

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 2010. 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.