return, in small groups 'of beings of dwarfish stature' (because, Evan explains, 'the experience of death diminishes us, just as a piece of linen shrinks when you first wash it' {*A* 75}).

Later Austerlitz sees them himself – especially in times of great stress, or as we may say, of madness. So, for example, he sees a small group of dwarfish figures, just like the ones Evan described, in Marienbad, when he has been unable to break out of his isolation with Marie de Verneuil, whom he loves and who loves him; and where, as he learns only later, he, his parents and his nanny Vera had spent their last happy summer together. He sees the past and the dead in the Salpêtrière, during his first breakdown, and on his night walks in London, when the final one is approaching; in the Prague archive, in Terezín, and in Paris.

He has always suspected, Austerlitz says, 'that the border between life and death is less impermeable than we commonly think' (*A* 395). Evan the cobbler – i.e. Sebald – puts this metaphor into an image:

Hanging from a hook on the wall above Evan's low work-bench, said Austerlitz, was the black veil that his grandfather had taken from the bier when the small figures muffled in their cloaks carried it past him, and it was certainly Evan, said Austerlitz, who once told me that nothing but a piece of silk like that separates us from the next world. (*A* 75–6)

It is always through this veil, faded from black to grey – of smoke or dust or light, but also of silk, or some other thin and delicate fabric – that Austerlitz glimpses the past, or that the dead return (for example, *A* 193). When, one day, he 'sees' his mother, she is in a grey silk bodice, with her face behind an iridescent, cloudy veil (*A* 229). Then we may remember, with our own 'shock of recognition', Ferber telling the narrator that he is visited every day by a beautiful woman wearing a ball gown made of grey silk (*E* 181–2). Is she Ferber's mother? Is she every lost mother – because we all lose our mothers, no matter what time and place we live in? Is she, perhaps, a memory of Sebald's own mother?

Because – and this is my last point, the point to which I have been secretly heading – all the retrieval of time and mourning of the dead links us not just to the narrator, but to the author himself. For it is not only the narrator but Sebald himself who has been doing the heart-breaking work of 'remembering, writing and reading' (*E* 193) of *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, and of all the other books as well. And we know that Sebald himself was often melancholy, and went through 'bad times',⁶ to which he often alluded in his writing (for

⁶ Especially during his early Manchester time, during which he spoke of feeling close to madness, just as the narrator of 'Ferber' does. See R. Sheppard, 'The Sternheim Years' in J. Catling, R. Hibbit, eds., *Saturn's Moons: W.G. Sebald – A Handbook* (Leeds, London: Legenda Main Series, Maney Publishing, 2011), 68. Also in the period described in Part II of *Vertigo* (see J. Cuomo, 'A Conversation with W.G. Sebald' in L. S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory* (London: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 103. I take the expression 'bad time' from Ferber (*E* 167).

instance, in *E* 154–6, *A* 46, *V* 33.) It is impossible not to imagine that, like Ferber in his painting, and like Ambrose Adelwarth telling his stories to Aunt Fini, in his writing Sebald was ‘at once saving himself, in some way, and mercilessly destroying himself’ (*E* 100). I even imagine that we can apply to him the ironic image of the photographer’s assistant in ‘Max Ferber’. The assistant’s body, he wrote,

had absorbed so much silver in the course of a lengthy professional life that he had become a kind of photographic plate, which was apparent in the fact (as Ferber solemnly informed me) that the man’s face and hands turned blue in strong light, or, as one might say, developed. (*E* 165).

In just this way, I think, Sebald became the grief he was writing.

In *Austerlitz*, as in ‘Max Ferber’, he glancingly suggests the connection of his story with himself. When the narrator first visits the fortress of Breendonk in 1967, he already knows that it was a German penal camp up to 1944; and he imagines the sufferings of the prisoners, and at the same time the ordinary life of their SS guards, playing cards or writing letters home. ‘I could well imagine the sight of the good fathers and dutiful sons from Vilsbiburg and Fuhlsbüttel, from the Black Forest and the Bavarian Alps,’ he says. ‘After all, I had lived among them to my twentieth year’ (*A* 28–9). He does not yet know that the pit in which he finds himself was a torture chamber; nonetheless he is overcome by nausea, and scenes from home arise in his mind (*A* 32–3). A few years later he reads Jean Améry, and learns the details of the tortures (he quotes Améry’s description at some length) which ‘were being conducted here around the time I was born’ (*A* 33–4).

We are back to the connection with the narrator’s home and birthday, which are also Sebald’s. And that – the coincidence of Jewish deaths with his birth – appears again, brought to its logical, or illogical, conclusion, in the last lines of *Austerlitz*. Here he quotes the messages scratched into the walls of another fortress that became a German prison during the war: the notorious Fort IX in Kaunas in Lithuania, where more than 30,000 people were killed. One message reads ‘*Nous sommes neuf cent Français*’, and under it three French names are scratched (the first, incidentally, that of Marcel Lob, from the camp of Austerlitz in Paris.) The last one is strangely familiar: ‘Max Stern, Paris, 18.5.44’. Meier Stern has become Max, Sebald’s own name; and 18 May 1944 was Sebald’s full birthday.

Let me, finally, quote an extract from an interview with Sebald by Marco Poltronieri, published in 1997. Poltronieri asks him about his return visit to his home village, Wertach im Allgäu. Sebald replies that it was ‘complicated’, because the idyll of his childhood was only apparent. ‘I look at a family album of the time,’ he says, ‘where I’m lying in my pram, and my mother is pushing me through the flowery alpine meadows, and underneath they’ve written May 1945... Since then I’ve learned what was happening elsewhere. So there’s a contrast between my privileged-baby position in this south German village, where no trace of the war ever reached, and the destruction of this country and all other countries that was happening at the same time, and all the horrors of the last years of the war.’⁷

The link is in ‘Max Ferber’ too – and not only in that first name. After the Great War Luisa Lanzberg consents to marry Fritz Ferber, who will become Ferber’s father. In 1921 they go on honeymoon to the Allgäu – Sebald’s home region. And Luisa writes: ‘*[T]he scattered villages were so peaceful it was as if nothing evil had ever happened anywhere on earth*’ (*E* 217, my

⁷ M. Poltronieri, “Wie kriegten die Deutschen das auf die Reihe? Ein Gespräch mit W.G.Sebald” in F. Loquai, ed., *W.G.Sebald, Porträt 7* (Eggingen: Isele, 1997), 138.

italics). Then, twenty years later, the villages still looked the same – but everything evil happened, and it came from there.

*

So what is this winding path we have followed, like the paths in Sebald's great walking book, *The Rings of Saturn*? It began in the mysterious images of 'Dr Henry Selwyn': in the narrator struggling to imagine how people can have oppressed others, barely hidden behind thin walls; in the image of the dead returning, having been intensely mourned by someone who hardly knew them. It became clearer in 'Max Ferber', in which Ferber and his mother see their dead, and in which the narrator himself mourns someone he hardly knew; in which, too, he explicitly links the dead of the Holocaust to himself through his birthday, and through the pattern woven by the doomed Jewish girls, like the one in his home. And it ends in *Austerlitz*, which is one long search for the dead, who want to return; and in which once again the dead of the Holocaust are linked to the narrator, through his visions of home in the fortress of Breendonck, and through his birthday again, and his name.

The path, in other words, leads from the Holocaust to Sebald himself, who was born at the same time, in Germany. That was the original contradiction that fractured his world. It is why all his books, but especially the two I have I have looked at, both wish and fear that 'time did not exist at all, only various spaces..., between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like' (A 261). It is why we see the exploited slaves just behind the thin walls; and why all Sebald's books, but especially these two, mourn others' losses as though they were his own.

KINDERTRANSPORT, CAMPS AND THE HOLOCAUST IN *AUSTERLITZ*

Jean-Marc Dreyfus¹

Abstract: This article develops an historical analysis of *Austerlitz*. Rather than tracking the (few) errors in historical narratives that the writer Sebald left in his text, it aims at considering the material used by the author to develop the story of Jacques Austerlitz. Through a complex game of ‘correspondences’, from train station to train station across Western Europe, Sebald gives his own vision of Kindertransport’s memory in the United Kingdom and of Holocaust memory and writing in general. Consistent with the declarations he made in several interviews, that it is in his view impossible to describe directly life in the camps and ghettos, he uses certain marginal aspects of Nazi persecution to build a powerful narrative of facts and memory. For example, he ends his story in Austerlitz, a satellite camp of Drancy for Jews, which was installed in warehouses in the heart of Paris. This camp was never described by historians before my own book – co-authored with Ms Sarah Gensburger – *Nazi Labor Camps in Paris. Austerlitz, Léviton, Bassano, July 1943–August 1944*. My article will try to show how a Holocaust historian can read Sebald’s writing, as an indirect approach to his difficult subject-matter.

The memory of the Holocaust seems to have taken some time to form in Britain, longer at any rate than in continental Europe or the United States.² While a detailed study of how Holocaust memory in the United Kingdom developed has yet to be undertaken, it should be noted that an official day of commemoration (Holocaust Memorial Day) was only instituted in 2000 – the first being held in 2001 – on the initiative of the then Prime Minister Tony Blair. It is true that London, and more specifically the Public Relations department of the War Office, was instrumental in revealing the horrors of the concentration camps through the dissemination on a massive scale of the images taken at Bergen Belsen in April 1945 as part of a deliberate, politicised campaign.³ However, it is also clear that the memory of the Holocaust, which is only “globalised” in a very superficial sense,⁴ has taken on certain particular forms in Britain. It has, in particular, become associated with one recently constructed “lieu de mémoire”, that of the Kindertransport, the 10,000 German, Austrian and Czech children sent off without their parents to England, where they were provisionally settled from the summer of 1938 onwards. This “hapax” in the history of the Shoah (in the sense that it is a unique event), insofar as it constitutes a successful collective rescue, is at the

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² On the subject of Holocaust commemoration see also: T. Kushner, *The Holocaust and Liberal Imagination. A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

³ On the impact of the images of Bergen Belsen, see: S. Bargett, D. Cesarani, *Belsen 1945. New Historical Perspectives* (London, Portland Or.: Vallentine Mitchell, IWM, 2006).

⁴ On this subject, see: J.-M. Dreyfus, M. Stoetzler, “Holocaust memory in the twenty-first century: between national reshaping and globalisation”, in C. Gelbin, S. Gilman, eds., “Jews in an age of globalisation”, guest edited issue of *European Review of History—Revue européenne d’histoire*, Vol. 18, No. 1, February 2011, 69–78.

heart of the approach to the representation of the destruction of the Jews in Europe taken by W. G. Sebald in his novel *Austerlitz*.⁵

In this article, I will seek to analyse the use made by Sebald of certain chapters from the Holocaust in this, his last book, a major work which develops many themes previously introduced in earlier texts. The objective of this attempt to read *Austerlitz* through the eyes of a historian of the Holocaust is obviously not to point out the errors made by Sebald. As a writer, he has produced a work of fiction, and it would be quite inappropriate, and indeed pointless, to pick out every last inaccuracy in his text. It is far more useful to examine Sebald's use of historical facts, what he has chosen to pick out from the vast mass of information now available on the Holocaust, and to see how he has worked this material into a narrative. This confrontation between a work of fiction and historical writing can only make sense insofar as it establishes a dialogue between these two narrative registers.⁶ Nor will I seek to pass judgement on the historical veracity of Sebald's characters, although it is perhaps appropriate, nonetheless, to consider their plausibility. The writer's staggering erudition warrants the asking of such questions, as he cannot be accused of (or excused for) concealing certain references.

The memory of the Kindertransport has only come to the fore recently. Its developing presence has come out of the efforts of children saved by the scheme who have lived their adult lives and are now well into retirement. In 1988, a first call was sent out by a small group of them, under the auspices of the important Jewish survivors' organisation, the Association of Jewish Refugees, which was created in 1941.⁷ The first gathering of these Austrian and German Jewish children, now British citizens, was duly organised, allowing them to exchange memories and shared experiences. It was here that the creation, or rather recreation, of a collective identity seems to have occurred, along with the establishment of a "tribute of memory" to British society, which was gratefully accepted. It is true that the narrative thus constituted was one of gratitude towards a liberal society, glossing over a host of problems encountered by the children and adolescents who made up the convoys. After all, the operation, which refused to accept parents, consequently also manufactured orphans on a vast scale.⁸ Then there were the children taken in by devout Christian families and converted virtually by force. This was the case for Susi Bechhöfer, whose story became the subject of a BBC documentary. Sebald drew heavily on her narrative in *Austerlitz*, to the point that Ms Bechhöfer for a while considered taking legal action. This tribute of memory eventually led to the inauguration of a plaque in the Palace of Westminster, in order to thank those MPs who had let the children in,⁹ as well as the construction of monuments at the entrance to London's Liverpool Street Station, where the majority of the children first

⁵ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

⁶ For an overview of recent developments regarding the questioning of the relations between fictional and historical writing in a French context, see: "Savoirs de la littérature", *Les Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales*, Nr 65–2 (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2010).

⁷ See the organisation's website: <http://www.ajr.org.uk/kindertransport>

⁸ On the Kindertransport, see: W. Benz, C. Curio, A. Hammel, eds., *Die Kindertransporte 1938/39. Rettung und Integration* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003); C. Berth, *Die Kindertransporte nach Großbritannien 1938/39. Exilerfahrungen im Spiegel lebensgeschichtlicher Interviews* (Hamburg/Munich: Dölling & Galitz, 2005).

⁹ The text on the plaque reads: "In deep gratitude to the People and Parliament of the United Kingdom for saving the lives of 10,000 Jewish and other children who fled to this country from Nazi persecution on the Kindertransport 1938–1939".

arrived. Two monuments were in fact constructed, the first of which was a “conceptual” vitrine piece containing objects which had belonged to refugee children. This was replaced in 2006 by a realist bronze sculpted group by the Israeli sculptor Frank Meisner. This station in the heart of London, in the heart of the City, this “lieu de mémoire” (site of memory), then, is also where Jacques Austerlitz meets the novel’s narrator and where, amidst the faded splendour of the station’s Great Eastern Hotel, he recounts part of his tale to him.¹⁰ It is also the site of the first re-emergence of Austerlitz’s memories, as he begins to recall his earlier life.

For *Austerlitz*, probably the most narrative of all Sebald’s novels, is the story of a child of the Kindertransport, Jacques Austerlitz, who, tormented by his lack of memories, wanders across Europe, meeting the narrator, who both is and is not Sebald, along the way. Austerlitz is a specialist in the history of nineteenth-century European architecture, a subject which, we learn in passing, he has taught for thirty years following a period of study in France.¹¹ “As far as I was concerned the world ended in the late nineteenth century. I dared go no further than that, although in fact the whole history of the architecture and civilization of the bourgeois age, the subject of my research, pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before them at the time.”¹² This last sentence is, in fact, the only time in the entire book that an attempt is made to formulate an explanation for the European catastrophe and the Holocaust, and one is left with the impression – reading the huge scholarship that has recently been produced on his writings – that everything is to be found in Sebald’s works; everything, that is, except political science! The travels of Jacques Austerlitz, which could be plotted on a map, lead him into North-West and Central Europe: the easternmost point visited by Jacques Austerlitz is the town and fortress of Terezin, in Bohemia.¹³ In a series of almost spiritualist “revelations”, he recovers his childhood memories and the narrative of his life. The pivotal moment comes with his arrival, after a night of wandering the streets of London, at Liverpool Street Station, where he hears the voices of European immigrants: “Memories like this came back to me in the disused Ladies’ Waiting-Room of Liverpool Street station...”¹⁴

The buildings of nineteenth-century Europe are imprisoning structures, imposing masses which seem to merge into a single place of confinement, prefiguring other, far more terrible buildings constructed in the twentieth century. In an interesting instance of “morphing”, Jacques Austerlitz begins to conflate them all, mixing up everything from archive buildings to psychiatric hospitals, as can be seen in his description of the Prague City Archives, where he is searching for documents relating to his parents:

The entire building, from the outside more like a mansion house than anything else, therefore consists of four wings, each not much more than three metres deep, set around the courtyard in an almost Illusionist manner and without any corridors or passages in them (...) And it was not just of a prison that the archives building in the Karmelitska reminded me, said Austerlitz ; it also suggested a monastery, a riding school, an opera house and a lunatic asylum...¹⁵

¹⁰ *Austerlitz*, 119.

¹¹ *Austerlitz*, 170.

¹² *Austerlitz*, 197.

¹³ *Austerlitz*, 261 and following.

¹⁴ *Austerlitz*, 192.

¹⁵ *Austerlitz*, 204–205.

In Sebald's description, the places of the construction of the Nation in the nineteenth century (barracks, archives, administrative buildings, hospitals) become places of imprisonment. In parallel to this, the spaces of bourgeois leisure come to evoke the camps. This is particularly true of spa towns, such as Theresienbad, with its "beautiful gardens, promenades, boarding houses and villas"¹⁶ which were in fact used as a lure to trick Jews who were told they would be resettled there. Likewise, the description of a visit to Marienbad given by Marie de Verneuil, a mysterious young French woman whom Austerlitz meets in the old Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, tells how "the mineral waters and particularly the so-called Auschowitz Springs had gained a great reputation for curing the obesity then so common among the middle classes, as well as digestive disturbances, sluggishness of the intestinal canal and other stoppages of the lower abdomen..."¹⁷ (the list of complaints continues for over half a page). Oddly, these physical symptoms are attributed to a fear of a loss of social standing: "the anxiety for the security of their social position constantly steering within them".¹⁸ Here too, bourgeois society in its entirety leads towards the source of the waters of Auschowitz (and, the reader understands, towards Auschwitz).

Jacques Austerlitz's wanderings across Europe take him from station to station, from Liverpool Street to Antwerp Centraal station, from Wilson Station in Prague to the gare d'Austerlitz in Paris,¹⁹ in a network of literary interrelations, of associations, to use the term employed in psychoanalysis. Antwerp Centraal Station, for instance, immediately makes him think of Lucerne station in Switzerland, destroyed in a fire – illustrated by a photograph in the book – which has clear echoes of Kristallnacht, the night of 9 November 1938 during which members of the SA systematically burned down the synagogues in German towns. Yet the "Night of Broken Glass" is not referred to specifically in the book. The protagonist's wanderings are also a journey from fortress to fortress, although one involves a striking and artful reversal of terms. For Europe's fortresses were constructed – with a hubris described wryly by Sebald – in order to protect populations from invaders, yet saw their role change to that of places of internment, to concentration camps. This was the case for the fortress of Breendonck, in Flanders,²⁰ which Austerlitz visits in an attempt to retrace the footsteps of the writer and philosopher Jean Améry. Like Breendonck, the fortress of Terezin also became a concentration camp. However, the transit camp for the Jews of Belgium sent to Auschwitz, through which 25,000 victims passed on their way to their deaths, was not Breendonck, but Malines/Mecheln. Significantly, Jacques Austerlitz goes through the town without stopping at the Dossin barracks, which were turned into a camp and now contain a museum.²¹ Terezin, too, was unusual in that it was a ghetto-camp,²² in which families were not separated, a camp for (temporarily) "privileged" Jews, which served the propaganda objectives of the Reich to fool the free world and the International Red Cross.²³

¹⁶ Austerlitz, 335.

¹⁷ Austerlitz, 295.

¹⁸ Austerlitz, 296.

¹⁹ The novel starts almost inside this impressive station: Austerlitz, 6.

²⁰ Austerlitz, 25 and following.

²¹ See the website of the Musée de la déportation in Malines-Mecheln: <http://www.kazernedossin.be/en>
²² The most thorough work on Terezin remains that of H.G. Adler, which is in fact quoted in Austerlitz, 327–334: H.G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941–1945. Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1955); Reprint (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005).

²³ On the visit of the Red Cross to Terezin, see: C. Lanzmann, *Un vivant qui passe: Auschwitz 1943–Theresienstadt 1944* (Paris: Mille et une nuits/Arte éditions, 1997).

Sebald, then, does not allow himself to go into the Nazi camps or to visit the main sites of destruction, the death pits of Eastern Europe containing the 1.5 million victims of the Einsatzgruppen, the mobile killing squads; the extermination camps; Birkenau. When pressed on the subject of his taking of such side-roads, and of the impossibility of representing the camps in a work of literary fiction, Sebald was quick to justify his position. This is what he said to Michael Silverblatt, in a highly revealing exchange:

Michael Silverblatt: And that always circling is this silent presence (of the concentration camps) being left out but always gestured toward. Is that correct?

W.G. Sebald: Yes. I mean, your description corresponds very much to my intentions. I've always felt that it was necessary above all to write about the history of persecution, of vilification of minorities, the attempt, well-nigh achieved, to eradicate a whole people. And I was, in pursuing these ideas, at the same time conscious that it's practically impossible to do this; to write about concentration camps in my view is practically impossible (...) So the only way in which one can approach these things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation.²⁴

Yet, to my mind, Michael Silverblatt does not phrase the question correctly – and Sebald is in no hurry to put him right. *Austerlitz* speaks about the camps not by avoiding them, but by constantly shifting the subject. It is possible to read *Austerlitz* as a metaphor for the impossible memory of Auschwitz (the book's title, the name of its protagonist, and the final destination of his wanderings, the gare d'Austerlitz in Paris, all begin and end with the same letters and sounds as Auschwitz). One could cite more examples of this, such as when the narrator refers to another Austerlitz, interned in the camp of San Sabba, the infamous Risiera di San Sabba, the Italian camp in which 5000 political opponents and Resistance fighters were tortured and murdered. This camp was also used as a transit camp for Jews deported to Auschwitz. Again, though, (as with Austerlitz's visit to Breendonck) the main Italian transit camp for Jews in their way to Auschwitz was not San Sabba but Bolzano and Fossoli di Carpi.

Paradoxically, the narrative technique chosen by Sebald, that of literary evasion, creates a link to the fictional representations in the literature of the Holocaust from the 1950s and 1960s, a world away from the graphic and supposedly ultra-realistic excesses which have come to the fore in recent years. Jonathan Littell's novel, *The Kindly Ones*,²⁵ which chronicles the massacres carried out by the mobile killing squads, the Einsatzgruppen, in every conceivable detail, down to every last spurt of blood and shit, perhaps constitutes the *nec plus ultra* of this removal of all presupposed limits placed on representation. Sebald thus places himself within the category of those more sensitive and – let us not be afraid to say it – Jewish authors who have adopted this strategy of avoidance, of circumscription, and have not dared to step inside the camps in their fiction. One famous example of this approach is a novel which met with great public and critical success, *Les bagages de sable* by Anna Langfus, which won the prix Goncourt in 1962.²⁶ The heroine and narrator is a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, still a young woman, who lives in a tiny attic flat in Paris. During her

²⁴ M. Silverblatt, "A Poem of an Invisible Subject" (interview) in L. Sharon Schwartz, ed., *The emergence of memory: conversations with W.G. Sebald* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 79–80.

²⁵ J. Littell, *The Kindly Ones. A Novel* (New York: Harper, 2009).

²⁶ A. Langfus, *Les bagages de sable* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962). English translation: *The Lost Shore* (London: Collins, 1963).

wanderings, she meets another survivor, both of them recognising each other in the crowd. The catastrophe is only referred to in very allusive terms.

While Sebald's reticence might seem excessive in this age of graphic, cinematic representations of horror, it in fact has a heuristic function. This subject-shifting is not merely evasive: it shows how memory can be thought of as an entity in constant movement, a form of memory which, as in case of the narrator/child-refugee Jacques Austerlitz, threatens with madness anyone who gets too close to it. This mode of functioning through fragments eventually allows the witness, the "Righteous" Véra Rysanova, the neighbour of Austerlitz's parents, the woman who tried to help them and has remained the custodian of their story, to be found.²⁷ It is her oral narrative which finally allows Jacques Austerlitz to learn his own history, and in the process rediscover his mother tongue. An oral narrative, then, and not the archive, makes this return of memory possible, even if the role of archival documents in *Austerlitz* also needs to be studied. The archive is seen here in terms of individual documents, isolated from each other, saved from the catastrophe, signposts along the route of memory, and not as a series of documents assembled and ready for perusal – and the historian of the Holocaust is suddenly (I speak here from my own experience) made to think about the singular nature of her/his professional practice, which involves poring over vast archives, rummaging through hundreds of boxes in order to build up a more-or-less linear narrative through which to approach the catastrophe. Sebald's approach is more akin to foraging than systematic study, yet as one reads through the book one encounters multiple accumulations of archival material, of old documents which still retain a menacing charge, and cry out to be read.²⁸ But the archives, the libraries, the museums are all closed, as in (in the book at least) the old Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris: "The old library in the rue Richelieu has been closed, as I saw for myself not long ago, said Austerlitz, the domed hall with its green porcelain lampshades which cast such a soothing, pleasant light is deserted, the books have been taken off the shelves, and the readers, who once sat at the desks numbered with little enamel plates, in close contact with their neighbours and silent harmony with those who had gone before, might have vanished from the face of the earth".²⁹

Echoing this mass of books and archival material are vast accumulations of objects, all destined inexorably to disappear, truly an obsession for Sebald. These lifeless objects, seemingly without owners, function as inscriptions of the Holocaust through an interesting representational shift that shows just how sensitive Sebald was to the changes in memorial paradigms that occurred in his time. The most recent of these has been the growing interest in the economic aspects of the persecution and destruction of the Jews of Europe, a process which the Nazis – followed, sometimes rather unthinkingly, by historians – termed "economic aryanisation".³⁰ This process of mass theft by decree was a gigantic enterprise of looting and

²⁷ For Véra's narrative, see: *Austerlitz*, 215 and following.

²⁸ On the role of archives in Sebald's writing, see: P. Artières, "L'archive et les ruines. Pourquoi W.G. Sebald a révolutionné l'écriture de l'histoire?" in J.-M. Dreyfus, E. Loyer, "W.G. Sebald, le souci de l'histoire", *Revue Européenne d'Histoire/European Review of History*, forthcoming July 2012.

²⁹ *Austerlitz*, 385. In reality, the reading room on the rue de Richelieu is still open for those wishing to consult the collection of medals and prints belonging to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

³⁰ The bibliography on this area of Holocaust studies is now extensive, although this has only recently become the case. For works attempting to give an overview, see in particular: M. Dean, C. Goschler, P. Ther, eds., *Robbery and restitution: the conflict over Jewish property in Europe* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007); M. Dean, *Robbing the Jews: The Confiscation of Jewish Property in the Holocaust, 1933–1945* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, USHMM, 2008).

redistribution. The resulting piles of objects, sorted into categories, have come to signify the destruction of their owners.³¹ These aryansation operations are described by Véra to Jacques Austerlitz: “I think it was in the late autumn of 1941, said Véra, that Agata had to take her wireless, her gramophone and the records she loved so much, her binoculars and opera glasses, musical instruments, jewellery, furs and the clothes Maximilian had left behind to the so-called Compulsory Collection Centre”.³² We see these stolen items reflected in the windows of the Bazar Antikos in the town of Terezin during Jacques Austerlitz’s visit, mysterious objects from which it is difficult to avert one’s gaze, “as if one of them or their relationship with each other must provide an unequivocal answer to the many questions I found it impossible to ask in my mind”.³³ This accumulation of objects on a vast scale was almost certainly what caught Sebald’s attention when he read an article in the German magazine *Die Zeit*, entitled “The Towers of Silence”.³⁴ This heavily illustrated article described the existence of an internment and forced labour camp for Jews in the heart of Paris, not far from the gare d’Austerlitz. Officially called the “Dienststelle Westen” (“Western Service”) by the German authorities, for its inmates and survivors it was simply “Austerlitz”. According to the journalist, it had been located on the same site as the newly-opened Bibliothèque Nationale de France, later rechristened the Bibliothèque François-Mitterrand, although in fact Austerlitz camp was situated some way further down the Seine, on the quai Panhard-et-Levassor, towards the Paris ring-road. For the journalist, however, the close proximity of high culture to destruction, of the nation’s greatest repository of learning to one of the branches of the Nazi concentration-camp system, could not fail to provoke a reaction on the part of the reader.

One could carry out a systematic comparison of the *Die Zeit* article with Sebald’s text. A large number of points taken from the article by the author have subsequently been proved false by historians. For instance, we now know that the camp guards were not “Indochinese” but in fact Central Asian troop from the Vlassov Army.³⁵ Sebald also contrasts the old library on the rue de Richelieu with its new incarnation, echoing the heated debates that accompanied its opening in France.³⁶ After all, was the “Babylonian” architecture of the *Très Grande Bibliothèque* not designed “on purpose to instil a sense of insecurity and humiliation in the poor readers...”?³⁷ In the library, Jacques Austerlitz, who is approaching the end of his travels, meets a conservator by the name of Henri Lemoine, who leads him up to the top of one of the library’s four towers. It is here that he has the vision – like Moses seeing the Promised Land which he is forbidden from entering – of what happened in the camp at Austerlitz:

an extensive warehousing complex to which the Germans brought all the loot they had taken from the homes of the Jews of Paris... In the years from 1942 onwards everything our civilization has produced, whether for embellishment of life or merely for everyday use, from Louis XVI

³¹ Another literary expression of this trope is found in D. Keene, *The Rain* (1998). See: <http://australianplays.org/script/ASC-1226/extract>

³² *Austerlitz*, 249–250. Some photos taken in Prague’s Collection Centre do exist, but Sebald did not use them in his book.

³³ *Austerlitz*, 274–275.

³⁴ A. Smolczyk, “Die Turmen des Schweigens”, *Die Zeit*, 23 January 1997.

³⁵ The division commanded by General Vlassov, a captured Soviet general, was constituted by the Wehrmacht out of Soviet POWs from the Baltic republics and central Asia.

³⁶ See for example two special issues of the magazine *Le Débat* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999–2000), Nr 105 (May–August 1999); Nr 109 (March–April 2000).

³⁷ *Austerlitz*, 389.

chest of drawers, Meissen porcelain, Persian rugs and whole libraries, down to the last salt-cellar and peppermill, was stacked there in the Austerlitz-Tolbiac storage depot.³⁸

The description continues for two whole pages yet contains some curious inaccuracies. I was myself researching the history of this unknown camp in Paris in 2001, at the time that Sebald's book was published in French by the publishing house Actes Sud. The sociologist Sarah Gensburger and I were jointly assembling documents on the history of Drancy's three satellite camps, where Jews with "privileged" status (in most cases through intermarriage) were forced to sort, clean, pack and remove all traces of ownership from the objects and furniture looted from 38,000 apartments in Paris and its suburbs.³⁹ In the end, the furniture is no longer there, the objects have all vanished, along with their owners, whose ancestors are to be found in the Jewish section of Montparnasse cemetery, visited a few pages earlier by Jacques Austerlitz.⁴⁰ The last station on the line for Jacques Austerlitz, a child of the Kindertransport saved from the catastrophe, the gare d'Austerlitz in Paris echoes Liverpool Street Station, where he arrived as a child and where he heard the first voices he can remember. The only possible narrative of the catastrophe is one of a ceaseless wandering that allows his family's history to be pieced together from fragments using a powerful combination of emotions and invocations, in the spiritualist sense of the term. For sometimes the dead return, in the form of physical remains, or images that have survived. Sebald thus provides us not so much with a meditation on historical writing as an ethics of the representation of horror, an ethics which, I would argue, historians would do well to consider more closely.

³⁸ Austerlitz, 401–402.

³⁹ Our book was eventually published at the end of 2003: J.M. Dreyfus, S. Gensburger, *Des camps dans Paris. Austerlitz, Léviton, Bassano, juin 1943–août 1944* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); English translation: *Nazi Labour Camps in Paris* (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).

⁴⁰ Austerlitz, 360–363.

THE PERIPATETIC PARAGRAPH: WALKING (AND WALKING) WITH W.G. SEBALD

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Abstract: What is perhaps hardest to grasp and explain about the writings of W. G. Sebald is what it feels like to read him. It is unlike reading almost anyone else. Many comparisons have been made, for example to Thomas Bernhard, to Kafka, to Nabokov, to Proust, to Andre Breton, to Walter Benjamin, and many other writers; the range of comparisons is suggestive of a futile urge to categorize his writing. This essay focuses on Sebald's style, making observations about paragraphs, metaphor, the digressive quality of his prose, and also his subject matter. Through an extensive consideration of Sebald's writing, and also what others have written about it, this essay attempts to capture what it feels like to read Sebald.

What is perhaps hardest to grasp and explain about the writings of W. G. Sebald is what it feels like to read him. It is unlike reading almost anyone else, although I am aware of the many comparisons that have been made, for example to Thomas Bernhard, to Kafka, to Nabokov, to Proust, to Andre Breton, to Walter Benjamin, and many other writers, some of which I don't even know and can't even read. Sebald, the expatriate German writer who died in 2001 at the age of 57 – though he had already written several exceptionally highly lauded books – was, it was widely agreed, probably only just hitting his stride. I imagine these myriad and indeed disparate comparisons are made out of a common feeling of futility – that the multitude of comparisons is an index of how little he really is like anyone else, so critics and commentators must grasp for likenesses, as though reaching for ballast on a new vertiginous journey – or an old journey, traversing familiar landscape, but with entirely new conveyances.

Although I am a scholar of literature, I do not read German, and I am aware that when I am reading Sebald, always I am reading, interrogating, and interpreting a text in translation. So even my observations about paragraphs – which is one of the main features of his writing that I wish to explore here – might look, actually look, different in the original text. The other key feature that I wish to dwell on is Sebald's thorough lack of metaphor. His prose digresses – constantly (in fact it is pretty much almost all digression: one critic felicitously employs the phrase “poetics of digression” to describe Sebald's writing)² – but it is not metaphorical. He nearly never uses metaphor, and simile rarely. This is extraordinary, and unusual, and once one notices it, it strikes one as being nearly like an exercise, like that whole novel by Georges Perec that avoids, in the entire text, using the letter E.³ In Sebald's world, one is led to understand, by this rhetorical absence, nothing is like anything else. Everything

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² J.J. Long, *W.G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 137.

³ G. Perec, *La Disparition* (1969), translated as *A Void* (1994).

is: is, or was – in great detail – and even then, even without the perfidious poetics of comparison, still potentially specious, enigmatic, and ephemeral. It is as though to compare something to something else is already to be seduced into the counterfeit maze of meaning without even first confronting or pondering the thing in itself and its already mendacious mantle of a word or words that attach to it and signify it: that perhaps already just the material fact of language abrades meaning, even while it is the very stuff necessary to confer meaning upon it or convey it. One critic describes it this way:

the narrative exudes a kind of encyclopaedic constation of places, of cities, buildings, houses, of landscapes; there is, in the Sebald text, a delight in circumstantial specificity, in naming things and objects, thereby acknowledging their testable thereness.⁴

Susan Sontag similarly needs clumsily to coin a word to suggest the stripped-down quality of Sebald's textual expression: she says Sebald's language is "delicate, dense, [and] steeped in thinghood."⁵

And even while he does not dwell on any word or words or phrases and their possible meanings for very long, one begins to feel that he is circling something, particularly things that he wants to bring you to but slowly and nonchalantly though deliberately. It is why, I imagine, he is thought of as a post-Holocaust writer – that the atrocities he glancingly includes in his prose are so embedded in the minutiae of his narrators' thoughts, memories, and their peregrinations that they seem both unimportant and crucially illuminated. This approach suggests not so much the banality of evil but the banality of everything. And if nothing matters – well, how can you live with that...? The word most often used to describe Sebald's prose is "melancholic" (as I shall return to shortly).

Though if nothing matters, then everything does. So even when Sebald's narrator is seemingly extemporizing on the condition of the house he stays in (the "floorboards were covered with a velvety layer of dust. The curtains had gone and the paper had been stripped off the walls, which had traces of whitewash with bluish streaks like the skin of a dying body"),⁶ and on the vicissitudes of the fortunes of the Ashbury family, he is obliquely – though perhaps very pointedly – suggesting the vestiges of the Troubles in Ireland that created such exigencies and circumstances. After much more extensive description of the house and the grounds and the family circumstances, he quotes (though as usual there are no quotation marks) Mrs Ashbury as describing her reticulated understanding of how, perhaps, their living situation – that of herself and her two daughters – came to be what it was:

Apart from my extremely reticent husband, said Mrs Ashbury, my only other source of information was the legends about the Troubles, part tragic and part ludicrous, that had formed during the long years of decline in the heads of our servants, whom we had inherited together with the rest of the inventory and who were themselves already part of history, as it were (*Rings of Saturn*, 214–215).

It is possible, in other words, to read Sebald as a post-Holocaust writer in this tortuous way: he writes obliquely about the calamities of history, and primarily of those of the

⁴ M. Swales, "Intertextuality, Authenticity, Metonymy? On Reading W.G. Sebald" in R. Görner, ed., *The Anatomist of Melancholy: Essays in Memory of W.G. Sebald* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2003), 81.

⁵ S. Sontag, "A Mind in Mourning" *Where the Stress Falls* (London: Vintage, 2003), 41.

⁶ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002 [1998]; published in German 1995), 210. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

twentieth century; and the calamity that has taken on the commonly held notion of the most important and most serious calamity of the twentieth century and the one, incidentally, that Sebald as a German would be the most expected to want to expatiate on (or be expiated for) is the Holocaust. It is a stretch, but given Sebald's labyrinthine writing and his oblique descriptions and references, it is not impossible – or far-fetched. But one wonders: is it necessary to narrow it down, to know that he is writing really always only about one thing, one event, as awful and in need of endless (paradoxically) amplifying and extirpating narrative exercises as it does?

Susan Sontag suggests that his status as a post-Holocaust writer is due to the reputation established for readers of his work in English by his first book published in English (though not his first book, which was *Vertigo*):

Because it was *The Emigrants* that launched Sebald in English, and because the subject of the last narrative, a famous painter given the name Max Ferber, is a German Jew sent out of Nazi Germany as a child to safety in England – his mother, who perished in the camps with his father, being the author of the memoir – the book was routinely labeled by most reviewers (especially, but not only, in America) as an example of Holocaust literature.⁷

There is more to understanding Sebald as a post-Holocaust writer than just his actual references to the Holocaust (which occur again even less obliquely in the last work published in his lifetime, *Austerlitz*, a narrative told entirely from the point of view of a survivor of the Kindertransport); he writes it himself on the penultimate page of *The Rings of Saturn*: “Now, as I write, I think once more of our history, which is but a long account of calamities.”⁸

Martin Swales suggests Sebald's writings constitute “the sayable things that are at the circumference of the suffering centre.”⁹ Richard Eder suggests that *The Emigrants* “presents a Holocaust-in-absence.”¹⁰ And André Aciman gets it exactly right when he observes (in 1998, before the publication of *Austerlitz*) that “Sebald never brings up the Holocaust. The reader, meanwhile, thinks of nothing else.”¹¹

One feels overwhelmingly like a precocious child (though inevitably not precocious enough) being led by the hand, slowly and patiently, by a very wise elder through the landscape of history, with the harboured hope on the part of the elder that he will have to say only very little for one to grasp the enormity of what he is really conveying. One knows there is a secret, can see and feel the fabric of it, but, feeling both singled out and foolish, can't understand the extent of what one is being shown and told. The book is even *illustrated*. How can one be so dense as not to see what one is being shown...? This is Sebald's technique: circling, circling – circumnavigating – in order to bring one to the brink of seeing something, knowing something, in the way that sometimes only a sidelong glance will allow one to see some very terrible things.

It is, of course, what being an inquisitive adult feels like perpetually – if one is lucky. That is perhaps the fissured, yet gratifying, lesson one comes away with. There are things perpetually within one's purview that simply do not become visible until one's eyes are clear

⁷ Sontag, “A Mind in Mourning”, 44.

⁸ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 295.

⁹ Swales, “Intertextuality, Authenticity, Metonymy?”, 87.

¹⁰ R. Eder, “Excavating a Life”, *The New York Times Book Review* (October 28, 2001), 10.

¹¹ A. Aciman, quoted in L. S. Schwartz, Introduction, in Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (London: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 12.

enough to see them – and by clear eyes, I mean maturity. Sebald is making the landscape of history available to us, pointing to all the crucial landmarks and facts, until we are ready to see it. He is urgent but patient. All-knowing and generous, but laconic and slow. An ideal, though mystifying, parent.

The conviction I am conjuring of a senescent sage, Sontag calls “the preternatural authority of Sebald’s voice: its gravity, its sinuosity, its precision, its freedom from all undermining or undignified self-consciousness or irony.”¹² Some, like Peter Schjeldahl, art critic for *The New Yorker*, no less alert to the influential effects of Sebald’s writings, likens them however to an affliction: “His conjurings of historical and personal loss, which in his novels and memoirs are usually keyed to the calamities of the Second World War, happen to you slowly, as you read, like the onset of a cold.”¹³ But when Schjeldahl comments that “Sebald’s signature tone is dead calm,”¹⁴ he is indicating the very same tone of authority that I want to call paternal.

One example of Sebald’s manner of wafting over a statement of some import and doing so only briefly, only once, in a kind of meiosis – that is, a kind of rhetorical understatement – comes in the concluding chapter of *Vertigo*. In the chapter “Il ritorno in patria,” the narrator makes this passing, nearly easy-to-overlook but potentially profound reference to his father’s engagement as an officer in the post-Weimar-era Third Reich amidst a very detailed description of the furnishings of his Bavarian childhood home which he is revisiting after “a good thirty years had gone by.”¹⁵ (I shall quote at length, mainly to show how incidental this mention seems among the extensive details):

the room which was furnished with all the pieces my parents had bought in 1936 when, after two or three years of continuous upturn in the country’s fortunes, it seemed assured that my father, who at the calamitous close of the Weimar era had enlisted in the so-called army of the One Hundred Thousand and was now about to be promoted to quartermaster, could not only look forward to a secure future in the new Reich but could even be said to have attained a certain social position. For my parents, both of whom came from provincial backwaters, my mother from W. and my father from the Bavarian Forest, the acquisition of living room furniture befitting their station, which, as the unwritten rule required, had to conform in every detail with the tastes of the average couple representative of the emerging classless society, probably marked the moment when, in the wake of their in some respects rather difficult early lives, it must have seemed to them as if there were, after all, something of a higher justice. This living room, then, boasted a ponderously ornate armoire, in which were kept the tablecloths, napkins, silver cutlery, Christmas decorations and, behind the glass doors of the upper half, the bone china tea service which, as far as I can remember, was never brought out on a single occasion; a sideboard on which an earthenware punchbowl glazed in peculiar hues and two so-called lead crystal flower vases were placed symmetrically on crocheted doilies; the draw-leaf dining table with a set of six chairs; a sofa with an assortment of embroidered cushions; on the wall behind it two small Alpine landscapes in black varnished frames, the one hung a little higher than the other; a smokers’ table with gaudily coloured ceramic cigar and cigarette containers and matching candlestick, an ashtray made of horn and brass, and an electric smoke absorber in the shape of an owl. In addition, apart from the drapes and net curtains, ceiling lights and standard lamp, there was a

¹² Sontag, “A Mind in Mourning”, 41.

¹³ Schjeldahl, “Feeling Blue: Artists Get Serious” in *The New Yorker* (August 4, 2008), 74

¹⁴ Schjeldahl, “Feeling Blue”, 74.

¹⁵ W.G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002 [1999]; published in German 1990), 186. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

flower *étagère* made of bamboo cane, on the various levels of which an Arcauria, an asparagus fern, a Christmas cactus and a passion flower led their strictly regulated plant lives. It should also be mentioned that on the top of the armoire stood the living room clock which counted out the hours with its cold and loveless chimes, and that in the upper half of the armoire, next to the bone china tea service, was a row of clothbound dramatic works by Shakespeare, Schiller, Hebbel and Sudermann" (V 192–194).

The narrator does not return to this mention of his family's perhaps coerced engagement in the development of Hitler's Third Reich, but only catalogues the perhaps equally compelled acquisitions and ornaments of their home. Conceivably we are meant to understand that the accoutrements the social and political decorum of the time insisted upon and allowed were the proper objects of a home befitting a family even timorously obedient to the dictates of the reigning regime, and that there was little thought or choice in the matter of allegiance, large or small.

It is possible that when I say that Sebald resists metaphor, I might be completely wrong; that is, that conceivably Sebald is always setting out elaborate analogies, harder to detect for being so thorough and elaborate and long, that his digressive threnodies of degeneration and the mutability and misery of memory are meant always to be understood as long parables for the more concrete and graphic calamities of history – that although I have suggested that he is not writing metaphorically, and only occasionally through simile, that he might be writing entirely as apologue.

For example, in *The Emigrants*, perhaps the delicacy with which Sebald circles around the story of his narrator's Uncle Adelwarth and his very special close relationship with Cosmo, the man to whom he serves as valet, travelling companion, and all around factotum – and probably his lover – functions to point to more generic kinds of knowing within suppressed understanding. It is almost as though the narrator himself does not detect the nature of their relationship, but the reader can. And when Ambros deteriorates and then dies from morbid depression, one cannot help but wonder if the love whose name not even Sebald's narrator dares speak – the very silence of it, I mean – killed him.

And so one also wonders if perhaps that delicacy or silence stands in for other kinds of silence: the social opprobrium against which outcasts must nevertheless keep up appearances, sustain a "shell of decorum."¹⁶ Sebald writes that his Aunt Fini suggests that after Cosmo's death "Ambros Adelwarth the private man had ceased to exist, that nothing was left of him but his shell of decorum." When Sebald's narrator goes to retrace their steps in Deauville he exhaustedly hallucinates seeing them, first in Deauville – Cosmo's "right arm, resting on the back of Ambros's seat," surrounded by "constant whisperings of the rumours that were in circulation concerning Cosmo and Ambros...variously described as master and man, two friends, relatives, or even brothers." The "curiosity of the Deauville summer guests... naturally grew, and the suspicions that were voiced waxed more audacious" (E 124–125). The narrator conveys his comprehension, against the narrative's own not seeming to know, through dreamed up romantic scenarios of his uncle and his possible paramour.

Or in another example, in the last section of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald's narrator chronicles at great length the adoption in Europe of silk production in the late eighteenth century, first in France, and then in Germany: the "greatest efforts were made to promote

¹⁶ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002 [1996]; published in German 1993), 99. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

the cultivation of silk, even in the rather backward Germany of the time, where pigs were still being driven across the Schlossplatz in many a principal town.” But we learn that what began as an economic opportunity ended as dictatorial control:

In Prussia, Frederick the Great with the help of French immigrants had attempted to bring a state silk industry into being, by ordering mulberry plantations to be established, by distributing silkworms free of charge, and by offering considerable rewards to anyone who would take up silk cultivation (*RS* 286).

The narrative brings us to understand that the “main reason why silk husbandry failed so soon after it had been introduced was not so much that the mercantile calculations were adrift, but rather the despotic manner in which German rulers attempted to force it along, whatever the cost” (*RS* 287). In the years leading up to the collapse of the silk industry in Germany in the first part of the nineteenth century, the enforcement of sericulture was tyrannical:

in the Rhineland-Palatinate, where silk farming had been conducted on the largest scale, every subject, official, citizen and householder who owned more than an acre of land was obliged within a given period to be growing six [mulberry] trees per acre, regardless of his circumstances or the use to which he had hitherto devoted his fields. Whomsoever had been granted arms-bearing, brewing or baking rights had to plant one tree, every newly accredited citizen had to plant two, all village greens, town squares, streets, embankments, boundary ditches, even churchyards had to be planted, so that subjects were compelled to buy a hundred thousand trees from the principality’s tree nurseries every year (*RS* 288).

When perhaps we are beginning to detect the parallels and presages of a time shortly forthcoming in Germany of a tyranny not only of the forced cultivation and breeding of silkworms, Sebald nevertheless makes it plain: “the Reich ministers of food and agriculture, of labour, of forestry and of aviation had launched a sericulture programme, inaugurating a new era of silk cultivation in Germany” (*RS* 293), which included specific instructions on “extermination to preempt racial degeneration,” namely by “suspending [the silkworms] over a boiling cauldron”:

The cocoons, spread out on shallow baskets, have to be kept in the rising steam for upwards of three hours, and when a batch is done, it is the next one’s turn, and so on until the entire killing business is completed (*RS* 294).

Thus that paragraph (covering five pages) ends, with no further word on silk or silkworms or sericulture, until this phrase I already quoted: “Now, as I write, I think once more of our history, which is but a long account of calamities”; but what follows is this: “it occurs to me that at one time the only acceptable expression of profound grief, for ladies of the upper classes, was to wear heavy robes of black silk taffeta or black crêpe de chine” (*RS* 295–296). And thus we have what seems like the resolution of the silk story – not the segue from silkworm genocide to Nazi pogroms, but the vestments of mourning to which this whole story (as nearly all his stories) must be making its headlong way (Sontag writes, “Sebald was not just an elegist; he was a militant elegist.”)¹⁷

This concluding commentary on silk takes us back to Norwich, for the sentiment finishes

¹⁷ S. Sontag, “Looking at War: Photography’s View of Devastation and Death” in *The New Yorker* (December 9, 2002), 94.

as follows:

Thus at Queen Victoria's funeral, for example, the Duchess of Teck allegedly made her appearance in what contemporary fashion magazines described as a breathtaking gown with billowing veils, all of black Mantua silk of which the Norwich weavers Willett & Nephew, just before the firm closed down for good, had created uniquely for this occasion, and in order to demonstrate their unsurpassed skills in the manufacture of mourning silks, a length of some sixty paces (*RS* 296).

And consequently we return to the launching pad for this book's narrative, which begins with his narrator "set[ting] off to walk the county of Suffolk" and leads him, still on the very first page, "into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility" (*RS* 3).

To begin one of his ambulant books with immobility is a nice rhetorical gesture, and suggests perhaps the ways that his mobility is really yet again a metaphor for his mental digressions, that, as Sontag points out, "travel is the generative principle of mental activity in Sebald's books."¹⁸

When I refer to the peripatetic nature of Sebald's writing, I am referring to an impression. I am referring to how it feels to read Sebald; how it has always felt to me reading Sebald is that one is taking a very long walk with him – very like the actual perambulations he (or his narrator) takes alone and also occasionally with his interlocutors in the books (in *Vertigo* the narrator walks so far his shoes fall apart [*V* 37]) – and that one is so absorbed in what he is narrating, that suddenly after a long while one looks up and has no idea how one got to this place from where one started, and has no sense of how long one has been traversing this terrain with him, and also has no urgent sense of a need to get back to where one started. This can happen within a page. And also at length throughout a chapter.

The light has changed, your body aches, you have been walking and walking along all this time.

One of the reasons for this impression is that there are no breaks.

When I say peripatetic paragraphs, I mean that there are no paragraphs – or, at least very few paragraph breaks in his writing. Certainly, there are fewer and fewer as his publications progress. One finds more in *Vertigo*, his first book, though still there are pages on end without any. In *Austerlitz*, as far as I can find, there are no paragraph breaks at all – in the whole book. It is interrupted (if you can even call it that) only by photographic images and some quotations, each illustrations of the prose in progress. On occasion (I found four), asterisks break a section to signify a breath, a turn, a pause.¹⁹

Therefore, practically, the only manner in which to cease reading Sebald is to do so arbitrarily – there is no: "I will read to the end of this section and stop." You must stop in the middle of a thought or a disquisition. You must interrupt him. It feels rude.

Now this is not to say that Sebald's writing is persistently stimulating. On the contrary, its rhythm is soporific. Its monotony of tone, its simultaneous (paradoxical) fullness of detail and its restraint, makes it hard to stop reading but also hard to keep reading. Another way to stop reading Sebald, in other words, besides reaching the end of a chapter or stopping arbitrarily, is to fall asleep.

¹⁸ Sontag, "A Mind in Mourning", 46.

¹⁹ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2001; published in German 2001), 42, 165, 354, 403.

This is one of the many paradoxes of Sebald's writing. (And I am not the only one to think so). Sebald's prose is both soporific and suspenseful. Geoff Dyer, for example, concurs when he comments that it is this "trembl[ing] constantly on the brink of being boring...that makes Sebald's writing so compelling."²⁰ He continues in this paradoxical vein by commenting that "Sebald's hypnotic prose lulls you into tranced submission, a kind of stupor that is also a state of heightened attention." It reminds one of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, because of that sense of movement created through the tidal style of the prose, that feeling of stimulation and sedation.

Sebald's writing is both depressing and uplifting. There are few critics who do not characterize Sebald's writing in some paradoxical way (though without pointing to it – and so seemingly not to recognize it – as paradox), and even fewer who can resist deploying the word "melancholic" to describe it, as I have suggested, but nevertheless exclaim the thrill and compulsion of reading it.

Elinor Shaffer refers to the "melancholy pleasure" of approaching his writings.²¹ Lynne Sharon Schwartz refers to his "tangled restlessness and torpor."²² Elsewhere Schwartz refers to his writing as "[m]agnetic" and "evanescent."²³ Richard Eder refers to his diction as "darkly incandescent."²⁴ Susan Sontag to "his commanding exquisite prose arias."²⁵ Michael Silverblatt refers to the writings' "gravity" and "playfulness."²⁶ Ruth Franklin calls it "bizarre" and "mundane."²⁷ Peter Schjeldahl refers to him as the "rapturously depressive German writer."²⁸

In a very insightful and humorous piece (this already is paradoxical – to write humorously of a writer whose prose is said to "glor[y] in bottomless malaise")²⁹ in *The New Yorker* in 2002, Anthony Lane writes that he is "torn between demanding that W.G. Sebald be given a Nobel Prize and suggesting as politely as possible that he be locked up."³⁰ And in a description that is not quite paradoxical but still invokes a discordant collocation of words, Michael Hoffman refers to the "chilly extravagance" and "numbed obsessiveness" of Sebald's prose.³¹

The nearly ubiquitous proffering of paradox in the descriptions of his writing is paralleled by the similarly vacillant efforts to classify the genre of his prose. I began this disquisition on Sebald proposing that the myriad efforts to find literary precedent or comparison for his prose suggested precisely the futility of the efforts, that it suggested instead precisely the ways that Sebald's prose was really like no other. Similarly, the yearning to describe his prose (as I have also done extensively here) but also almost always to have to describe it paradoxically,

²⁰ G. Dyer, "A Symposium on W. G. Sebald" in *Threepenny Review*, No. 89 (Spring 2002), 18.

²¹ E. Shaffer, "W.G. Sebald's Photographic Narrative" in R. Görner, (ed.), *The Anatomist of Melancholy: Essays in Memory of W.G. Sebald* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2003), 51.

²² L. S. Schwartz, "A Symposium on W. G. Sebald", 19.

²³ L. S. Schwartz, Introduction, in Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*, 16.

²⁴ Eder, "Excavating a Life", 10.

²⁵ Sontag, "A Symposium on W. G. Sebald" in *Threepenny Review*, No. 89 (Spring 2002), 18

²⁶ M. Silverblatt, "A Poem of an Invisible Subject" in L. S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*, 78.

²⁷ Ruth Franklin, "Rings of Smoke" in Lynne Sharon Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (London: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 121.

²⁸ Schjeldahl, "Feeling Blue", 74.

²⁹ Schjeldahl, "Feeling Blue", 74.

³⁰ A. Lane, "W.G. Sebald" in *Nobody's Perfect: Writings from The New Yorker* (London: Knopf, 2002), 497.

³¹ M. Hoffman, "A Chilly Extravagance" in L. S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*, 90.

with antithetical terms, or dreamily – by the very similes and metaphors that he uses so sparingly – suggests the genuine elusiveness of his style.

Critics unfailingly comment on the impossibility of classifying the genre of Sebald's writing. "The porousness of generic borders," Jim Shepard writes, "isn't exactly news, and anyone who's read W.G. Sebald has a vivid sense of just how much can be accomplished in that hazy ground between memoir, history and speculation."³² "[G]enre-defying," describes Eva Hoffman; Sebald is a "writer of almost unclassifiable originality."³³ Another critic describes *The Emigrants* as a "mesmerizing but hard-to-classify combination of biography, fiction, memoir, travel sketch and antiquarian essay."³⁴ This literature – simple, evocative, even easy to read ("quicksilver reading," comments Michiko Kakutani³⁵) – like its narrators and protagonists, has no home: no generic home.

Exile is the keynote of Sebald's texts; his tomes are populated with the displaced: the four "emigrants" of *The Emigrants*: Henry Selwyn, Paul Bereyter, Ambros Adelwarth, and Max Ferber; Jacques Austerlitz of *Austerlitz*; the narrator who at the end of *Vertigo* returns to his childhood hometown of W.; and Sebald himself, German by birth and upbringing, who resided in Britain for over thirty years. Even the characters and historical figures who are not in exile are still all nearly universally portrayed as away or adrift from wherever they call home: Henri Beyle, Dr. K., Dante, Thomas Browne, Roger Casement, Joseph Conrad, Swinburne, Michael Hamburger, etc. etc., and of course the narrators themselves, whose divagations are both corporeal and expository.

The untethered existence of Sebald's characters is analogized in the style, the genre (-lessness) of his prose. The constructed figures and the writing that constructs them are equally not at home in the world. And thus it renders us so. The various descriptions referring to Sebald's "restive mental travellings"³⁶ might put one in mind of Elizabeth Bishop's poem of ambivalent voyaging, "Questions of Travel." While the poem exhorts us wearily to "Think of the long trip home," which for the deracinated of Sebald's books is impossible – no sooner is a figure torn from the land by his roots (whether he recalls the renting or not), there is no way back: the country has disappeared, or the émigré has nothing to go back to; the tether has snapped – but then also to wonder: "Should we have stayed home and thought of here?" Anyone reading Sebald is, at least for the moments of immersion in his prose, made an anxious armchair itinerant. Stationary yet perambulating, agitatedly navigating landscapes of history, memory, tragedy, longing, loss, and dispossession, and then stopping, resting, pausing momentarily, at the absurdity and uncanniness, yet, though unexpected, the inevitability, of connection: not union, but relatedness; we can detach ourselves from the details of history only willfully, and ignorantly. "Is it right to be watching strangers in a play in this strangest of theatres?" Bishop's poem asks. It is not right but inescapable, Sebald's books might answer, when we comprehend that we ourselves are strangers and wanderers, also.

³² J. Shepard, *The New York Times Book Review* (May 17, 2009), 9.

³³ E. Hoffman, "Curiosity and Catastrophe", review of *After Nature*, *The New York Times Book Review* (September 22, 2002). (http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/22/books/curiosity-and-catastrophe.html?ref=w_g_sebald; visited 7 August 2010).

³⁴ J. Schuessler, "Campo Santo: Hanging out with Kafka" in *The New York Times Book Review* (April 23, 2005).

³⁵ M. Kakutani, "In a No Man's Land of Memory and Loss", review of *Austerlitz* in *The New York Times* (October 26, 2001) (http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/26/books/books-of-the-times-in-a-no-man-s-land-of-memories-and-loss.html?ref=w_g_sebald; visited 7 August 2010).

³⁶ A. Lane, "Postscript: W.G. Sebald" in *The New Yorker* (January 7, 2002), 22.

'I COULDN'T IMAGINE ANY WORLD OUTSIDE WALES': THE PLACE OF WALES AND WELSH CALVINIST METHODISM IN SEBALD'S EUROPEAN STORY

Jeremy Gregory¹

Abstract: This essay explores the vital place of Wales, and Welsh Calvinist Methodism, in Sebald's *Austerlitz*. I argue that to an extraordinary extent Wales, in terms of both a landscape and a site of childhood events, functions as a marker and a point of comparison which echoes during the rest of what unfolds. I also suggest that some of the marks of Welsh Calvinism – such as providentialism, predestination, and fatalism – lie behind the narrative thrust of the novel, as events unfold which happen in ways which Austerlitz cannot easily explain. In this reading, Calvinism becomes one of the keys to the narrative structure of the book and Austerlitz's feeling that he is one the elect resonates with both a Calvinist theology and an Israelite sense of identity. The essay ends by suggesting that the care with which the 'Welsh' section of Sebald's book is constructed reveals Sebald's own 'love affair' with the Welsh landscape. It is worth at least speculating that during his time as a lector in German at The University of Manchester, from 1966 to 1970, Sebald took time to explore the nearby spectacular landscape of Snowdonia which later featured so centrally in his breathtaking novel.

What I want to do in this short essay is to say something about the vital place of Wales, and Welsh Calvinist Methodism, in Sebald's European novel, *Austerlitz*. The fact that Dafydd Elias, as Jacques Austerlitz thought himself to be until nearly the age of 16, was fostered in 1939, aged 4 and a half, by a childless Welsh Calvinist minister, Emyr Elias, and his wife Gwendolyn, who lived in a house in the hills just outside the small Welsh town of Bala (and who had hoped eventually to adopt him), was perhaps not that unusual. Wales was one of the main destinations for children evacuated from London and the Home Counties during World War 2, as well as being regarded as a safe haven for young refugees from further afield in Europe, including young Jewish boys like the young Austerlitz who found themselves there because of the *Kindertransport*.² Nevertheless, what I want to foreground is the way in which Wales, and Welsh Calvinist Methodism, as the context for Austerlitz's formative upbringing and earliest memories, become unusual reference points for his unfolding narrative. I will suggest that, to an extraordinary extent, Wales, both in terms of it as a landscape (and often Sebald / Austerlitz is quite specific in his reference to particular locations), and as a site of childhood events and recollections, functions as a marker, a point of comparison, and a ground bass, which echoes, and is frequently recounted, during the rest of what occurs, to a degree which may well be unique in twentieth-century European literature.

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² V. K. Fast, *Children's Exodus. A History of the Kindertransport, 1938–1948* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), 56, 164. C.W.E. Bigsby, *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: the chain of memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 69, recounts how Austerlitz was inspired by Sebald watching a Channel 4 documentary in 2000 about Susie Bechhofer who had been sent to Wales on the *Kindertransport*. In this essay, references to the text are from the 2001 Penguin edition.

Literary critics and cultural historians routinely refer to *Austerlitz* as a 'European' novel, as a book dealing with the trauma of war, and as a study of the workings of the memory.³ For all these aspects, they highlight, among other things, the broad geographical coverage of the novel, ranging from London to Paris, Brussels, Germany and Central Europe, which not only justifies the designation 'European', but is also related to the themes of war and memory. Oddly, the part played by Wales in any of these features has rarely been emphasised, despite the fact that Wales is the location for more than forty pages of narrative near the start of the novel, and it is the place where the young Austerlitz spends his war-time years. Wales is also a recurring trope in Austerlitz's memory. For example, when in hospital in London towards the end of the novel (325), Austerlitz thinks a great deal about the minister in the asylum in the Welsh town of Denbigh, where he died after a mental breakdown after Gwendolyn's death. As Austerlitz travels through the Rhineland, the sight of the Mäuseturm makes him think of Lake Vyrnwy (319), not far from Bala, and while watching the Bastiani Travelling Circus just outside the Gare d'Austerlitz, among the musical strains he seems to hear is 'a long forgotten Welsh hymn' (383). However, the way in which Wales reverberates throughout the text, and by which Wales itself becomes part of this wide-ranging European novel – so that for Austerlitz it is absolutely natural to compare aspects of Welsh landscape and culture with European landscape and culture – is offset by the fact that Austerlitz later recalls that as a child growing up in wartime Wales, there was no wireless or newspapers in the manse, and the minister and his wife never mentioned the war, leading him to remember that at the time: 'I couldn't imagine any world outside Wales' (78). So there are at least two Waleses in the novel: an enclosed inward-looking Wales and a Wales which plays a part on a European stage.

If the significance of Wales within the text has not been emphasised enough by critics, even more intriguingly from the point of view of a historian of Christianity, the religious dimension of the novel has attracted hardly any comment. Perhaps this is because Austerlitz himself remarks that he has never felt that he 'belonged to a ... religious confession' (177) and so critics have not given much concern to the ways in which religion is portrayed and operates in his story. But this lack of attention to the role of religion in the novel is surprising since the Wales of Austerlitz's childhood, as he remembers it up until the age of eleven, is recollected as being entirely dominated by the Calvinism of his foster parents, making it a complete totality within itself, unaware of the world beyond it, and where the only frame of reference and point of comparison is the Bible. In a graphic moment of bibliocentrism, after identifying with some of the heroes of the Old Testament, Austerlitz remembered thinking that the picture of the Sinai desert, where the Israelites camped during the Exodus, in his Welsh children's bible (and from which he learnt the Welsh language more successfully than from any other source) looked just like the part of Wales where he grew up (77). As he recollected it, Austerlitz actually felt closer to the people in the bible illustration than to what he recalled as the increasingly strange-seeming world in which he lived, and he was particularly drawn to what was going on inside the tent in the middle of the picture with the

³ J.J. Long, *W.G. Sebald: Image, archive, modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 151; Scott D. Denham and Mark Richard McCulloch, *W.G. Sebald: history, memory, trauma* (Berlin: W.G. Gruyter, 2006), 4, 109, 133, 234, 236, 24–244, 259; R. Boyers, *The Dictator's Dictation: the politics and novels and novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 200; C. Parry, 'Constructing European Identities in Fiction', in Theo D'haen and Iannis Goerlandt, eds, *Literature for Europe?* (New York: Editions Rodopi, 2009), 279, 280, 289, 291, 292, 295.

cloud of white smoke. This is presumably meant to be a representation of the Jewish tabernacle, although it is not clear whether the white smoke/cloud is meant to signify the burning of incense in the tabernacle or the white cloud God sent to guide the Israelites through the desert. And, from the point of view of the novel more generally, why was the Calvinist-educated young Austerlitz so fascinated by the tabernacle? It may be that he had imbued a Calvinist sense of election and apprehended a connection between this and the Israelite sense of themselves as the chosen people of God but, whatever the precise meaning, in a more general sense it surely underlines the young Austerlitz's self-understanding in purely biblical terms. Only after the end of the war, when he broke his parents' ban on going to the cinema, and when he was sent to a boarding school in Oswestry – which Austerlitz saw as a liberation – did this bibliocentric worldview collapse, and he encountered books other than the Bible, such as geography, history, travel writing and biography (genres and forms which, of course, are used by Sebald within his text). To some extent, then, the entire novel could be read, in almost conventional Enlightenment terms, as the gradual withdrawal of the power and authority of the Bible as it was challenged and replaced by other texts and authorities based on this-worldly and verifiable evidence and experience. In this, the trajectory of the novel as a whole could be envisaged as a move away from the enclosed world of Wales and Welsh Methodism and into a broader European frame of reference.

Nonetheless, neither Wales nor the biblical and religious models and ways of thinking disappear from the text. As I have already noted, Wales continues as a reference point throughout the novel. Additionally, some of the dominant marks of (Welsh) Calvinism – such as providentialism, predestination, and fatalism – lie behind the narrative thrust of the novel as a whole, in that events continue to unfold and happen in ways which Austerlitz cannot easily explain. Calvinism, it could be argued, is one of the keys to the narrative structure of the entire book. Austerlitz himself, early on his story, accounts for the fact that he did not know who he really was on 'an agency greater than or superior to my own capacity for thought, which circumspectly directs operations somewhere in my brain, [which] has always preserved me from my own secret, ... systematically preventing me from drawing the obvious conclusions' (60). There are clear intimations here of a Calvinist God, where the emphasis is on the contrast between divine intelligence and human limitations, and there is something almost like a sense of predestination, since Austerlitz considers he is being directed by an external force.⁴ Elsewhere, Austerlitz admits, in Calvinist fashion, to apprehending that he was one of the elect: 'all that school year I felt as if I had been chosen, and although, as I also know, such a belief in no way matched my uncertain status, I have held fast to it almost my whole life' (103). The contrast he perceived between his personal sense of election and his own unsure position in the world is precisely, according to some historians, what may have attracted certain individuals and social groups to Calvinism in certain periods and places in history, although this is also highly debated, and increasingly historians are wary of making such sweeping connections.⁵ Nevertheless, the emphasis on

⁴ For an insider-view of Calvinism, see D. N. Steele and C. C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: defined, defended, documented* (Phillipsburg NJ: The Presbyterian Reformed Publishing Company, 1963). These core points have frequently been summarised (not without controversy) under the acronym TULIP, standing for Total depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints. For a modern historian's take on Calvinists and their social history, see P. Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: a social history of Calvinism* (New Haven, Conn: Yale, 2002).

⁵ See the account of the issue in Benedict, *Christ's Churches*.

being one of the chosen, but of also being apart from the world, resonates with both a Calvinist sense of being one of the elect but also with an Israelite sense of identity and of being a member of a separate and 'chosen people'.⁶

Austerlitz's memories of his Welsh childhood, and the centrality of religion in it, are notable on a number of accounts. First is the sense of oppression in the unhappy house with its locked rooms, and never-opened windows where he felt 'some kind of captivity', suggesting a feeling of entrapment and suffocation in a confined, closed, and constricted system. These are precisely the points which some critics of Calvinism have made of it since the sixteenth century. Is there also some underlying reference here to the Babylonian captivity of the Jewish people? The minister's wife always seemed to him to be cleaning the house – surely a reference to the protestant / Calvinist work ethic – although she shows none of that pride in conspicuous consumption, or the sense of comfortable calm and order, and inner warmth, suggested to Simon Schama in his analysis of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of Calvinist house interiors.⁷ Instead the house was 'cold and silent' (62). The minister himself spent four days a week – in Calvinist manner – preparing his Sunday sermon in his study.⁸ Most of the time he seemed in a black mood, until the time came to deliver the sermon, when he became transformed – almost a changed person – and after which he became nearly jovial. The sermon itself invariably dwelt on the Last Judgement, frequently leaving, Austerlitz reminisced, some of the congregation 'as white as a sheet' (64).

Second, Austerlitz recalled that Calvinist eschatology was entrenched in his young mind not so much in any specific doctrine he had imbibed from his religious education but in the *chiaroscuro* – the light and shade – of the minister's moods, and even more in the changing gloom and brightness of the mountainous Welsh landscape where dark valleys could suddenly be covered in sunlight, in what might be termed a 'biblical sky'. Moreover, it was the sight of the furnaces near a small town in south Wales, and the view from the hotel in which he and the minister were staying, which resulted in the minister giving a sermon the next morning on the wrath of God, petrifying the congregation as he warned of the devastation which would occur to the homes of people who refrained from keeping the Sabbath holy. Austerlitz remembered the bomb that fell that afternoon, destroying homes and killing people in their Sunday best, the dead being, as the minister would judge, and the young Austerlitz had already internalised, sinners. Significantly, neither the minister nor the young Austerlitz make any reference to the bomb as an instrument of war, rather they viewed it as an instrument of divine punishment. All this meant that the young Austerlitz was left with an Old Testament sense of retribution, punishment and guilt.

As I have already indicated, memories of his childhood in Wales continued throughout the rest of Austerlitz's life. There were only two sorts of material objects Austerlitz

⁶ For some of the ways in which British Protestants in earlier centuries had understood themselves as a 'chosen people', see P. Collinson, 'The Protestant Nation' in *The Birthpangs of Protestant England. Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 1–27. Tony Claydon and Ian McBride have noted a tension between the Reformed theology's emphasis on the salvation of the *individual* and the idea of an 'elect nation': see their 'The trials of the chosen people: recent interpretations of Protestantism and national identity in Britain and Ireland', in T. Claydon and I. McBride, eds., *Protestantism and National Identity. Britain and Ireland, c. 1650–c. 1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3–32.

⁷ S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

⁸ For Calvinist sermon preparation, see B. Jackson, "'As a musician would his violin": the oratory of the Great Basin prophets' in R. H. Ellison, ed., *A New History of the Sermon: the nineteenth century* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 498.

remembered in the Welsh manse, and which he kept after the minister's death, and both had links, either obvious or more subtly, to religion. The first and overtly religious document was the *Calendar of Sundays and Church Festivals from 1928 to 1946* published by the Calvinistic Methodist Church of Wales. In this the minister had recorded the places where he preached and on which biblical text, and this was a perpetual reminder to Austerlitz of the minister's hell-fire preaching. This is not a fictional document and I am sure that Sebald actually saw a copy, although I have been unable to locate one.

The other possessions were photographs of the old village of Llanwyddn, which had been submerged by the creation of Lake Vyrnwy in 1888 to provide water for Liverpool.⁹ This had been the home village of the minister whose own father had been sub post-master there. Sebald used 'real' photographs in the text: a web-search comes up with several etchings of the old village which are just like the ones he used. The combination of 'fiction' and 'fact' is one of the hallmarks of Sebald's writings and is addressed elsewhere in this collection. Indeed the very fact that the 'Welsh' section of the story is so well illustrated seems to confirm its central position within the novel. The flooding of the village – along with the loss of other villages in Wales and the Lake District in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to make space for reservoirs to provide water for the growing conurbations of Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham – is an extreme example of the ways in which modernity altered the rural landscape. In the case of Llanwyddn (and this is not mentioned in the text), the 'drowning of the village' entailed literally digging up bodies from the graves in the old churchyard and re-burying them in the new village (which seems to mark a literal return of the dead, to echo Carole Angier's essay). In the novel, the flooded village stands for another world, being famous for the football matches that had taken place on the green (and hearing the minister talking about this was the only time Austerlitz remembered him showing warm human emotions). The young Austerlitz imagines the minister as being the only one who was saved from the flood; but he thinks of the other inhabitants still living there literally underwater. This kind of thought leads him to recall Evan the cobbler (Austerlitz calls him a 'visionary' (81)) who had a radically different worldview from that of the judgemental minister, where death was associated with everlasting punishment, and instead the cobbler believed that 'only a piece of silk separates us from the next world' (76), suggestive perhaps of a shadowy, liminal and nearly permeable state between the living and the dead. Evan claimed that he could sometimes see dead people who had been brought back to life and that he could spot them by the fact that they were shorter than most people and their faces seemed to blur at the edges, as if they were still half connected to the world of the dead. If I were to push this a little – and Sebald does not himself make the connection in the text, although he was himself raised a Catholic – Evan's religious world view has some resonances with a Catholic worldview, of praying to saints for intervention, and for souls in purgatory, where the emphasis is on the endless possibility of a connection with, rather than a separation from, the next world.¹⁰ This is another Wales, a Wales of folklore and spirits, which comes to

⁹ H. R. Jones, *Lake Vyrnwy: the history of a valley and a submerged village* (Liverpool: D. Marples, 1892).

¹⁰ It is perhaps worth noting that although Sebald often denounced organised religion, he could not reject Catholicism totally: L. Patt, *Searching for Sebald. Photography after Sebald* (Los Angeles, Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), 67. Patt suggests he was an embodiment of the phrase: 'There is no such thing as a Lapsed Catholic'. For a vivid evocation of the Catholic world view see E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale, 1992).

be a kind of counterpoint to the Calvinist worldview of Austerlitz's childhood.¹¹ It is also no coincidence that it is Evan's son who is the projectionist in Bala cinema, and who is seen as a representative of imagination and freeing the mind after the straightjacket of Calvinism. This Wales of the imagination perhaps resonates more readily with the world of Austerlitz's birth parents; he was, after all, named 'Jacques' after Offenbach, and his surname was, he discovers, the real surname of Fred Astaire.

If critics would do well to attend to make more of the significance of Wales within this European novel, it is tempting to conclude by speculating why, and how, Sebald was so fascinated by Wales. The fact that one of his prototypes for Austerlitz, Susie Bechhofer, had been sent to Wales on the *Kindertransport* presumably explains why Wales features at all, and its place at the start of the novel. But the precision with which the Welsh landscape is described surely indicates a deeper, more personal engagement with aspects of Welsh geography and culture than this fact can by itself explain. It is surely not reading too much into the narrative to suggest that the care with which the 'Welsh' section of Sebald's book is constructed reveals Sebald's own 'love affair' with the Welsh landscape. It is worth at least considering that, during his time as a lector in German at the Victoria University of Manchester from 1966 to 1970, Sebald took time away from his teaching duties to explore Snowdonia and the Welsh mountains which were only a little over two hours away from the city in which he worked and lived, a city which is itself the subject of another essay in this collection.

¹¹ R. Gwyndaf, *Welsh Folk Tales* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1999); Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) examines, among other things, the place of holy wells in post Reformation Wales.

‘UTTER BLACKNESS’: FIGURING SEBALD’S MANCHESTER

John Sears¹

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

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grids that mark traces of movements.² 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'.³ 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'.⁴ 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

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

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

⁴ 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'.⁵ 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

⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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'.⁸ 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

⁶ See Hughes, *Frank Auerbach*.

⁷ 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

⁸ 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'.⁹ '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.¹⁰ 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'.¹¹ 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.¹²

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

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

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

¹¹ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux*, 11.

¹² 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 momentum¹³ – 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’.¹⁴

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”’.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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

¹³ Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto*, 19.

¹⁴ Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto*, 121.

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

¹⁶ 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'.¹⁷ '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.¹⁸

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

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

¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ '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',²⁰ a

¹⁹ Hughes, *Frank Auerbach*, 86.

²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² 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'.²³ 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

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

²² Hughes, *Frank Auerbach*, 160.

²³ 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*.

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

Janet Wolff¹

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.

*

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

*

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

*

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, *Hiller’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

*

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.

*

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.

THE USES OF IMAGES: W.G. SEBALD & T.J. CLARK

Helen Hills¹

Abstract: Scholarship on W.G. Sebald's work, seduced by his brilliant prose, has tended to concentrate on the texts as verbal matters, at the cost, at times at least, of the images. Thus within much of the existing Sebald scholarship the rich and ambiguous relationship between word and image gets short shrift. This chapter interrogates that relationship, approaching Sebald's work, especially *Austerlitz* (2001), as a potentially productive challenge to architectural history. I weave my account through a consideration of *The Sight of Death. An Experiment in Art Writing* (2006) by the renowned art historian, T.J. Clark, which poses a deliberate and self-conscious challenge to certain conventional practices within art history. Thus the chapter examines the use of images – especially images of architecture – in Sebald's work to reflect on what his approach might offer the discipline of art history.

The sophisticated staging of the complex inter-relationship between image and text in the work of W.G. Sebald (1944–2001) is a potentially productive challenge to art history. I weave this reading of Sebald's work, particularly *Austerlitz* (first published in German in 2001), through a consideration of T.J. Clark's *The Sight of Death* with which there are many apparent similarities and resonances.² Although it may seem invidious to compare the work of Sebald, who was not an art historian (he referred to his work as 'prose narrative'), with that of a renowned art historian whose work poses a deliberate and self-conscious challenge to certain conventional practices within art history, I argue that it is Sebald who may have most to show us in this regard.

In *The Sight of Death* an eminent art historian adopts – perhaps one should say 'resorts to' – an unusually literary mode of writing, the diary entry, combined with poems, while Sebald's tactic might be characterised as a remarkably historical mode of literary writing. Both Clark and Sebald deploy a multitude of images in their texts: Sebald uses a range of black and white images: plans, paintings, sketches, but mostly black and white photos, which are inserted without captions in his text. Both authors, in their radically differing ways, are writing about the discrepant role of images (photographs, paintings) in both skewering and destabilizing relationships between past and present, about sight, particularly 'the sight of death', about silence and the strange workings of sight and memory. Both authors, again in different ways, confront the problems of the image, of 'seeing' and not seeing and of the queasy relationship between seeing and knowing. Sebald is principally concerned with what we fail to see or mistakenly see, with radical disjuncture between claim and sight, and with the unnerving potential that photographs sometimes possess to release intense connection

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² W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 2001). Subsequent references are to this edition (abbreviated in the main text as *A*) followed by page numbers. T.J. Clark's *The Sight of Death. An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006) (abbreviated in the main text as *SD*).

between their dead subject and their living viewer; meanwhile Clark aims to make himself and his reader see more – and more of what he himself sees – in specific oil paintings by Nicolas Poussin.

It is not by chance that Clark invokes poetry and Sebald deploys photographs. It is as if both writers found the traditional, conventional modes of their respective practices insufficient to the task they had set themselves. Thus although the differences between Sebald and Clark are many and profound, a juxtaposition of aspects of their work is illuminating. It seems to me that in these two books there is at work an interesting exchange, or intersection, of a sort, between the ‘task’ of the art historian and that of the literary writer, that is very suggestive. Such slippage across or productive exchange between fields is by no means restricted to these two writers. One could add to their number the names of a host of other, more or less prominent, contemporary writers, who are deploying photographic images, often of architecture, in their work, notably Orhan Pamuk, J.G. Ballard, Iain Sinclair and Rachel Lichtenstein.³ Of course, these practices extend beyond contemporary novels and memoirs to the intensified conjunction of text and image in contemporary culture, such as advertising and websites.

Both authors set themselves the problem of *writing after*. For Clark it is that of writing after Marxism; for Sebald that of writing after the Shoah. Both regard themselves as impossibly ensnared. For Sebald the questions revolve around what sort of writing is possible after the Holocaust and in the face of humankind’s pitiless extermination of nature, which he has witnessed all around him, and which he regards as indelibly connected to the logic of modernity; for Clark, the most prominent pitfalls are those of the social history of art, of which he once was the most dazzling exponent.⁴ Not by chance, then, does Clark invoke poetry and Sebald deploy photographs.

W.G. Sebald’s writing shuns the techniques of a realistic novel. Indeed, it can be seen as an attempt to destroy the border between fiction and nonfiction in an attempt to interrogate the problem of how we might ‘know’ the past. Thus the narrator of *Austerlitz* recounts the efforts of a Czech Jew to recover the fragments of a family history, shattered by the Holocaust. Yet, as Mark Anderson and others have argued, the roads in Sebald’s work do not all lead to Theresienstadt, despite the forceful application of that reading of Sebald’s work particularly by commentators in the USA and UK.⁵ Sebald’s concerns are wider – with existential exile, as well as the political refugee, the long history of mass killings in European history, as well as in the twentieth century – and he ranges across European history from the Renaissance and the eighteenth century to the present. The thematization of the Shoah in his work goes hand in hand with a profound concern with the longer history of modernity.⁶ As Anderson points out: ‘The view of human devastation and darkness is much larger, at once geophysical

³ O. Pamuk, *Istanbul: Hatıralar ve Şehir* (2003) was published in English as *Istanbul: Memories of a City*, trans. by M. Freely (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); J.G. Ballard, *Miracles of Life: Shanghai to Shepperton: an autobiography* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008); I. Sinclair, *London Orbital: A walk around the M25* (London: Granta, 2002); I. Sinclair and R. Lichtenstein, *Rodinsky’s Room* (London: Granta, 1999).

⁴ His most significant contribution remains T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985), which transformed the face of art history.

⁵ Richard Eder in *The New York Times* claimed that Sebald, with Primo Levi, was ‘the prime speaker of the Holocaust’. Richard Eder, ‘Excavating a Life’, *New York Times Sunday Book Review* (October 28, 2001), 10. Quoted by Mark M. Anderson, ‘The Edge of Darkness: On W.G. Sebald’, *October*, 106 (Fall 2003), 104.

⁶ J.J. Long, *W.G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 3.

and metaphysical, though their roots lie in a profound meditation on the violence of European modernity'.⁷ In short, it is the eerie relationship between presence and being and loss and oblivion that detains him:

On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation. For the history of every individual, of every social order, indeed of the whole world, does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but rather follows a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail down into darkness.⁸

T.J. Clark, like Sebald, is concerned with a materialist account of history, but for Clark this is orchestrated around the contemplation of paintings. Clark presents his book, somewhat disingenuously perhaps, as an informal diary account of his engagement with Poussin, more specifically with two paintings by Poussin, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, 1648, (National Gallery, London), and *Landscape with a Calm*, 1650–51 (the Getty Center, LA), which Clark encountered hanging together at the Getty Museum while he was on a six-month research stint at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. This was for him a fortuitous opportunity to study the paintings together, away from the jostling dim National Gallery room where *Snake* usually hangs.

While Clark seizes upon the first person voice and the diary form in his quest to achieve intimacy, immediacy, the minimum of mediation, and to authentically convey the contradictory processes of extended looking, Sebald deploys the first person only in gestures of infinite regression. In *Austerlitz*, Sebald's 'place' as author is assumed by a German narrator, whose biographical details closely resemble Sebald's, but whose principal role is to bear witness, to *listen*, rather than to speak. Thus the book is largely made up of avowedly indirect speech, reported in extensive sentences, which range sometimes over pages, and whose protraction itself represents the twists and self-envelopings of time and memory. Yet the narrator holds the narrations together, and is himself woven into them, in an implicit gesture of solidarity and identification that is all the more effective for being unstated. One example must suffice. At the very end of *Austerlitz*, the narrator reads a book by Dan Jacobson, which Austerlitz had given him, which describes the author's search for his grandfather, a search which takes him to Fort IX in Kaunas, Lithuania, where the Wehrmacht command posts were set up in 1941 and where more than 30,000 people were killed over the following three years. 'Transports from the west kept coming to Kaunas until May 1944, when the war had long been lost, as the last messages from those locked in the dungeons of the fortress bear witness', writes Jacobson (A 415). One of these messages, 'Max Stern, Paris, 18.5.44', gestures toward W.G. 'Max' Sebald, who was born on that date. Thus Sebald's and the narrator's identities are intertextually affiliated and transnationally ranged, and dispersed, rather than concentrated and seeking convergence as in Clark's work.

Both Sebald and Clark adopt their unconventional modes of writing and representation, because of their awareness of the multiple discrepancies and slippages between images and time. Clark's book recounts the process of standing day after day in front of a painting, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (Fig. 1).

⁷ Anderson, 'The Edge of Darkness', 120.

⁸ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Harvill Press, 1998), first published as *Die Ringe des Saturn: eine englische Wallfahrt* (Frankfurt: Eichborn, 1995).



FIG. 1: Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake*, oil on canvas, 118 × 198 cm (National Gallery). Credit: © The National Gallery, London.

Clark observes:

astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing again and again: aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface, what is salient and what incidental alter bewilderingly from day to day, the larger order of the depiction breaks up, recrystallizes, fragments again, persists like an after image. (*SD* 5).

Clark's realization was that the diary record was of interest as a 'record of looking taking place and changing through time' (*SD* 5). Thus his book challenges conventional art history's supposed habit of assuming that an artwork remains always the same to the interpreter, to examine instead the ways in which painting, looking, and writing are entwined, and in it he searches to be more responsive – which is also to be more hesitant – to the painting, and to modes of seeing.

What Clark finds increasingly compelling is less the snake and the imposition of a narrative about it than what he calls 'structural and material issues': the size and shape of the picture, the place assigned to animal and human within that shape; the relation of large and small, dark and light, within the pictorial field; and the balance between overall simplification and clarity of structure and materiality in detail. For Clark this amounts to 'a claim for a kind of ethical balance, or ethical composure', which paintings 'through their very wordlessness may strike': 'The pictures' ethical temper is their *atmosphere* most powerfully, and the viewing distance this atmosphere seems to dictate' (*SD* 136). 'There is,' suggests Clark, 'such a thing as an ethics and politics specifically of the image – a set of attitudes to, and demonstrations of, the way giving visual form to experience can (sometimes) edge

understanding away from the confines of the sentence'.⁹ For Clark, then, attentive looking at a painting can produce or reveal such an ethics. His book uses images to assist – even perhaps to force – the viewer to participate in such concentrated detailed looking for ‘ethical’ ends.

Initially, Clark’s tone seems designed to encourage us to look more closely and carefully – more hesitantly, perhaps: ‘There is a word and a concept hovering here, to do with the point where the mental and manual meet, or the conceptual and material; but for the moment they’re escaping me’, he writes about *Calm* (SD 64). He tries to demonstrate the way in which an earlier engagement with a painting can resurface unpredictably to foreground specific aspects of it later: ‘This morning almost the first thing I saw in *Landscape with a Snake* was the pair of tiny figures – are they women or men in togas? – standing at the top of the hill by the farmstead, to the left [...] I know I have noticed them before, looking at the picture in London. And now I realise that at least once over the past few days, I half-remembered that there was “something there” – some unfinished business – up on the cliff’ (SD 44) [Fig. 2]. Clark seeks at once to immerse himself in and explore the yields of repeated acts of looking, partly to test whether ‘the work we depend on images to do for us – the work of immobilizing, and therefore making tolerable’ is thereby undermined (SD 8). More significantly, the repeated returns to *Landscape with a Snake* are a challenge to what he sees as the prevailing practice in art history of ‘writing pictures to death’ in embedding ‘in the form of the narrative the (false) suggestion that once upon a time, back there and in the present [...] the picture lived everlastingly here and now’ (SD 8–9).

Elsewhere, however, the apparent hesitancy of Clark’s tone yields to something more insistent: ‘It is important that we find our way into the picture first (I want to be literal for a moment about our entering the fiction from the nearest point available) on a definite downhill slope’ (SD 89). Such instructions martial our looking (somewhat as TV cameras direct ‘watching’ an orchestra play) and combine with the numerous images to produce an insistent and hectoring register. For *The Sight of Death* is lavishly interspersed with illustrations, including many more details of fewer paintings than is usual in art history publications, as well as larger details of smaller areas of the picture surface than is usual (how much detail is too much?). Thus one plate shows at approximately life-size a detail of part of a castle which is no more than one-thirtieth of the whole painting in extent, and several other illustrations show the same castle carefully cropped to highlight its relation to foreground and background. Images are dispersed liberally amongst the text: ‘Look at the wrinkles for bricks on the front pillar’, Clark enjoins himself and us, ‘Go in close again, and the blue, in its very impersonality, is a fragile shifting work of the hand’ (SD 63). Thus he seeks to draw together text with image. The detail and direction are a form of coercion delivered with the best intentions, of course, since for Clark ‘scale and color, and opacity versus transparency, are the forms of an argument in Poussin: they *are* the argument, or what marks this argument off from many others roughly the same, but lacking in precision’ (SD 49).¹⁰ They are his mode of tracing the way a painting ‘directs an inquiry into “what it is saying”’ (SD 83).

⁹ T.J. Clark, ‘Balancing act (letter to the editor)’ in *Artforum International* 45:8 (April 2007), 42.

¹⁰ This coerciveness is at odds with Poussin’s work, and indeed, it appears to be at variance with Clark’s own understanding of it. He observes eagerly with regard to *Landscape with a Snake*: ‘this picture’s construction is as uncoercive as they come.’ Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 90. That is not all that seems to me to be at odds with Poussin. The leisurely, self-indulgent, powerfully Americanized tone and artful manner of writing are at odds with Poussin’s rigorous economics.

Detail of *Landscape with a Calm*.

What are these miniature figures in Poussin about? Why do they come and go in perception? Why, once seen, do they matter so much? Calling the figures tiny is crude. They are smaller or larger within a fairly wide range. The characters hurrying or sauntering on the path by the city wall in *Landscape with a Calm*, for instance – Anne suggested the other day that their being visible only from the waist up may be a way of registering the track they are walking along as worn-down, age-old – are different in kind from the red and blue pair on the cliff, at least if we look at them from a reasonable viewing distance, taking in the picture as a whole. The pair in *Snake* are spots of color, points of light, things that can only be figures even if we cannot exactly make them out – signs of figures, I'd say; if the semiotics were not too cut and dried. The people on the path, by contrast, are just readable as individuals actually doing something, not simply standing for themselves, not upright instances.

Detail of *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*.

sion: the branch in question is on another plane altogether, many feet closer to us) is a clump of dark leaves. Behind them is the dark receding corner of the farmstead wall. The red and light blue of what they are wearing are electric: small as they are (a third of an inch in a picture that looks almost 4 feet high) the figures are meant to fixate; and they do, once seen. Even from normal viewing distance, 6 or more feet away, they register. Equally, they can be repressed. I know I have noticed them before, looking at the picture in London. And now I realize that at least once over the past few days I half-remembered that there was "something there" – some unfinished business – up on the cliff. But the half-memory passed and did not lead to me actually looking: it was only today that I saw them, immediately, and then as a consequence saw the slightly larger, darker red and blue walkers down by the lakeside – in the gloom where the swimmers have thrown off their clothes.

FIG. 2: T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death, An Experiment in Art Writing* (Yale University Press: 2006), pp. 44–45, showing the juxtaposition of details of paintings and text.

The imbalance of power in making mute things speak preoccupies both Sebald and Clark, though they respond in very different ways. 'I began writing, and could not stop', Clark claims (*SD* 3). Sebald makes no similar disingenuous disclaimers of responsibility; rather the contrary. From the first, he makes clear both the great *difficulty* and the responsibility of enunciating. His writing demonstrates the extremely problematic relationship between writing and speaking, images and memory, and the obliteration of other stories or other versions of the same story that his words necessarily and inevitably represent, even in their arduous task of searching to remember something and to restore something that has been wilfully obliterated. For Sebald attention to the image does not reveal or produce an ethics. Indeed, his whole work flinches from any ready engagement with that showy and treacherous word. Instead Sebald reveals that his own text is itself quite the reverse: it is complicit and compromised. To do this, rather like Clark, he deploys the image; but for Sebald the relationship between image and text is always troubled. Further, while Clark insists that we look here and see that, Sebald treats the relationship of text and image with far greater wariness. He demonstrates their allure, their tensions and their treachery indirectly, unobtrusively, and non-directively. While Sebald's *Austerlitz*, like Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul*, deploys photographic images, apparently in the manner of more or less conventional illustrations, the volumes always resist, in a range of ways, demeaning the photograph into mere illustration of the text, or vice versa. In this way Sebald's novel disrupts historicist narrative devices in a Benjaminian mode.¹¹

A photograph of a cracked display case containing butterflies, for example, is inserted amidst an extended reflection on the beauty of moths and various collected creatures, itself a passage which in its curiously hesitant and divagational tone evokes both the beautiful dead butterfly and its meandering flight (Fig. 3). The photo is forced into the text mid-sentence, such that the whole, text and image taken together, implies that the text itself enters the logic of collecting, figured here as a collection of captured, dead creatures, not readily seen, imprisoned behind cracked glass. Multiple delicate painstaking violences have already taken place and the text is part of them.

Images detonate and throw the reader off kilter; text disorients the reading of the image. Sometimes this is orchestrated graphically, as for example, in *Schwindel. Gefühle* (Frankfurt: Eichborn, 1990) (Fig. 4). Here, as Mark Anderson has shown, the top of the painting of the Battle of Marengo showing only pale sky, is located at the bottom of the left-hand page, introduced by the centred three-word line 'mit sich allein' ('alone with himself').¹² The bottom of the painting, representing the actual battle, is at the top of the facing page, and is followed by a second triad of words, 'wie ein Untergehender' ('like one meeting his doom'). The image, like a baroque *trompe l'oeil*, is cropped to resemble a memorial column, complete with verse-like epitaph. The belated experience of the materiality of death leads to the dizzying cut: the spliced painting trips the reader up and induces a textual vertigo akin to the 'vertiginous sense of confusion' in the text experienced by Henri Beyle related to his renunciation of a military career, and his decision to become Stendhal.¹³

¹¹ In Pamuk's case this device enables him to explore Islamic unease with figurative visual representation.

¹² The passage is brilliantly analysed in Anderson, 'Edge of Darkness'. The editions in English translation fail to reproduce such subtleties in the relationship between text and image, thereby considerably blunting the work of the novel. Anderson, 'Edge of Darkness', 102–121, esp. 118–119.

¹³ Marie-Henri Beyle (1783–1842) adopted the pen name of Stendhal (among others).

ein aschgraues Gefieder, außerdem einen karminroten Schwanz, einen schwarzen Schnabel und ein weißliches, wie man denken konnte, von tiefer Trauer gezeichnetes Gesicht. Im übrigen, fuhr Austerlitz fort, fand sich fast in jedem der Räume von Andromeda Lodge irgendein Naturalienkabinett, Kästen mit zahlreichen, zum Teil verglasten Schubladen, in denen die ziemlich kugeligen Eier der Papageien zu Hunderten aufraufgiert waren, Muschel-, Mineralien-, Käfer- und Schmetterlingssammlungen, in Formaldehyd



eingelegte Blindschleichen, Nattern und Echsen, Schneckenhäuser und Seesterne, Krebse und Krabben und große Herbarien mit Baumblättern, Blüten und Gräsern. Adela habe ihm einmal erzählt, sagte

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Austerlitz, daß die Verwandlung von Andromeda Lodge in eine Art Naturhistorisches Museum ihren Anfang genommen habe mit der Bekanntschaft, die der Papageienvorfahre Gerald's im Jahr 1869 mit Charles Darwin gemacht hatte, als dieser in einem von ihm unweit von Dolgellau gemieteten Haus arbeitete an seiner Studie über die Abstammung des Menschen. Darwin sei damals oft bei den Fitzpatrick's in Andromeda Lodge zu Gast gewesen und habe, der Familienüberlieferung zufolge, immer wieder die paradiesische Aussicht gerühmt, die man von hier oben radiesische Ausischt datiere auch, so, sagte Austerlitz, habe ihm Adela gesagt, das bis auf den heutigen Tag sich fortsetzende Schisma in dem Clan der Fitzpatrick's, nach dem in jeder Generation einer der jeweils zwei Söhne dem Katholizismus abtrünnig und Naturforscher geworden sei. So war Aldous, der Vater Gerald's, Botaniker gewesen, während sein um mehr als zwanzig Jahre älterer Bruder Evelyn festgehalten hatte an dem überkommenen Glaubensbekenntnis des in Wales als die schlimmste aller Pervertionen geltenden Papismus. Tatsächlich war auch die katholische Linie in der Familie immer die der Exzentriker und Verrückten gewesen, wie man deutlich am Fall des Onkels Evelyn noch sehen konnte. Er ist zu der Zeit, während ich als Gast Gerald's alljährlich viele Wochen hindurch bei den Fitzpatrick's war, sagte

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Fig. 3: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003), pp. 126–127, showing Sebald's characteristic use of grainy images set into text without caption.

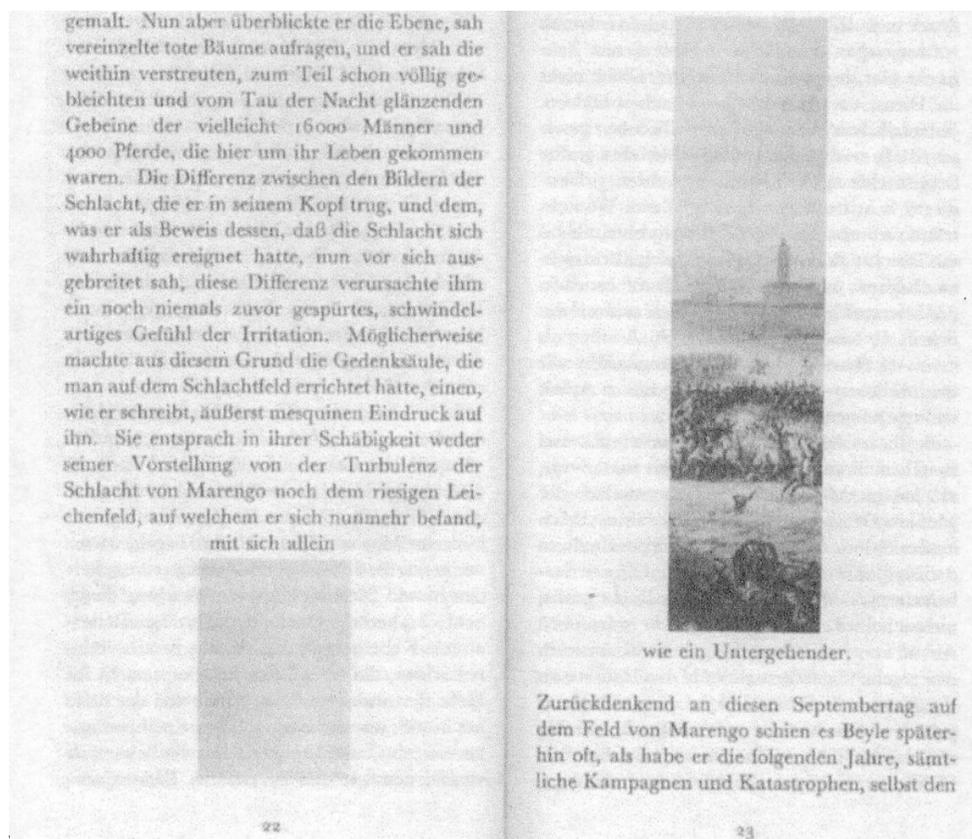


FIG. 4: W.G. Sebald, *Schwindel. Gefühle* (Frankfurt: Eichborn, 1990), pp.22–23, showing Sebald's manipulation of image and text relationship.

Sebald deploys photographs like guns. They disrupt and knock off course. Even as they suggest authentication and truth, they undermine that assumption. But the knock-out shots they deliver are unrelated to force. The photographic medium does not impose a sense of mediation. There is, rather, an invitation to meditate.¹⁴ Consider the first spread of images from *Austerlitz* (Fig. 5). Closely cropped ogling eyes of defamiliarised animals, supposedly from the Antwerp Nocturama, and of the painter Jan Peter Tripp and the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein are the first images to appear in *Austerlitz*. Insistently but quietly they suggest questions about the relationships between animal and human, between text and image, and between looking and interpreting; and about the connections between all three. Moreover, as the narrator claims that the eyes of the nocturnal animals resemble those of 'certain painters and philosophers', the photographs occupy a position of disturbance in relation to the text, since the animals' eyes, contrary to those claims, do not actually closely resemble those of either the painter or the philosopher. Thus the question of the difference

¹⁴ P. Muldoon, *Plan B* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2009), 7.

er, durch dieses, weit über jede vernünftige Gründlichkeit hinausgehende Waschen entkommen zu können aus der falschen Welt, in die er gewissermaßen ohne sein eigenes Zutun geraten war. Von den in dem Nocturama behausten Tieren ist mir sonst nur in Erinnerung geblieben, daß etliche von ihnen auffallend große Augen hatten und jenen unverwandt



forschenden Blick, wie man ihn findet bei bestimmten Malern und Philosophen, die vermittels der rei-



nen Anschauung und des reinen Denkens versuchen, das Dunkel zu durchdringen, das uns umgibt. Im üb-

FIG. 5: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003), p. 11.

between seeing and knowing, sight and seeing, and between claim and evidence is implied. While the nocturnal animals can see in the dark, humans cannot; instead humans have a remarkable capacity to see what they are told is there. Thus paradoxically, through the sight of the organs of sight the problem of ‘the darkness that surrounds us’ (A 3) is subtly set in motion.

Clark insists that looking takes time and effort. We look from different views and at different moments. His book confounds the lure of visibility that it appears to offer the reader. ‘*Landscape with a Snake* seems to me wonderful’, writes Clark, ‘because it puts that fiction of visibility to the test’ (SD 9). Despite his tiresome defensiveness, his clever and arch contrivance, despite so much being wise after the event—and all in the name of its obverse – Clark, too, is searching for an ethical way to do (art) history, and it is that search that produces the unconventional form of his book. The marks of Poussin’s praxis come to stand for an ethics and a politics that Clark can state ‘only by means of tracing the slipperiness of the materiality of Poussin’s paint’.¹⁵ Through that exploration, Clark traces an ethics in Poussin: ‘for a painter like Poussin the stakes were higher than truth to materials. What he was after was a freedom – freedom and accuracy – a way of reopening the world to imaginative scrutiny’.¹⁶

The numerous and detailed reproductions of Poussin’s paintings in Clark’s book (on which Yale University Press has lavished huge resources) seem to represent an effort both to replicate seeing the paintings themselves and to match as closely as possible what T.J. Clark’s text tells us that he saw and directs us to see also. Thus the dream here is of identity: seeing the same and the same seeing. For Sebald that is precisely the nightmare and the fear. Instead Sebald selects images that are often hard to decipher, murky and grainy, images which self-evidently lack authority, and which fail to support textual claims – even directly undermining textual authority. Sebald’s scrupulous avoidance of the subjection of image to text or text to image is most apparent in his fastidious avoidance of captions, but it extends to including images that have no direct consonance with the text whatsoever. Thus his images serve to further fragment truth, rather than to guarantee it, for instance by playing on apparent consonances which are simultaneously exposed to be either wittily unreliable or to have no literal correspondence at all. A description of a medieval castle is illustrated with a photo of a castle amid a rocky landscape, which, on closer inspection, turns out to be a close-up of a planter in the form of a castle sprouting cacti.

What at first sight appears to be a prosaic photograph of two billiard balls (Fig. 6) is inserted into an account about Iver Grove, a ‘building now everywhere falling into decay’ (A 147), which Austerlitz and his history teacher happen to visit: ‘it seemed to us as if silent horror had seized upon the house at the prospect of its imminent and shameful end’ (A 147). The owner of Iver Grove tells them that his ancestor, who built it, suffered from insomnia and withdrew into the observatory ‘to devote himself to various astronomical studies, particularly selenography or the delineation of the moon’ (A 148). After his death, no-one had ever played in the billiard room again:

¹⁵ P. Plock, ‘Social Paint’, unpublished paper delivered to the annual conference of Association of Art Historians (2009). See Clark, *Sight of Death*, 43.

¹⁶ Clark, *Sight of Death*, 127.

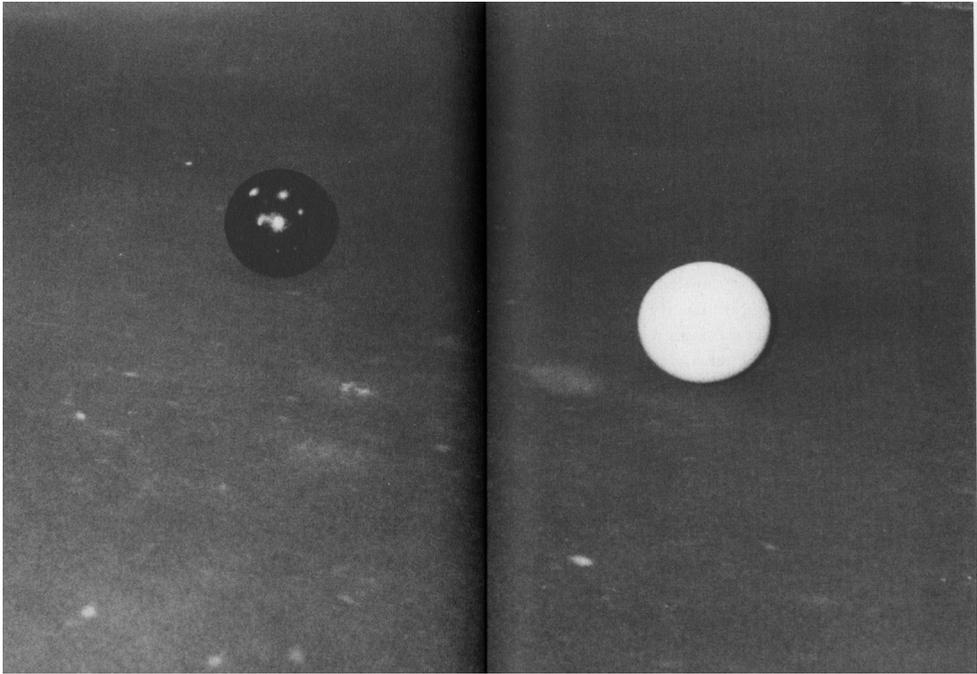


FIG. 6: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003, pp.158–9).

Evidently, said Austerlitz, this place had always remained so secluded from the rest of the house that for a century and a half scarcely so much as a gossamer-thin layer of dust had been able to settle on [...] the green baize cloth stretched over the table, which seemed like a self-contained universe. (A 152).

The photograph, therefore, depicts at once planet and satellite, billiard table and balls, and a dust-covered ‘self-contained universe’ that is a neglected memorial to the ancestor.

Just as *Austerlitz* shuns the techniques of a realistic novel, its images shun the status of illustration. Sebald demonstrates a lively awareness of the problems of the photograph. Jacques Austerlitz is himself an architectural historian, and interested in photography:

From the outset my main concern was with the shape and the self-contained nature of discrete things, the curve of banisters on a staircase, the moulding of a stone arch over a gateway [...] it never seemed to me right to turn [...] my camera on people. (A 108).

I am not, of course, claiming that W.G. Sebald *was* an architectural historian or that his books are in any straightforward way architectural history. But I would like to raise the question here of whether they may not also be an important *form* of architectural history – and therefore present a challenge to certain conventionally established and unexamined practices within architectural history.

The issue posed by Sebald, which is also found in much contemporary cultural production, is the way in which images juxtaposed with texts produce an inter-play between them (the

interstices or the intertextuality) to indicate the constructed nature of the text itself. Sebald's work appears to participate in the 'pictorial turn' (or, as it is sometimes called, the 'iconic' or 'visual' turn) in contemporary culture, that is, in the widely shared notion that visual images have replaced words as the dominant mode of expression in our time. This idea is elaborated and resisted most notably by W.J.T. Mitchell.¹⁷ Rather than adopting a simplistic notion that 'images are replacing words', or relying on a pre-existing theory or method, Mitchell suggest we let pictures 'speak for themselves'.¹⁸ Starting from 'metapictures' or pictures that reflect on the process of pictorial representation itself, he sought to study pictures themselves as forms of theorizing. He aims to 'picture theory, not to import a theory of pictures from somewhere else'.¹⁹ Sebald's use of images is less didactic, and is above all concerned with photographs. Unlike many writers who use photographs to interrogate memory (such as Pamuk, who writes about Istanbul by drawing heavily on his own experiences), Sebald deploys his writing and photographs in order to 'give myself an idea of that which I myself never lived and which no-one spoke to me about'.²⁰ Thus his is a conjuring of absences, without a wish to produce solid presences. This method draws on the mysterious power in photographs of what Barthes calls 'concomitance', or 'co-presence', whereby photographs can sometimes strangely convey to a viewer a sense of her own earlier and thitherto forgotten presence in the scene.²¹

These very practices, which are at work in the text-image relations and constitute their density, pose a direct challenge to conventional architectural history, both in its rather naïvely 'flat' use of photographs as 'illustration', and in its equally naïve historicist appropriation of memory and time.

A single spread (Fig. 7) from Deborah Howard's *Architectural History of Venice* (in many ways, an exemplary piece of architectural history), demonstrates two ways in which architectural history habitually seeks to annihilate the specifics of the moment in its use of photographs. The right-hand photograph in Figure 7 is characteristic of architectural history's habit of selecting photographs devoid of people, and in which all signs of the specificity of the moment are effaced. Such photographic illustrations appear to indicate that the moment privileged for analysis is contemporaneous neither with the building's execution nor with the architecture's interpretation, so much as *outside* of history itself.

When events and people do intrude, architectural history fastidiously ignores them. Thus in the left hand photo in Figure 7 the mysterious gentleman taking his coffee, who appears to be purposefully framed by the open door and who would not be out of place in a book by Sebald, is at once shown and effaced. The text is forbidden from mentioning such people. A particularly eloquent example is a beautiful photograph of Palazzo Bonagia in Palermo in Anthony Blunt's *Sicilian Baroque* (1968), taken, as the caption points out, before the aerial bombardment of 1943 (Fig. 8).

¹⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: essays on verbal and visual representation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 6.

¹⁹ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 6.

²⁰ Quoted in R. Kahn, 'La photographie dans *Les Anneaux de Saturne* de W.G. Sebald', in R. Kahn, ed., *À travers les modes* (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Université de Rouen, 2004), 25–34, 26.

²¹ Scrutinizing Lartigue's 1931 beach image, Barthes wondered whether 'maybe [as a younger man] I was there'. Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), 84.

VENICE SINCE THE FALL OF THE REPUBLIC



ABOVE, LEFT
121 Caffè Florian,
 Piazza San Marco, décor
 by Ludovico Cadorin,
 1858 (Sarah Quill)



ABOVE, RIGHT
122 Corpo di Guardia,
 Arsenal, by Giovanni
 Casoni, designed 1829
 (Sarah Quill)

Although Napoleon's Kingdom of Italy was short-lived, it established certain attitudes towards the architectural heritage of the city which were to survive through much of the nineteenth century. The most significant of these were a continuing readiness to demolish historic buildings and a bold policy of modernization. The Neoclassical movement, which had formulated an idiom so well-suited to Napoleonic ideals, had provided the style adopted by the Establishment. As the chief propagator of Neoclassicism, the Venetian Accademia di Belle Arti was given full recognition, and in 1807 Giannantonio Selva was given the task of converting the former Scuola and monastery of the Carità into their new premises. Meanwhile, a new organizational framework for local government in the city was founded to replace the Republic's numerous magistracies. Thus the Kingdom of Italy not only bequeathed its policies, but also the administrative machinery with which to implement them.

The second and third periods of Austrian rule (1814–48 and 1849–66)

With the return of the Austrians a period of recession and economic hardship set in. A trade blockade in 1813–14 had only aggravated the already precarious financial situation. The cumbersome bureaucracy established during the Napoleonic period proved incapable of tackling the huge social problems caused by the economic decline – poverty, infant mortality and unemployment. The changing social conditions in the city are reflected in the fact that the number of people in domestic service fell by as much as 90% in the early nineteenth century. Heavy taxation penalized property owners so severely that many palaces and houses were demolished, simply because their

FIG. 7: Deborah Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice* (London: Batsford, 1989), p. 218.
 Photograph © Sarah Quill.



115 (top left) TRAPANI Staircase of the Santuario dell'Annunziata, now the Museo Pepoli, begun in 1639 with decoration added in the 18th century.
 116 (top right) PALERMO Court of the Palazzo Cattolica. Probably built about 1720 by Giacomo Amato.
 117 (below) PALERMO Staircase of the Palazzo Castel di Mirto, now Bonagia (photographed before the bombing of 1943), said to have been built by Andrea Giganti in the 1750s. Based on Neapolitan models.

FIG. 8: Anthony Blunt, *Sicilian Baroque* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968): fig. 117, showing the use of an old photograph in architectural history illustration: in this case a photograph that predates the bombing of 1943.

Two boys stand at the foot of the staircase facing each other. One is dressed in pale linens and wears a boater; the other is rougher, darker and in a cloth cap. They stand semi-adversarially, together a metaphor for the question of who will occupy this aristocratic splendour in future – after the allied attack which half destroyed the palace not long after this photo was taken. They at once stage the architecture of the staircase, and are themselves staged. Yet they are scrupulously and utterly ignored in the text. Thus although people are sometimes visible in its photos, the task of architectural history is to make them invisible. In short, architectural history's image practice is markedly squeamish about incident, event, and life. It is as if architectural history fears those inhabitants and the disturbing concomitance of photographs, as if its task were the exorcism of the ghosts of architecture's own inhabitants.

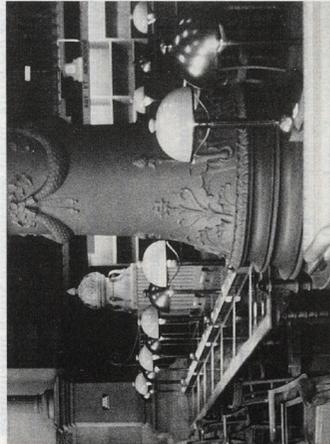
Let us turn to two examples of Sebald's approach to architecture. Emblematic of his thinking of the losses incurred in the course of modernity is the contrast Sebald draws between

zum erstmal in meinem Leben ausweitete vor Glück. Weshalb gewisse Klangfarben, Verschattungen in der Tonart und Synkopen einen dermaßen ergreifen, das wird ein von Grund auf unmusikalischer Mensch, wie ich es bin, sagte Austerlitz, niemals verstehen, aber heute, in der Rückschau, kommt mir vor, als sei das Geheimnis, von dem ich damals angerührt wurde, aufgehoben gewesen in dem Bild der schnee-weißen Gans, die reglos und unverwandt, solange sie spielten, zwischen den musizierenden Schaustellern stand. Mit etwas vorgerecktem Hals und gesenkten Lidern horchte sie in den von dem gemalten Him- melszelt überspannten Raum hinein, bis die letzten Töne verschwebt waren, als kennte sie ihr eigenes



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Los und auch das derjenigen, in deren Gesellschaft sie sich befand. — Wie mir vielleicht bekannt sei, so nahm Austerlitz bei unserer nächsten Begegnung in der Brasserie Le Havane seine Geschichte wieder auf, ist in der über die Jahre immer mehr heruntergekomenen Zone am linken Seineufer, wo er seinerzeit mit Marie de Verneuil in dieser ihm unvergänglich gebliebenen Zirkusvorstellung gewesen sei, inzwischen die den Namen des französischen Präsidenten tragende neue Nationalbibliothek errichtet worden. Die alte Bibliothek in der rue Richelieu hat man bereits zugesperrt, wie ich mich unlängst selbst überzeugte, sagte Austerlitz, der Kuppelsaal mit den grünen Porzellanlampenschirmen, die ein so gutes, beruhigen-



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Fig. 9: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003), pp. 390–391.

the old Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the new one bearing the name of the French president, just along the Quai from the Gare d'Austerlitz. It is worth quoting his reflections on these buildings at length, to demonstrate their comic, cutting qualities, and the relationship between text and image in the astute reading of architecture, archive, reading, and memory. The scene is set by Austerlitz's description of an unforgettable circus performance in 'the increasingly dilapidated area' that later became the site of the new library:

nor could I have said at the time whether my heart was contracting in pain or expanding with happiness for the first time of my life [...], said Austerlitz, but today, looking back, it seems to me as if the mystery which touched me at the time was summed up in the image of the snow-white goose standing motionless and steadfast among the musicians as long as they played. (A 383-4).

There is, of course, no photograph to record this epiphanic goose; instead, below there is a photograph of the old library in the rue Richelieu, since closed (Fig. 9):

as I saw for myself not long ago, said Austerlitz, the domed hall with its green porcelain lampshades which cast such a soothing, pleasant light is deserted, the books have been taken off the shelves, and the readers, who once sat at the desks numbered with little enamel plates, in close contact with their neighbours and silent harmony with those who had gone before them, might have vanished from the face of the earth. (A 385-6).

The old library bears an imprint of a former way of life now lost. The new library, by contrast, deforms social life and seeks to exclude the reader, the one who wishes to remember, as a potential enemy. The dissolution of the capacity to remember, in line with the inexorable spread of processed data, and the architectural effouement of the Bibliothèque Nationale are inextricably intertwined:

In order to reach the Grande Bibliothèque you have to travel through a desolate no-man's land in one of those robot-driven Métro trains steered by a ghostly voice. (A 386).

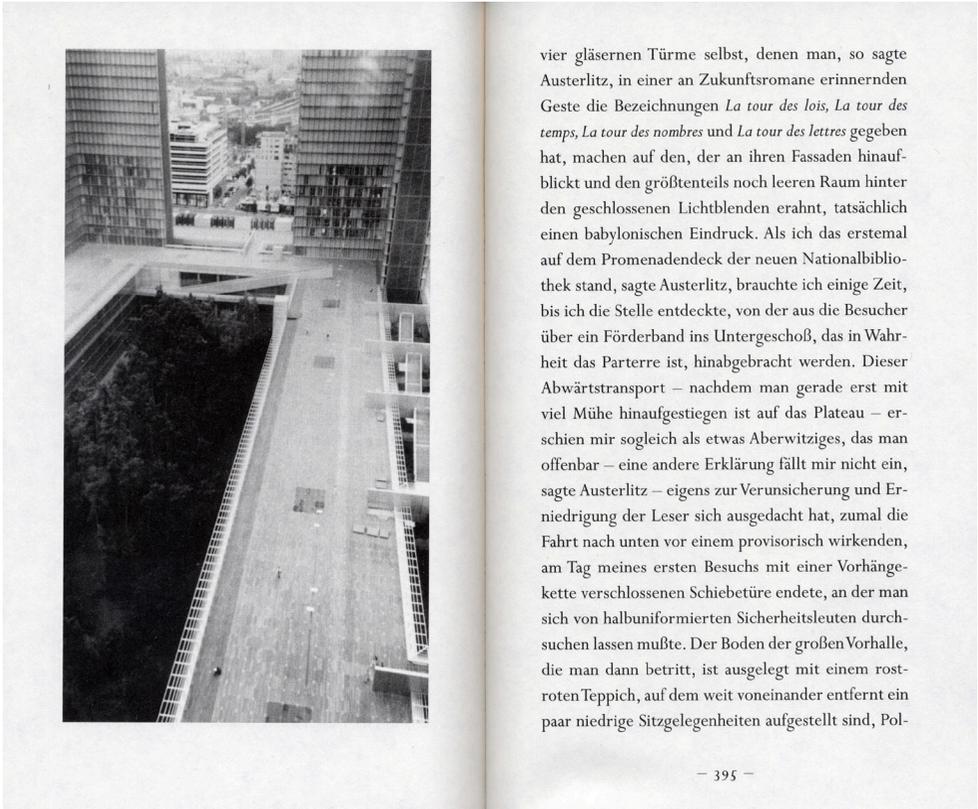
Sebald's reference to the new library as a 'hideous, *outsize building*' (my italics) returns the reader to a discussion earlier in the text of the Palace of Justice in Brussels: 'for somehow, we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them' (A 24). The library, we are presented with is, then, already partially ruinous, ruined and ruining (Fig. 10). As in Kafka's Castle, access, knowledge, and hierarchy are architecturally ranged.

You might think, especially on days when the wind drives rain over this totally exposed platform, as it quite often does, said Austerlitz, that by some mistake you had found your way to the deck of the *Berengaria*. (A 387).

Cataclysm is at hand: Theresienstadt's inhabitants were arrayed 'almost as if they were passengers enjoying an evening stroll on the deck of an ocean-going steamer' (A 341). Sebald depicts a close relationship between bourgeois rationality and violence, wherever it may unfold, including the architecture and processes of the library:

This downwards journey, when you have just laboriously ascended to the plateau, struck me as an utter absurdity, something that must have been devised – I can think of no other explanation, said Austerlitz – on purpose to instil a sense of insecurity and humiliation in the poor readers. (A 389).

The new library treats the work of history and of the intellectual as suspect: uniformed officials question new readers in cubicles, 'as if you were on business of an extremely dubious



vier gläsernen Türme selbst, denen man, so sagte Austerlitz, in einer an Zukunftsromane erinnernden Geste die Bezeichnungen *La tour des lois*, *La tour des temps*, *La tour des nombres* und *La tour des lettres* gegeben hat, machen auf den, der an ihren Fassaden hinaufblickt und den größtenteils noch leeren Raum hinter den geschlossenen Lichtblenden erahnt, tatsächlich einen babylonischen Eindruck. Als ich das erstmal auf dem Promenadendeck der neuen Nationalbibliothek stand, sagte Austerlitz, brauchte ich einige Zeit, bis ich die Stelle entdeckte, von der aus die Besucher über ein Förderband ins Untergeschoß, das in Wahrheit das Parterre ist, hinabgebracht werden. Dieser Abwärtstransport – nachdem man gerade erst mit viel Mühe hinaufgestiegen ist auf das Plateau – erschien mir sogleich als etwas Aberwitziges, das man offenbar – eine andere Erklärung fällt mir nicht ein, sagte Austerlitz – eigens zur Verunsicherung und Erniedrigung der Leser sich ausgedacht hat, zumal die Fahrt nach unten vor einem provisorisch wirkenden, am Tag meines ersten Besuchs mit einer Vorhängekette verschlossenen Schiebetüre endete, an der man sich von halbuniformierten Sicherheitsleuten durchsuchen lassen mußte. Der Boden der großen Vorhalle, die man dann betritt, ist ausgelegt mit einem rostroten Teppich, auf dem weit voneinander entfernt ein paar niedrige Sitzgelegenheiten aufgestellt sind, Pol-

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FIG. 10: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003), pp. 394–5.

nature, or at least had to be dealt with away from the public gaze'. And, despite its size, it proves useless in Austerlitz's search for traces of his father, who had disappeared from Paris fifty years before. Indeed, the library is referred to as a 'place of banishment' (A 391). Even its 'curious nature reserve' is a place of trickery and death: 'birds which had lost their way in the library forest flew into the mirror images of the trees in the reading-room windows, struck the glass with a dull thud, and fell lifeless to the ground' (A 392). The library is presented as a manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything that bears living connection to the past.

The next photograph in the book follows a few pages after the account of the library (Fig. 11). This is a double-page photo of the room of files on prisoners in the little fortress of Terezín, from where Austerlitz's parents went to their death. This photo, in turn, evokes one earlier in the book, of another computerless windowless office filled with papers, that is, Austerlitz's own (Fig. 12). That room, humanized by its very disorder, both works to underline the ruthless ordering in the files on prisoners and aligns the latter with the inhumanity of the order at the new Bibliothèque Nationale.

The humiliating new library remembers and is related to what it has obscured, the subterranean world of cities, the lost colombaria, repeatedly referred to through the text:

Thus, on the waste land [...] where this Babylonian library now rises, there stood until the end of the war an extensive warehousing complex to which the Germans brought all the loot they had taken from the homes of the Jews of Paris [...], for the fact is that the whole affair is buried in the most literal sense beneath the foundations of our pharaonic President's Grande Bibliothèque. (A 403).

There then follows a description of the retreat of light from the city seen from above, in which scale and proximity are dizzyingly confounded and nature becomes destruction such that tree-tops of the pine-grove that earlier had resembled 'moss-covered ground', end as a 'regular black rectangle' (A 403). Like the coincidences Sebald speaks of, his style recovers, devours, and displaces the past. Remarking elsewhere on the literary style of Sir Thomas Browne, Sebald argues that he manages to 'levitate' the reader's perspective: 'The greater the distance, the clearer the view: one sees the tiniest details with the utmost clarity. It is as if one were looking through a reversed opera glass and through a microscope at the same time'.²² In this *selbstvergesenes Schauen*, a phrase Sebald uses in *Unheimliche Heimat*, his study of

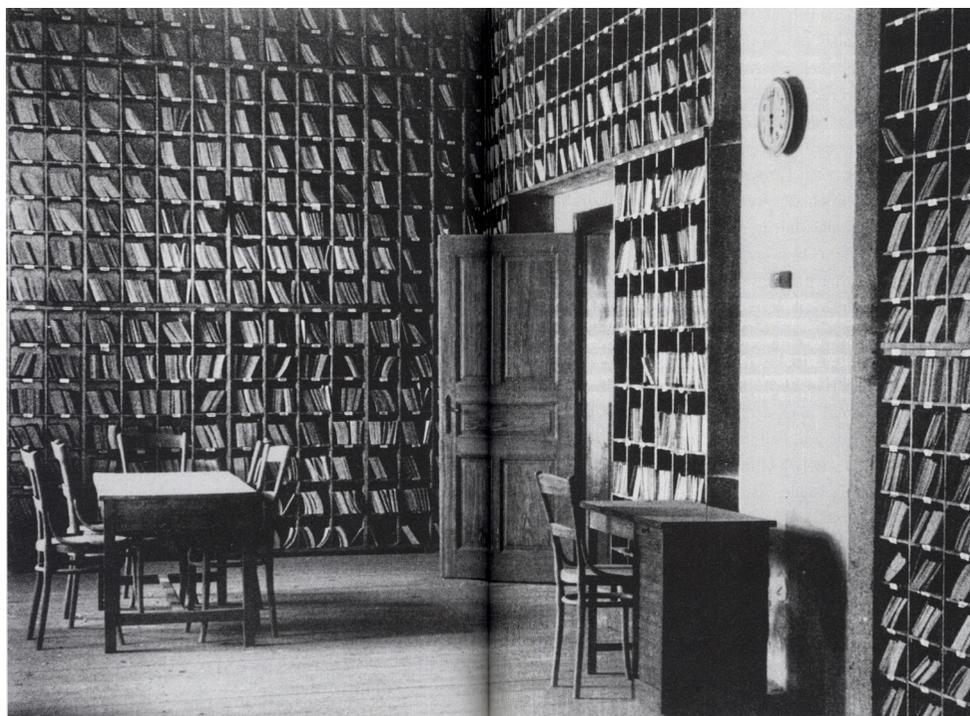


FIG. 11: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003), pp. 402–3.

²² Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, 19.

In den nachfolgenden Jahren habe ich Austerlitz fast jedesmal, wenn ich in London war, an seinem Arbeitsplatz in Bloomsbury unweit des British Museum besucht. Ein, zwei Stunden bin ich dann meist bei ihm gesessen in seinem engen Büro, das einem Bücher- und Papiermagazin glich und in dem zwischen den



am Fußboden und vor den überfrachteten Regalen sich stapelnden Konvoluten kaum Platz gewesen ist für ihn selber, geschweige denn für seinen Schüler. Austerlitz ist ja für mich, der ich zu Beginn meines Studiums in Deutschland von den seinerzeit dort amtierenden, größtenteils in den dreißiger und vierziger Jahren in ihrer akademischen Laufbahn vorangerückten und immer noch in ihren Machtphantasien befangenen Geisteswissenschaftlern so gut wie gar nichts

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FIG. 12: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003), p. 51.

Austrian literature, transcendence becomes possible: ‘The metaphysical moment and its surveying perspective have their origins in a profound fascination in which our relation to the world is for a time reversed. In the process of looking, we sense that things are looking at us, and we begin to comprehend that we are not here to look piercingly at the universe, but rather to be looked as piercingly by it.’²³

By contrast when Austerlitz gets to Theresienstadt, with an intensifying feverishness over several pages text is replaced by images, and the reader is hurled against closed and urban emptiness, barred windows and broken doors.

²³ W.G. Sebald, ‘Jenseits der Grenze. Peter Handkess Erzählung Die Wiederholung’ in *Unheimliche Heimat: Essays zur Österreichischen Literatur* (Frankfurt: Frankfurt Fischer, 1984), 158.

Erboden verschluckt wurde. War schon die Verlassenheit der gleich dem idealen Sonnenstaatswesen Campanellas nach einem strengen geometrischen Raster angelegten Festungsstadt ungemein nieder-



drückend, so war es mehr noch das Abweisende der stummen Häuserfronten, hinter deren blinden Fenstern, sooft ich auch an ihnen hinaufblickte, nirgends ein einziger Vorhang sich rührte. Ich konnte mir nicht denken, sagte Austerlitz, wer oder ob überhaupt irgend jemand in diesen öden Gebäuden noch wohnte, trotzdem mir andererseits aufgefallen war, in welcher großer Zahl in den Hinterhöfen mit roter Farbe grob nummerierte Aschenkübel der Wand

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FIG. 13: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003), p. 275.

The photo that introduces us to Theresienstadt boasts a sign trumpeting ‘IDEAL’, that distances and makes ironic what it seems to lay before us (Fig. 13), Theresienstadt, the city that Hitler gave the Jews, the ‘ideal’ city that was anything but. Next is a double spread of three photos of closed windows, doorways and rubbish bins, threaded with fragmented text (Fig. 14).

most uncanny of all, were the gates and doorways (Tören and Tore) of Terezín, all of them, as I thought I sensed obstructing access to a darkness never yet penetrated [...] in which there was no more movement at all. (A 267–268).

Images and text (the regimented numbered rubbish bins, the illegible graffiti) block understanding and deny access (Fig. 14). The very next pages bear no words at all; two

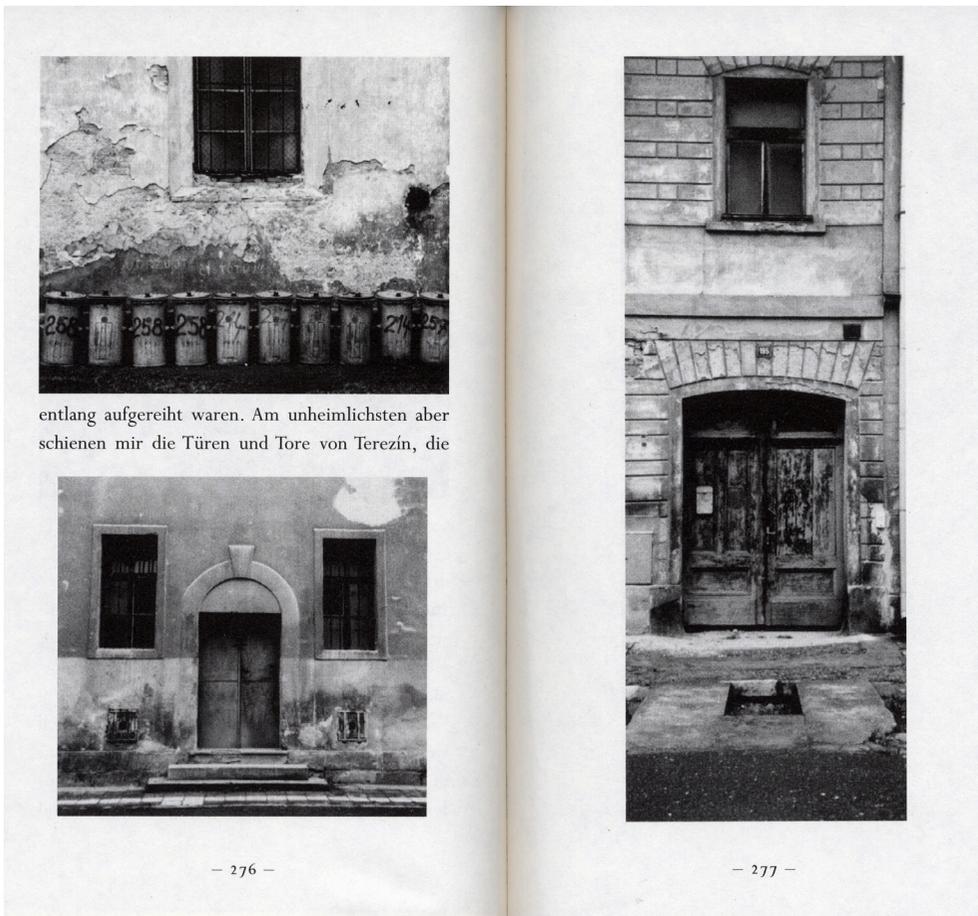


FIG. 14: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003), pp. 276–277.

photographs of ruinous doors, closed and ominously battered, claustrophobic, confrontational, and silent (Fig. 15).

At midday Austerlitz reaches the dead-end of the Antikos Bazaar, which occupies one of the largest buildings in Terezín. It is imaged three times, as if drawing closer to the subject, but although we are told that its vaults ‘reach back a long way as well’ (A 273), the photographs increasingly emphasize not depth but surface. First a long low photograph stretching across a double spread, with text above, of the shop front and its windows, each increasingly dark, dejected and empty; followed by two smaller photos of the junkshop windows, as if drawing closer to the subject. In the junkshop windows lie jumbled stranded objects ‘that for reasons one could never know had outlived their former owners and survived the process of destruction’ (A 277).

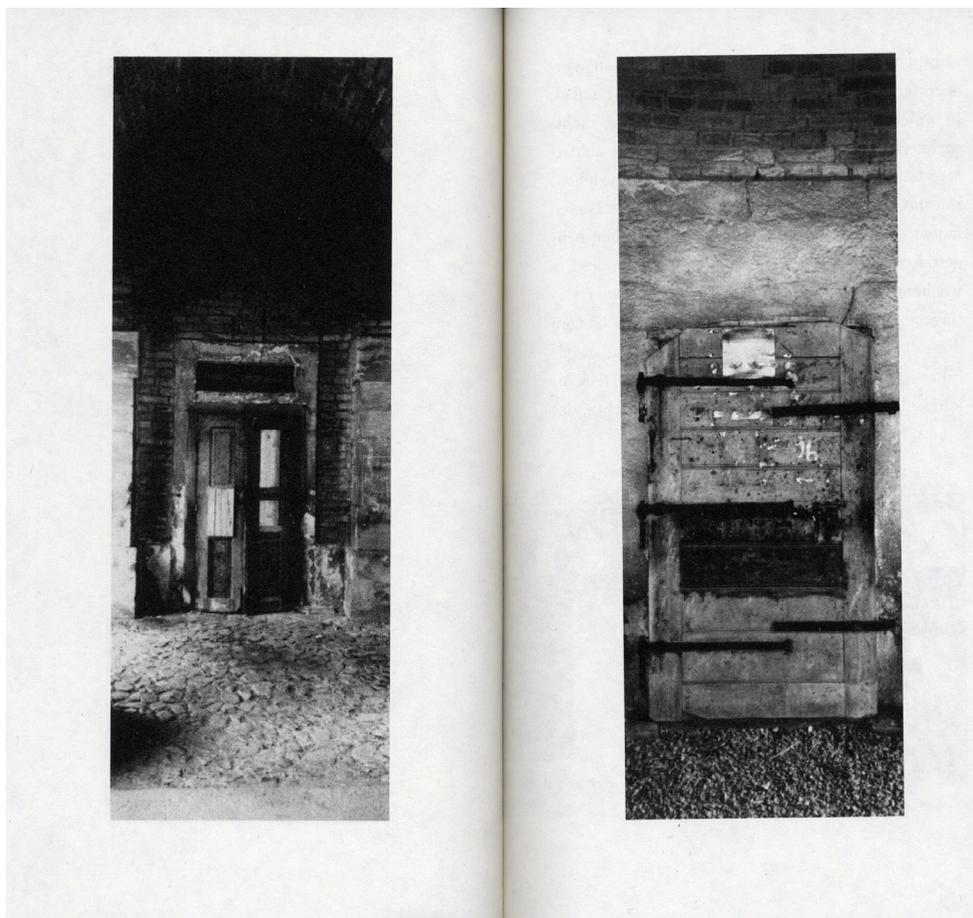


FIG. 15: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003), pp. 278–9.

In the last of these photos a porcelain horseman rescues a girl, ‘in a moment, perpetuated but for ever just occurring’ (A 277) (Fig. 16). Superimposed on it and barely perceptible, the reflection of the narrator-photographer himself forms another survival from a destroyed past, for which his narrative is both search and record of loss, in a moment that occupies an entirely unfixable relation to time.

In contrast to Clark’s emphatically directed looking and his insistence on the ethics of a certain sort of looking, and in even greater contrast to the frozen engagement of much architectural history, Sebald’s encounters are open and fluid. Movement and transience run through the work, echoed by an apparent openness in the narrative that follows distractions or coincidences, and that traverse, ignore, or transgress boundaries, in order to ‘walk after’ (‘nachgehen’) the stories that cross his path, following the vanishing traces of people, objects,

ideas and memories, in order to save them from oblivion. In this task he is inspired, assisted, and thwarted by photos and other images which he allows to have more memory and more future than the beings who contemplate them.

auf einem Aststummel hockend dieses ausgestopfte, stellenweise schon vom Mottenfraß verunstaltete Eichhörnchen, das sein gläsernes Knopfauge unerbittlich auf mich gerichtet hielt und dessen tschechischen Namens – veverka – ich nun von weit her wieder erinnerte wie den eines vor langer Zeit in Vergessenheit geratenen Friends. Was, so fragte ich mich, sagte Austerlitz, mochte es auf sich haben mit dem nirgends entspringenden, nirgends einmündenden, ständig in sich selbst zurückfließenden Strom, mit veverka, dem stets in der gleichen Pose ausharrenden Eichhörnchen, oder mit der elfenbeinfarbenen Porzellankomposition, die einen reitenden



Helden darstellte, der sich auf seinem soeben auf der Hinterhand sich erhebenden Roß nach rückwärts wendet, um mit dem linken Arm ein unschuldiges,

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FIG. 16: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003), p. 284.

NOVEL CRIME, HUNTING AND INVESTIGATION OF THE TRACES IN SEBALD'S PROSE

Muriel Pic¹

Abstract: Mindful of the criminality in memory, Sebald's prose itself leads an investigation. He uses the inquest process from the crime novel genre, and espouses the specific narrative regime of the crime novel. He also makes reference to the latter by punctuating the narrative with true crime stories. In *Vertigo*, for example, Sebald relates an unsolved crime taken from an article in an Italian newspaper. The story serves to reinforce an uneasiness felt by the narrator since his time in Vienna. Sebald's writing can be seen as an historical operation of searching for clues, which are not presented as documents producing a discourse of truth. Rather, they give rise to an experience of remembering which becomes entwined with that of reading. In his prose, the document appears as a fragment detached from its context, free to provoke a re-living of the past by invoking the imagination. Sebald's aim is to bring the past to life through prose and images. He uses documents from history, rejecting the positivistic historical method borrowed from the natural sciences. Wandering through time with the narrator in Sebald's works, the reader is thus drawn into a deep meditation on identity. This essay analyses the complex narrative techniques Sebald uses to develop his vision of the past, including his pathbreaking use of photographs.

*The text is a forest in which the reader is hunter. Rustling in the underbrush
– the idea, the skittish prey, the citation – another piece “in the bad”.*

Walter Benjamin²

The characters in Sebald's work are all survivors who have entered into a time without beginning nor end, existing in the wanderings of memory. They are victims of “unresolved crimes”.³ Sometimes fatal – as it can lead to suicide – this inability to appease the unravelling time of memories produces symptoms which are present in all of Sebald's narratives in various forms. We can often find in his prose the use of explicitly psychiatric terms to designate these symptoms. In *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks. Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke*,⁴ Sebald analyses the work of several Austrian authors from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, noting the influence on their work of this rapidly developing discipline at that time, as well as the role of these literary figures in the development of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. A vocabulary of pathology is present throughout this essay where he talks of “perversion”, “paranoia” and “schizophrenia”. It is

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² W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, eds., Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (New York: Belknap Press, 2002), m2a, 1.

³ L.S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory. Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 105.

⁴ W.G. Sebald, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks. Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke* (Residenz-Verl.: Salzburg Wien, 1985).

through the prism of these notions that Sebald reads the works of Stifter, Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal, Thomas Bernhard and others.

In Sebald's prose, the symptom always appears within the first few pages as an *incipit*. It is with this that the story starts, and that the investigation begins: the investigation into memory, but also intertextuality and identity. Sebald is a detective and a hunter; he follows and reads traces as clues. Indeed, he discovers the past as a means to investigate memory, to explore libraries, and to decipher texts and images.

Investigation and memory: symptoms, signs, coincidences

The first chapter of *Vertigo* begins with the rewriting of Stendhal's life, introducing the theme of self-writing. Through the telling of the author's recurrent collapses, this passage renders the bibliographic and the clinical as inseparable. After this introduction, we discover in Chapter II a narrator who is travelling to Vienna, then Northern Italy, "hoping that a change of place would help him get over a particularly difficult period of his life".⁵ Tirelessly he takes the same way through the Austrian capital, tracing a crescent moon, walking without aim. Plagued with vertigo and hallucinations, the narrator is led to see "people I had not thought of for years, or who had long since departed".⁶ This uneasiness also echoes that of the characters in *The Emigrants*, survivors, several of whom end up killing themselves. Each of these short stories is the tale of a "suicide at an advanced age, which is a syndrome of survivors";⁷ the most famous cases of which are Jean Améry, Primo Levi, Paul Celan, Tadeuz Borowski. If the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* is not in this situation, it is clear that we discover him to be in a state of profound melancholy, which necessitates a stay in the hospital. Prey to paralysis that reminds him of the hero of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the narrator crawls painfully to a window to watch the outside world "in the tortured posture of a creature that has raised itself erect for the first time".⁸ Finally, *Austerlitz*, which has, according to Sebald, "the form of an elegy, a long prose elegy",⁹ narrates the rediscovery of memory in a man who, throughout the novel, is prey to symptoms physically translating the indescribable return of something repressed. Here, we find several descriptions of anxiety attacks that take hold of the hero unexpectedly. Jacques Austerlitz knows the scattering of the self, the loss of identity. The view of the dislocated "I" is a constant throughout the novel, the hero being ignorant of his entire past. In Paris, Jacques has "The first of the several fainting fits I was to suffer, causing temporary but complete loss of memory, a condition described in psychiatric textbooks, as far as I'm aware, as hysterical epilepsy".¹⁰ The hero wakes up in the Salpêtrière hospital, where Doctor Charcot had interned a large number of hysterics at the end of the 19th Century. Hysteria is the first symptom that appears in the prose because, according to Freud, reminiscences generally cause hysterics a great deal of suffering.¹¹ An investigation into memory is used to understand the illness. It is

⁵ W.G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage books, 2001), 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory*, 38

⁸ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage Books, 2002), 5.

⁹ Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory*, 103.

¹⁰ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Michael Hulse, (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 268.

¹¹ S. Freud and J. Breuer, *Studien über Hysterie* (1875) (Frankfurt a. M: Fischer, 1991).

a condition of survival, and the prose has to resolve Jacques' condition as if solving a crime. Thus, Sebald affirms in *The Emergence of Memory* that his narratives are "crime fictions" faced with "unresolved crimes":¹² against people as memories, but also against humanity. In his prose, Sebald shows that the criminality can be the representation of the past.

Mindful of the criminality in memory, Sebald's prose conducts an investigation. If he uses the inquest process from the crime novel genre, and if his writing espouses the specific narrative regime of the crime novel, it also makes reference to the latter by punctuating the narrative with true crime stories. In *Vertigo*, for example, Sebald relates an unsolved crime taken from an article in an Italian newspaper. The story serves to reinforce an uneasiness felt by the narrator since he was in Vienna which has continued to grow throughout time spent in Venice, and then in Verona. In a particularly comical outburst of paranoid panic, the narrator imagines himself to be, in this autumn of 1980, the fourth and latest victim of the group called the Ludwig organisation, which has held strikes annually since 1977. The pizzeria where he is at the time suddenly appears to be a trap, where the waiter speaks the coded language of death, "L'verno è alle porte". On the bill, we are shown the patronym of ill omen appearing as "Cadavero Carlo". The entire narrative is built with a collection of coincidences that, though they are excessively interpreted in *Vertigo* as evil omens, turn out to be the symptoms of a state of paranoia. The symptom becomes a sign, and soon a clue, for it is in trying to comprehend this state that, seven years later, the narrator retraces his voyage from Vienna to Verona via Venice. This self-investigation leads him to Milan, where he arrives at the station only to read "an advertisement for Hertz entitled PROSSIMA COINCIDENZA", right before he is mugged. After this forewarned coincidence, the narrator procures himself two new identity papers dated 4th August 1987. Immediately after taking possession of this identification, he is seized by a "paralysis of memory" and by "incessant waves of vertigo".¹³ Vertigo, the eponymous symptom of this work, translates the crisis by the implicit autobiographical question *who am I?*, intimately linked to the memory of self. To lose memory is to lose identity, to lose one's roots in the world, and to be condemned to either wandering or paralysis. To rediscover one's past is to lead a *self-investigation*. It is a process which is the foundation of any autobiographical project, and it always appears in Sebald's prose.

As with Jacques in *Austerlitz*, Max Ferber, in *The Emigrants*, will also be led towards conducting an investigation of his past, eventually replaced in his task by the narrator, in order to recall a trace, buried for a very long time, that he did not want to find.¹⁴ The investigation, conducted by the narrator into Ferber's past, leads him to the intimate diary of Ferber's mother, Lusía Lanzberg. Sebald claims that this diary is, in part, authentic, forming a collection of "disjointed notes"¹⁵ from which he creates a biographical montage that allows Vladimir Nabokov to appear in Luisa's life. The family of the young woman lived in Steinach, a village in Northern Bavaria, not far from the seaside resort of Bad Kissingen, where, according to his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov stayed. There, according to Sebald's fantasy, Luisa meets Nabokov as a child already hunting butterflies.

¹² L.S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory*, 103.

¹³ Sebald, *Vertigo*, 79.

¹⁴ Sebald, *The Emigrants*.

¹⁵ Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory*, 213.

But I do remember that the fields on either side of the path were full of flowers and that I was happy, and oddly enough I also recall that, not that far out of town, just where the sign to Bodenlaube is, we overtook two very refined Russian gentlemen, one of whom (who looked particularly majestic) was speaking seriously to a boy of about ten who had been chasing butterflies and had lagged so far behind that they had had to wait for him. This warning can't have had much effect, though, because whenever we happened to look back we saw the boy running about the meadows with upraised net, exactly as before. Hansen later claimed that he had recognized the elder of the two distinguished Russian gentleman as Muromzev the president of the first Russian parliament, who was then staying in Kissingen.¹⁶

Nabokov indeed describes this episode in his autobiography *Speak, Memory*¹⁷ and Sebald superimposes the remembering of *reading* and that of *living*. The investigation about meaning becomes a way to *read*: an exercise of reading the book of the past as the baroque period was reading the book of nature.

Investigation and knowledge: intertextual clues

To discover the meaning of a work of literature is to conduct an investigation from the clues gleaned while reading. As a writer of narratives, Sebald knows well that investigating is a way of interpreting. In reading, the investigation determines meaning. An obsession with books and studies is the symptom of another illness that Sebald knows very well, and that is cultivated in his country of adoption, namely melancholy, which Robert Burton has definitively inscribed in the humanities field.¹⁸

In *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrative opens with an account of the symptom, and then turns to the recollection of someone who has died, a colleague of the narrator who taught literature at the University of East Anglia, Michael Parkinson: "The inquest concluded that he had died of unknown causes, a verdict to which I added the words, in the dark and deep part of the night".¹⁹ The shock of this death deeply affects Janine Dakyns, a colleague of the narrator, who succumbs, a few weeks later, to a disease that swiftly consumes her body. After the brief narrative of this double death, Sebald tells us that the victims had in common, over and above reciprocal affection, some biographical points, such as both having studied at Oxford. An investigation seems to begin into the enigmatic death of these colleagues. However, it will not be taken very far. The causes of death are to remain unknown, as the narrative instead begins to explain the causes of the narrator's unease and his need, after these encounters with death, to undertake a long walk along the coast of the North Sea. Another investigation then begins, occupying the entire first chapter and producing a thread to the whole narrative. This is the research being done by the author on Sir Thomas Browne and, more exactly, in the first few pages, on the place where one of his relics, a skull, is to be found. It becomes a meditation on death, discovered through an investigation, led by Browne in his book about burial urns:

¹⁶ Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 214.

¹⁷ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 130.

¹⁸ R. Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1621.

¹⁹ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 6.

And since the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man is to tell him he is at the end of his nature, Browne scrutinizes that which escaped annihilation for any sign of the mysterious capacity for transmigration he has so often observed in caterpillars and moths. That purple of silk he refers to, then, in the urn of Patroclus, what does it mean?²⁰

With this question, placed under the sign of the moth's mysterious capacity for transmigration, which ends the first chapter, the investigation begins: the thread of the narrative that will take us to unexpected places and periods will be made of silk. Departing from the path linking Norwich and Lowestoft, the narrator takes the road to China at the time when the empress Cixi had assumed power as a result of a series of political crimes. Fascinated by moths and by silk, Cixi on her deathbed looks back and realizes "that history consists of nothing but misfortune".²¹ This point of view on human destiny reminds the narrator of a description of "the denial of time"²² as presented in the short story by Jorge Luis Borges *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. Sebald also refers to this narrative slightly earlier in his work, having previously made reference to *The book of imaginary beings*, in order to remind us that "life is no more than the fading reflection of an event beyond recall". With *The Rings of Saturn*, the reader is in the night of time, discovering the non-sense of life in the descriptions of destruction. The silk thread that the reader follows is that of the intertext: the text of Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, at the origin of Borges' short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. The labyrinth, whose image appears several times in the narratives, becomes a library. The investigation about meaning is an *intertextual investigation* that leads the reader on the trail of a reading memory – a centre of gravity around which different actors move, or a narrative composed of different particles like the rings of the planet Saturn, planet of melancholy, under whose influence the author was born.²³ To discover this fragmented composition of the rings, astronomical equipment is required, just as the intertextual clues have to be examined closely to follow the investigation in *The Rings of Saturn*. Amongst the leftovers of the past, a tiny piece of silk symbolises the fine and precious thread of memory.

As we have seen, the investigation of meaning concerns memory as text, and is placed within the context of the crime novel. But, if the investigation in Sebald's prose refers to this well-known genre in England, it also refers to the psychotherapy process as Freud describes it, a journey through memory in order to understand the symptom, as well as a hermeneutics in reading a book. In this way, the investigation in Sebald's prose can be measured by the "presumptive paradigm"²⁴ that, according to Carlo Ginzburg, makes its appearance in the human and social sciences at the end of the 19th Century. In his analysis, Ginzburg suggests a parallel between the method of authentication of a painting by the Italian art historian Giovanni Morelli, and that of the investigation of the crime novel by Arthur Conan Doyle: "The art connoisseur resembles the detective who discovers the perpetrator of a crime (or the artist behind a painting) on the basis of evidence that is imperceptible to most people". The same is true of the psychoanalyst, who is interested in the "little gestures that escape us unawares" in this "epistemological model":

²⁰ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 26.

²¹ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 153.

²² Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 153.

²³ Cf. W.G. Sebald, *After Nature*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (New York: Random House, 2002).

²⁴ C. Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm" in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. by J. Tedeschi, and A.C. Tedeschi (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 102.

In each of these cases [Morelli, Doyle, Freud] the model of medical semiotics is evident: that discipline which permits the diagnosis of diseases inaccessible to direct observation based on superficial symptoms, sometimes thought to be irrelevant in the eyes of the layman – Dr. Watson, for example. [...] But these are not simply biographical coincidences. Towards the end of the nineteenth century – more precisely in the decade 1870–80 – a presumptive paradigm began to assert itself in the humane science that was based specifically on semiotics.²⁵

Infinitesimal traces allow for access to a deeper reality that would be impossible to capture by other means – traces, or more precisely symptoms in Freud's case, clues in the case of Sherlock Holmes, pictorial signs in that of Morelli. But, as Ginzburg explains it, the roots of this paradigm were much older than the late nineteenth century:

Man has been a hunter for thousands of years. In the course of countless chases he learned to reconstruct the shapes and movements of his invisible prey from tracks on the ground, broken branches, excrement, tufts of hair, entangled feathers, stagnating odours. He learned to sniff out, record, interpret, and classify such infinitesimal traces as trails of spittle. He learned how to execute complex mental operations with lightning speed, in the depth of a forest or in a prairie with its hidden dangers.²⁶

So as this “cognitive heritage” is handed down and enriched by generations of hunters, the figure of the hunter occupies a privileged position in Sebald's narratives. In *Vertigo*, it is the corpse of Gracchus the hunter from Kafka's short story and the hunter Schlag, a character from childhood in W. In *The Emigrants*, we come across Nabokov the butterfly hunter, and in *Austerlitz* the narrator presents the hunter as a figure specific to the Bavarian region. Finally, in *The Rings of Saturn*, there is the fisherman of herrings, who read the sea as the sky, and in *Campo Santo*, the hunter is Julien l'Hospitalier, the hero of Flaubert who belongs to Christian history. The hunter is the figure of the writer. He “would have been the first to tell a story because he alone was able to read, in the silent, nearly imperceptible tracks left by his prey, a coherent sequence of events”.²⁷ He is the one who, like the writer, deciphers the world in the Book of Nature. For Sebald, the aim is to decipher the past, to read and write the experience that is at the centre of any autobiographical project, for example Stendhal's *Vie de Henri Brulard*, which is at the heart of the first chapter of *Vertigo*.

Investigation and empathy: a reading method

If the hunter is a double of the writer in his method of deciphering traces and telling stories, he is also a figure of empathy, for to decipher a destiny or to read a book is in Sebald's prose to engage in empathy. As well as being a symbol of the author, the hunter is also a figure of empathy (*Einfühlung*). According to “the ancient law of hunting” (illustrated for example by the adventure of Acteon), he becomes the prey just as the investigator must put himself in the shoes of the assassin in order to retrace the unfolding of events and the motive of the crime. Empathy is a recurring experience for the narrator in Sebald's work, and there is an exemplary scene in *The Rings of Saturn*: the encounter with a hare during a visit to the deserted military centre of Orfordness built on an extraterritorial slip of land, on the English

²⁵ Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, 102.

²⁶ Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, 102.

²⁷ Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, 103.

coast near the mouth of the Aalde river. In the profound silence of the place, the narrator is “frightened almost to death when a hare that had been hiding in the tufts of grass by the wayside starts up, right at [his] feet”:

In that very fraction of a second when its paralysed state turned into panic and flight, its fear cut right through me. [...] I see the edge of the grey tarmac and every individual blade of grass, I see the hare leaping out of its hiding-place, with its ears laid back and curiously human expression on its face that was rigid with terror and strangely divided; and in its eyes, turning to look back as it fled and almost popping out of its head with fright, I see myself, become one with it.²⁸

The empathy between the hare and the narrator, which is traditionally that of the empathy of the hunter, can be associated with the becoming-other that is played out in Sebald's prose between the one who recites the story, and those who are narrated. The narrator's search for identity is made through this constant metamorphosis from the autobiographical to the biographical. This is how the prose in Austerlitz is orchestrated. More than in any of the other works, the narrator accompanies his character.

This mechanism of empathy is directed at any reader; first and foremost at Sebald himself, as well as all who read his works. The reader of these narratives must also become, if not a hunter, at least an investigator. To capture the breadth of the narrative work, he or she must place and identify quotations and documents, as reading follows a cognitive process that repeats that of the author. Empathy can only work if it is possible to read, or more exactly to decipher, another's past, for example that of Stendhal. In 1826, as Sebald reminds us, Stendhal is near the lake of Albano in Italy and, in a melancholic state, is tracing the initials of all the women he loved in the dust on the ground. While relating this episode, Stendhal makes reference to Voltaire's *Zadig*, when the narrator is writing initials in the dust “like Zadig”.²⁹ But, here, he makes a mistake; for it is not Zadig who writes the letters of his name, but his beloved Astartée who yearns after him in chapter 15. With this “reading lapsus”,³⁰ Stendhal makes an inversion between the writer and the writing. This inversion shows that the function of the initials traced out in the dust is to be opened as a text, to be read. Writing his autobiography, Stendhal is to be read as Zadig, to be deciphered through the initials of women's names, initials in which all his life can be summed up. This first act of writing, of making a trace, creates self-reading at the same moment as the process of self-writing begins. Reading becomes an event of memory, with its accidents – here, the confusion between writing and writer; there, that of dates. It is an investigation of meaning, in this case the meaning of autobiography, which allows the passage in Stendhal to be read in the light of another episode of *Zadig*, chapter 3:

Since you have condescended so far, as to admit of my Address to this August Assembly, I swear to you by Orosmales, that I never saw the Queen's illustrious Bitch, nor the sacred Palfrey of the King of Kings. I'll be ingenuous, however, and declare the Truth, and nothing but the Truth. As I was walking by the Thicket's Side, where I met with her Majesty's most venerable chief Eunuch, and the King's most illustrious chief Huntsman, I perceived upon the Sand, the Footsteps of an Animal, and I easily inferred that it must be a little one. The several small Ridges of Land between the Footsteps of the Creature, gave me just Grounds to imagine it was a Bitch whose Teats hung down; and for that Reason, I concluded she had but lately pupped. As I observed likewise some

²⁸ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 234.

²⁹ Stendhal, *Vie de Henri Brulard* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 36. Cf. Voltaire, *Zadig* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 108.

³⁰ L. Marin, *L'écriture de soi* (Paris: Éditions du Collège international de philosophie, 1999), 26.

other Traces, in some Degree different, which seemed to have grazed all the Way upon the Surface of the Sand, on the Side of the fore-feet, I knew well enough she must have had long Ears. And forasmuch as I discerned; with some Degree of Curiosity, that the Sand was everywhere less hollowed by one Foot in particular, than by the other three, I conceived that the Bitch of our most august Queen was somewhat lamish, if I may presume to say so.³¹

As Ginzburg notes in “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, it is this episode that leads to Zadig becoming the symbolic name for a reading method: “The name “Zadig” had taken on such symbolic value that in 1880 Thomas Huxley, on a lecture tour to publicize Darwin’s discoveries, defined as “Zadig’s method” that procedure which combined history, archaeology, geology, physical astronomy, and palaeontology: namely, the ability to forecast retrospectively.”³² These are indeed retrospective forecasts that allow the discovery of a destiny already written, but only to be realised on being read. It remains for the reader to follow the clues, and decipher the coincidences out of which destiny is written.

If Sebald’s writing can be considered a historical operation of searching for clues, these clues are not held up as documents producing a discourse of truth, but rather give rise to an experience of remembering which is confounded with that of reading. In Sebald’s prose, the document is re-written in a becoming-trace, a fragment exiled from its context, free to provoke a re-living of the past by invoking the imagination. To give life back to the past through prose and images is Sebald’s aim. He uses documents from history, as he emancipates himself from an historical method whose positivism is borrowed from the natural sciences. In this manner, preserving the fragility of the trace is to keep it alive, at each instant on the edge of nothingness, as Jacques Derrida notes a trace has “the vulnerability of cinders”.³³ Between conservation and obliteration, the montage of traces in prose makes the reader face the reality of a past constantly at the mercy of destruction and waiting for an investigation he can lead to the reliving of all that was.

³¹ Marin, *L'Écriture de soi*, 38 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18972/18972-h/18972-h.htm>.

³² Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, 117.

³³ J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différance* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 339.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Carole Angier (Oxford Brookes University): ‘And so they are ever returning to us, the dead’: the presence of the dead in W. G. Sebald

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Jean-Marc Dreyfus (University of Manchester): Kindertransport, camps and the Holocaust in *Austerlitz*

Jean-Marc Dreyfus is Reader in Holocaust Studies at the University of Manchester, Department of Religions and Theology. He is a specialist on the economic aspects of the Holocaust, mostly in Western Europe, and has extensively published on the looting of Jewish properties and assets in the annihilation policy, as well as on the compensation processes after the war. He is the author of four books and nine edited volumes. He has been active in publishing unknown Holocaust testimonies. His book, co-authored with the sociologist Sarah Gensburger, on the three satellite camps of Drancy was published in an English translation in 2011: *Nazi Labor Camps in Paris. Austerlitz, Léviton, Bassano, July 1943–August 1944*.

Monica Pearl (University of Manchester): Peripatetic paragraphs: walking (and walking) with W.G. Sebald

Monica B. Pearl is Lecturer in Twentieth Century American Literature at the University of Manchester. Her work addresses the construction of subjectivity in cultural texts, with recent focus on AIDS, and its written and visual representation. She is the author of *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, forthcoming from Routledge, and, most recently, of articles on the graphic memoir, *Fun Home*, the author Audre Lorde, and the play and film *Angels in America*.

Jeremy Gregory is Professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Manchester. His research and publications have contributed to the debates concerning the role of the Church of England in particular, and religion in general, in English social, cultural, political and intellectual history from the mid seventeenth to the mid nineteenth centuries.

His *Restoration, Reformation and Reform, 1660–1828: Archbishops of Canterbury and their diocese* (OUP, 2000) was a wide-ranging revisionist assessment of the Church in this period.

He has edited a large number of books and essay collections on the Church and eighteenth-century religious life, including *The Speculum of Archbishop Thomas Secker, 1759–1768* (1995) for the Church of England Record Society; (with Jeffrey Chamberlain) *The*

National Church in Local Perspective: the Church of England and the regions, 1660–1800 (2003); *John Wesley. Tercentenary Essays* (Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 2005) ; and a special issue on religion for *The Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* (2009). He compiled (with John Stevenson) *The Routledge Companion to Britain in the Eighteenth Century* (2007) and was co editor (with Kate Cooper) of *Studies in Church History*, 2002–2007 for the Ecclesiastical History Society: www.history.ac.uk/ehsoc.

John Sears (Manchester Metropolitan University): Utter blackness: figuring Sebald's Manchester

John Sears is author of *Stephen King's Gothic* (2011) and *Reading George Szirtes* (2008). He is currently working on a gothic reading of William S. Burroughs, and on an exhibition of Burroughs's photographs. He is Senior Lecturer in English at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Janet Wolff (University of Manchester): Max Ferber and the persistence of pre-memory in Mancunian exile

Janet Wolff is Professor Emerita of Cultural Sociology at the University of Manchester, where she directed the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts from 2008 to 2010. She returned to Manchester, her home town, in 2006. Before that, she taught at the University of Leeds; the University of Rochester, where she was Director of the Program in Visual and Cultural Studies; and Columbia University, where she was Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the School of the Arts. Her books include *The Social Production of Art, Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art, Feminine Sentences, Resident Alien, AngloModern*, and *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty*.

Helen Hills (University of York): The uses of images: W.G. Sebald & T.J. Clark

Helen Hills is Professor of Art History at the University of York. Her specialist interests include architectural theory and Neapolitan baroque architecture and religious devotion. Publications include *Invisible City: The Architecture of Devotion in Seventeenth-century Neapolitan Convents* (2004), which was awarded the Best Book of 2004 Prize by the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women (USA) and *Marmi mischi siciliani: invenzione e identità* (1999).

Muriel Pic (University of Neuchâtel): Novel crime, hunting and investigation of the traces in Sebald's prose

Muriel Pic is Researcher in Modern Literature at the FNS in the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland). Her research interests include: French literature of the 20th Century (Pierre Jean Jouve, Jean Paulhan, Georges Bataille, Collège de Sociologie, Edith Boissonnas), German literature of the 20th Century and critical theory (Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno), literary assemblage, le montage littéraire (relation of text and image, documentary and testimony genre), literature and non-knowing, cultural studies. She has authored three books: *Le Désir monstre. Poétique de Pierre Jean Jouve* (2006), *W.G. Sebald. L'Image papillon, suivi de W.G. Sebald, L'Art de voler* (2009), and *Les désordres de la Bibliothèque* (2010). She curated, with the artist Valérie Mréjen, an exhibition of Sebald's archives in February 2012 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.