

‘Halls of Lost (and Found) Causes’: Retracing Jewish exile, trauma and memory in W. G. Sebald’s The Emigrants (1996) and Austerlitz (2001)

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This dissertation approaches W. G. Sebald’s prose works, specifically the narratives *The Emigrants* (1996) and *Austerlitz* (2001), through an analysis focusing on Sebald’s representation of Jewish exile identity in a post-war European context. The extent to which Sebald successfully reconstructs Jewish memory in the present is my point of departure in this dissertation.

As I argue, these travel narratives represent the ambivalence of post-war Jewish exile identity and its associated trauma through the journey as a ‘methodology of memory’. I contend that the imaginary, discursive and liminal space created through the mediation of memory enables a reconstruction of Jewish cultural memory in the present. This deconstructs various cultural binaries and is accounted for on three distinct levels. Firstly, as an uncanny figure, travel blurs the familiar and foreign and problematises the notion of an enclosed, rooted *Heimat*. Secondly, as a narrative device, it engages with issues of historical mediation by overlaying multiple historical frames and connecting disparate sites of memory, thus blurring history and memory, place and ‘non-place’ (Marc Augé). As I show, this also allows for ‘postmemorial’ (Marianne Hirsch) and intercultural dialogue to be established between disparate subjects through the sharing of memory. Finally, as a symbol of Jewish exile identity, travel is engaged as its own symbolic ‘lieu de mémoire’ (Pierre Nora), which, bearing the traces of Jewish dispersion, operates as both a destructive and productive force. I argue that this threefold figurative, narrative and symbolic form offers an ethical representation of the ambivalent status of post-war Jewish exile, suspended between the poles of cultural integration in a foreign place and the desire to return to a lost homeland. This said, both texts construct Jewish exile identity as a dialectic process, formed of both destructive and constructive memories. Travel is therefore a symbol of both dislocation and absent identity, but also an important means of identity formation.

Key words:

Holocaust narratives, emigration, travel, exile, trauma, memory, Jewish identity, cultural memory, *Heimat*, space, ‘non-place’, intercultural dialogue, ‘postmemory’, ‘lieu de mémoire’

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References to the following texts are made using the abbreviations below:

A: W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2001, 2011)

TE: W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Penguin, 1996, 2002)

Introduction: W. G. Sebald in context

Despite the late-coming to fame of German émigré writer W. G. Sebald (1944-2001) – his first book to arrive in English translation was *The Emigrants* in 1996 – a considerable amount of both German and English critical literature has amassed around his multimodal oeuvre spanning fiction, history, memoir, poetry and travelogue.¹ In these ‘prose books of uncertain form’, Sebald traversed multiple genres and blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction, eschewing chronological narration for a concentric patchwork of flashbacks and digressions, framed though multiple points of view which destabilise any singular perspective.²

After settling in the UK in 1970, Sebald was appointed professor of European literature at UEA in 1987. It was from this self-exiled position that the writer confronted the silences of 20th-century European history and his own difficult relationship with German culture and its problematic notion of *Heimat*.³ Working not only across genres, but also national borders, Sebald was an itinerant, deeply observant writer. Informed by travel and theories of trauma, his books engage with issues of historical representation in public space and the ways in which the past leaves scars on the physical environment. These themes, which guide this dissertation, also tie in with contemporary historiography’s ‘linguistic turn’ and the rise of memory studies in the humanities, thus providing a theoretical groundwork.⁴ Focussing on Sebald’s literary treatment of forced displacement and its traumatic effects, this dissertation surveys the two texts that deal most succinctly with the after-effects of Second World War Jewish displacement in the shadow of the Holocaust: *The Emigrants* (1996) and *Austerlitz* (2001). These narratives

¹ Notable collections of critical essays on W. G. Sebald include: J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead, (eds.) *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Anne Fuchs and J.J. Long (eds.), *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007). For an overview of literature on Sebald, see Richard Sheppard, “‘Woods, trees and the spaces in between’: A report on work published on W. G. Sebald 2005–2008”, *Journal of European Studies*, 39, 1 (2009), pp. 79–128

² W. G. Sebald, interview, “Ich fürchte das Melodramatische”, in John Zilcosky, ‘Lost and Found: Disorientation, Nostalgia, and Holocaust Melodrama in Sebald’s “Austerlitz”’, *MLN*, 121, 3 (2006), pp. 679–698, p. 687

³ ‘*Heimat*’, or ‘homeland’, is a discourse rooted in the German national tradition, its heritage as a *Kulturnation*, and its regional ‘Volk’ culture.

⁴ Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, (eds.) *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008); Jeffrey Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Wolfgang Mueller-Funk, *The Architecture of Modern Culture: Towards a Narrative Cultural Theory* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012); Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy, (eds.) *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

draw connections between cultural displacement and its impact on individual memory through travel as a twofold experience of spatial and temporal discontinuity. As a result, these texts engage with questions of historical transmission and shifts in cultural memory, and bear witness to the fact that ‘no memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts’.⁵ This draws attention to structures of cultural memory, based on a nexus of ‘social, medial, and cognitive processes’ and their ceaseless interplay ‘in socio-cultural contexts’.⁶ However, as I put forth, Sebald’s texts problematise this relationship through trauma as a temporal break which questions the very notion of personal identity, and through this, the assumed intersection of two contrasting mnemonic models, one predicated on a subjective understanding of the past, versus one based on representational symbols in society.⁷

With this in mind, I evaluate the motif of the journey and its threefold figurative, narrative and symbolic textual function, and question the degree to which this motif ethically represents post-Holocaust Jewish trauma and exile. As a ‘methodology of memory’ I propose that Sebald’s use of travel operates primarily as an uncanny figure, where, unable to escape their residual trauma or return to a lost *Heimat*, Sebald’s Jewish emigrants are suspended in a liminal state of endless, ambulant wandering.⁸ This ambivalent figure also exposes the fractured bond between Jewish identity and European culture as a consequence of the Holocaust. In chapter two, I discuss how the travel narrative gives voice to the increased reliance on mediated versions of the past for subjects lacking an inherited memory.⁹ In a theoretical context, this aligns with Marianne Hirsch’s notion of ‘postmemory’ which examines the significance of media (artefacts, architecture, language and narrative) for the descendants of victims who have lost access to an intergenerational, ‘communicative’ memory.¹⁰ As a transitory ‘non-place’, travel also represents the ultimately fictional and constructed nature of memory and the zone of mediation between a present listener/observer and external memory

⁵ Astrid Erll, ‘Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction’, in (eds.) Erll and Nünning, p. 5

⁶ Ibid., pp. 4, 6

⁷ Jeffrey K. Olick, ‘From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products’, in (eds.) Erll and Nünning, pp. 151–162

⁸ John Zilcosky, ‘Sebald’s Uncanny Travels: The Impossibility of Getting Lost’, in J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead (eds.), *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 103–120

⁹ Anne Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove, ‘Germany’s Memory Contests and the Management of the Past’, in A. Fuchs, M. Cosgrove and G. Grote (eds.), *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse since 1990* (Suffolk/NY: Camden House, 2006), pp. 1–24, p. 11

¹⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Harald Welzer, ‘Communicative Memory’, in (eds.) Erll and Nünning, pp. 285–300

props.¹¹ Furthermore, fluctuating between memory and forgetting, this ‘space of encounter’ also gestures towards the fundamental ambiguity of trauma.¹² Lastly, in chapter three I engage further with Sebald’s ethical representation of Jewish identity through the emblematic relation of ‘non-places’ to the traumatic history of Jewish exile. In this way, Sebald’s literary journeys are also highly ambivalent ‘lieux de mémoire’; bearing the traumatic traces of Jewish deportation, but also the redemptive memory of refuge, they reflect on the diasporic, unsettled status of European Jews today.

Given the enduring reality of forced displacement in contemporary society, this dissertation is further informed by trauma and migration studies.¹³ These transformations and complexities, as Marc Augé writes, demand us to reconsider ‘the traditional categories people use when they think about their identity and their reciprocal relations’.¹⁴ Likewise, given Sebald’s belief that simple recreations of the Holocaust ‘can only become an obscenity’, his texts blur fact and fiction in a unique representation of the ways in which historical violence fragments uniform perspectives.¹⁵ Whilst this expresses the very precarity of ‘home’ for those in exile, I argue that it also establishes the possibility for new, ‘mobile homes’ and portable cultural spaces. These fluid, largely embodied spaces of memory, which operate ‘in a world of expanding horizons and dissolving boundaries’, show that, in the words of Morley and Robins, ‘places are no longer the clear supports of our identity’.¹⁶ Looking back through history however, Sebald reveals this to be a long existent reality amongst marginalised exiles. His determined reconstruction of Jewish cultural memory was therefore a political undertaking, or, as Carole Angier reminds us in her newly authored biography of the writer, a determined act of present-day ‘restitution’.¹⁷

¹¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995)

¹² Long and Whitehead, p. 9; Hirsch (2012)

¹³ I am grateful to PhD candidate Rebecca Carr for their insights on the topics of trauma and migration.

¹⁴ Augé, p. 40

¹⁵ W.G. Sebald, ‘Recovered Memories’, interview with Maya Jaggi, *The Guardian* (22 September 2001) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/22/artsandhumanities.highereducation>> [accessed: 08/07/2021]; Richard Eder, ‘Excavating a Life’, *New York Times* (28 October, 2001). Sebald defended his ‘periscopic’ style as an ‘ethical’ way of avoiding ‘melodrama’, *Die Spiegel* (2001), in Zilcosky (2006)

¹⁶ Dave Morley and Kevin Robins, ‘No Place like Heimat: Images of Home(land) in European Culture’, in Erica Carter, James Donald and Judith Squires (eds.), *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), pp. 3–31, p. 5

¹⁷ Carole Angier, *Speak, Silence: In Search of W. G. Sebald* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021)

Chapter One

In Search of a Lost *Heimat*

‘Expulsion, exile, and elimination’, observes Stuart Taberner, are the ‘midwives of the modern age’.¹⁸ This post-war condition of humanity ‘deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come’ – as Albert Camus wrote in 1942 – is expressed in Sebald’s texts that retrace histories of European dispersion, exile and identity-loss.¹⁹ At the core of *Austerlitz*, and three of the four discrete narratives of *The Emigrants*, is a Jewish exile who occupies an ambivalent position between a lost or destroyed homeland and a place of resettlement. These characters ruminate around undisclosed traumas and are unable to identify with or fully integrate into the contemporary society they live in. This this kind of trauma, posing acute problems for historical representation, has been a guiding preoccupation amongst postmodern theorists concerned with ethics of representation.²⁰ Highlighting the importance of ‘linking processes of working through to the reconceptualization of sociocultural issues’, Dominick LaCapra insists on the need for ‘empathic unsettlement [...] in the response to traumatic events or conditions.’²¹ This is the capacity to identify to some extent with the traumatic suffering of the other, whilst being aware of their radical otherness in the way they understand the past, their memory and their shared history.²²

As I argue in this chapter, Sebald represents this dialectical process of similarity and difference through the use of travel as an uncanny figure that operates in a liminal zone between the familiar and the foreign. In doing so, Sebald follows LaCapra’s model of trauma, which functions as ‘a dynamic interaction between excess and limits’.²³ This highlights the importance of maintaining historical specificity, thus preventing the ‘obscuring of crucial historical distinctions’, whilst simultaneously showing that ‘truth claims are necessary but not

¹⁸ Stuart Taberner, ‘German Nostalgia? Remembering German-Jewish Life in W. G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*’, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 79, 3 (2004), pp. 181–202, p. 184

¹⁹ Albert Camus, quoted in Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under post-Totalitarian Rule, 1956-1989* (London: Bloomsbury, I. B. Tauris, 2017), p. 13

²⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996); Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore/London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001)

²¹ LaCapra, p. xxxi

²² Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, “‘Empathic Unsettlement’: A Key Concept in History and Political Thought”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 22, 1 (2020), pp. 173–181

²³ LaCapra, p. xxxii

sufficient conditions that must be cogently related to other dimensions of historiography, including empathetic, responsive understanding and performative, dialogical uses of language'.²⁴ As the 'generative principle of mental activity' in Sebald's writing, travel responds to these other dimensions of historiography, and, as a dynamic figure of traumatic processes of repetition and return, destabilises ideas of rootedness and belonging.²⁵ This brings together the experience of loss, as expressed in the historically concrete discourse of *Heimat*, with the more abstract representation of trauma as the 'absence of undivided origins, absolute foundations, or perfect, totalising solutions to problems'.²⁶ As I hope to show, this allows Sebald's German narrator to be at once close and, at the same time, at distance from the Jewish subject; representing its alterity, whilst tracing lines of empathy through a concrete representation of the German *Heimat* as irreparably damaged and out of reach. Thus, in contrast to wide-ranging criticism claiming that Sebald's representation of history produces what LaCapra calls 'negative sublimity', which transcends the possibility of working through by dividing the past into timeless pre- and post-traumatic periods, I argue that Sebald's representation of exile is, in fact, effective because of this ambiguity.²⁷

Rather than, in the thinking of John Zilcosky, turning 'the margin into a new centre', Sebald rejects essentialism by representing Jewish exile as unstable and situated precariously between the poles of assimilation and rejection.²⁸ This is achieved through travel as a peripheral, interstitial space. Following the methods set out by the French anthropological historians Marc Augé and Pierre Nora, who suggested that contemporary society and its 'figures of excess' had, on one level, divorced history from memory and, on another, brought the near and the elsewhere together, Sebald focuses his attention on European soil and a precisely delineated – though subjectively filtered – object-world.²⁹ In this formation, otherness, as the 'sole intellectual object' of anthropological research, is no longer at distance,

²⁴ LaCapra, p. xxxii

²⁵ Susan Sontag, 'A Mind in Mourning', *Where the Stress Falls* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. 41–8, p. 46

²⁶ LaCapra, p. xxxiv

²⁷ See Mark A. Anderson, 'The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald', *October*, 106 (2003), pp. 102–121; Stefanie Boese, "'Forever Just Occurring": Postwar Belatedness in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39, 4 (2016), pp. 104–121; Mary Cosgrove, 'Melancholy Competitions: W.G. Sebald Reads Günter Grass and Wolfgang Hildesheimer', *German Life and Letters*, 59, 2 (2006), pp. 217–232

²⁸ Zilcosky (2006), p. 683

²⁹ Augé; Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (1989), pp. 7–24; Augé writes that 'contemporary historians have begun to pay attention to major themes usually considered anthropological, such as the family, private life, and "places of memory"', p. 25

but contained within the contemporary world and its ‘accelerated transformations’.³⁰ As I propose, Sebald repositions the otherness of the Jewish exiled subject in contemporary spaces of ‘excess’, sites of ‘supermodernity’, or ‘non-places’ – in this case sites of transit – as a means of disrupting the binaries of home and away, history and memory, and notions of historical linearity.³¹ With their temporal, spatial and individual excesses, these interconnected spaces conflate the disorientating nature of the urban metropole and its vast transportation networks with the temporal breaks and discontinuities of traumatic displacement.³² In their awareness of the dilemmas of Jewish diasporic history, which, being imposed by others, ‘cannot be seen as self-contained and autonomous’, Sebald’s travel narratives thus engage alternative ‘counter-histories’ in contemporary social space.³³ This two-way exchange, reflecting wider processes of historical and cultural transformation, is most notable in *Austerlitz* as Sebald’s most novelistic creation.

This multimodal text centres around the fictional biography of Jacques Austerlitz, a Czech-Jew who is brought up in rural Wales after being evacuated from Prague on a Kindertransport, thus escaping the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia and the imminent devastation of the Holocaust. He is adopted by a Welsh minister and his wife and, with the assumed name of Dafydd Elias, grows up ignorant of his past. Later in life, a return of repressed trauma leads to Austerlitz’s impossible quest – through Paris, Prague, and eventually Theresienstadt – in search of his origins which have been irretrievably distorted by the trauma of childhood displacement. This last book of Sebald’s can be distinguished from *The Emigrants* and earlier, more documentary style narratives in which the German narrator is more obviously speaking as W. G. Sebald, academic and writer. Based upon a composite of two separate Jewish accounts of Holocaust-related displacement and refuge, Austerlitz is not so much an ‘emigrant’, resettled in a new home after a determined migration, but a survivor with a similarly multifaceted identity, and is thus unable to identify with any one home. This volatility, as afforded to the exiled subject, is adjoined with a creative potential; where hallucinations, flashback and the imagination have the power to transform the material environment, hidden meanings and alternative historical narratives are revealed. In this representation, exile and its

³⁰ Ibid., p. 18

³¹ In ‘From Places to Non-Places’, Augé writes that ‘supermodernity produces non-places’, where ‘transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating [...] in a world of solitary individuality’, p. 78

³² Ibid., pp. 77–8, 109

³³ Elizabeth Grosz, ‘Judaism and Exile: The Ethics of Otherness’, in (eds.) Carter, Donald and Squires, pp. 57–72

related traumas are interwoven in ‘non-places’ where the memory of exile occupies a central position. This creative aspect of trauma is discussed in more depth in chapter two.

Lacking in any real memory, Austerlitz attempts to connect with his past through mediated forms of memory, such as photographs, historical narratives and diaries. This draws attention to the artificiality of his identity which cannot be attributed to any single origin. As a result, he fails to comprehend the historical event that has veiled his entire identity, his personal history, the fate of his parents and his place of birth. This ‘double trauma’ of orphaned war refugees, displaced and denied a homeland to identify with, and deprived of any inherited intergenerational memory, is felt as a personal biographical rift which unsettles notions of historical linearity. According to Edward Said, this is the defining feature of exile: ‘the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.’³⁴ With this in mind, rather than a historically static event, the Holocaust’s destructive nature is accounted for in *Austerlitz* through a representation of displaced trauma and the absence of a complete memory which prevents second and third-generation survivors from accessing their own past. Simultaneously, in line with LaCapra’s model, the Holocaust retains its historical specificity as a secretive and enigmatic operation. Where Austerlitz fails to comprehend his own fragmented biography, the reader gains a sense of the hidden brutality and ultimate incomprehensibility of the twentieth-century’s darkest site of trauma. As Henry Rousso notes in regards to Holocaust memorialisation, ‘the exceptional nature of the past event determines the “weight” of this event in the present.’³⁵ As a result, Austerlitz is prevented from discovering the mystery of his origins, drawn towards but unable to fully access the fragmented history of Jewish cultural destruction which cannot be sequenced into any coherent self-defining narrative.

³⁴ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 173

³⁵ Henry Rousso, ‘History of Memory, Policies of the Past: What For?’, in (eds.) Konrad H. Jarausch and Thomas Lindenberger, *Conflicted Memories. Europeanizing Contemporary Histories* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), p. 30

1.i: Between Home and Away

Moving through the ruins of recent European history, Sebald's emigrants are, in the words of Iris Radisch '*materialistischer Geschichtsmetaphysiker*'; 'metaphysicians of history', or simply melancholy chroniclers of past events, they orient themselves through, and within, the historical environment.³⁶ More at home in the past than the present, they engage in compulsive memory work, which as Sebald shows, is ultimately ungrounded. For the Jewish exile, as I put forth in the following section, the notion of 'home' has become deeply associated with its simultaneous absence, and so operates as merely an uncanny reminder of the Jew's perennial statelessness. This gives expression to the fact that, in the words of Jewish cultural historian Elizabeth Grosz, the Jew is 'both familiar with, yet excluded from, the cities, the cultures and the communities within which he or she circulates.'³⁷ From this perspective, 'home' – or, the 'anthropological place' – is impossible to achieve in its entirety for the Jewish exile without a real memory of their own.³⁸ Instead, they are left suspended between what is familiar and that which is foreign, lost amidst the inescapable occurrence of homely fantasies rooted in the past.

Austerlitz opens with an account of the narrator's repeated travels to Belgium, whose motivations were 'never quite clear' and which seem to take him, ambiguously, 'further and further abroad'.³⁹ This lack of destination or purpose introduces the arbitrary chain of events which lead to the narrator's first encounter with Austerlitz. The narrator recalls the 'uncertainty' of his footsteps as he navigates Antwerp and eventually takes 'refuge' in the Nocturama of the city zoo. In doing so, he observes an array of exotic species and their 'strikingly large eyes'.⁴⁰ This is supplemented by four photographs of human and non-human eyes, which reflect 'the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us by means of looking and thinking'.⁴¹ This scene of animal imprisonment introduces the key themes of *Austerlitz*, these being a desire to communicate across otherness, as well as exile, captivity and escape, and the human quest for meaning in an irrational, unreal world. This scene, as the narrator remarks, has become 'confused' in his mind with memories of the *Salle des pas perdus* – literally, 'hall of lost causes'

³⁶ Iris Radisch, 'Der Waschbär der falschen Welt', *Die Zeit*, 5 Apr. 2001, p. 55, in Taberner (2004)

³⁷ Grosz, p. 60

³⁸ Marc Augé's notion of the 'anthropological place', where history, identity and their relations coexist harmoniously, is defined in more depth later on.

³⁹ A, 1

⁴⁰ A, 3

⁴¹ A, 3

– in Antwerp Centraal Station.⁴² This depiction of the indeterminacy of memory, drawing attention to the epistemological gaps that naturally occur in the mediation of trauma to a contemporary audience, makes *Austerlitz* a characteristic text in the genre of Holocaust fiction.⁴³ This aspect of the text is reinforced by its associative nature and implied lack of a premeditated structure, which thematises the unreliability of personal memory and the disjunctions of history, place and their identity. In relation to trauma, this lays the groundwork for Sebald's representation of memory as transient, operating in the gaps between material and metaphysical, visible and invisible dimensions.⁴⁴ This dialectic recalls Freud's image of the darkroom as a model for psychical processes, in which 'not every negative [...] necessarily becomes a positive' so that 'nor is it necessary that every unconscious mental process should turn into a conscious one'.⁴⁵ Memory is therefore inherently visual, but also transitory and often hidden, prefiguring Austerlitz's reliance on media in order to comprehend his own repressed memories.

Finding himself in the waiting room of Antwerp Station, the narrator perceives 'another Nocturama, a curious confusion', filled by a 'subterranean twilight'.⁴⁶ As a space of experiential delay, and with an implied tension between knowledge and blindness, the waiting room symbolises Cathy Caruth's theory of belatedness in which the mind recalls an event it experienced but never truly knew.⁴⁷ Throughout *Austerlitz*, this motif of the waiting room adjoins Sebald's withholding of information and is emblematic of the postponed return of traumatic memory. Offering a space for rumination, reflection and affective memory, it lies below the official, and immediately visible, aspects of social life and thus offers an alternative historical model based upon subjective memory processes. Defying the temporal logic associated with functional travel, the travellers are perceived as 'the last members of a diminutive race [...] expelled from its homeland'.⁴⁸ Moreover, as a public space which

⁴² A, 4

⁴³ Andreas Huyssen, 'Gray zones of remembrance', in David E. Wellbery and Judith Ryan (eds.), *A New History of German Literature* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 970–5; Cosgrove (2011), p. 197

⁴⁴ Carolin Duttlinger, 'Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*', in (eds.) Long and Whitehead, pp. 155–171, p. 158

⁴⁵ Ibid.; Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis Part III*, in Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. 16, ed., trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1974)

⁴⁶ A, 5

⁴⁷ Andrew Barnaby, 'Coming Too Late: Freud, Belatedness, and Existential Trauma', *SubStance*, 41, 2 (2012), pp. 199–138, p. 122; Caruth (1996), pp. 4–7

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 6

constitutes a place of transition between home and away, the *Salle des pas perdus* can be read as a ‘non-place’.⁴⁹ Defined by its ‘itineraries’ and not its essential identity, where the ‘act of passing’ describes ‘a loss of focus’, it blurs the distinctions between the familiar and the foreign and connects trauma with its uncanny doublings, repetitions and returns.⁵⁰

Symbolically so, it is here the narrator meets Austerlitz who is ‘occupied in making notes and sketches’ relating to the *Salle des pas perdus*.⁵¹ Austerlitz’s observant attitude casts him as a character in direct dialogue with history as it is mediated in social space. With a knack for seeing traces of historical injustice, Austerlitz’s own repressed trauma is implicit in his particular historical vision. Thus, on leaving Antwerp station, he remarks in French: ‘*combien des ouvriers périrent, lors de la manufacture de tels miroirs*’, wondering how many workers perished in the construction of the waiting room mirrors from cyanide poisoning.⁵² This reinforces the disguised nature of traumatic history and, suspended between memory and forgetting, the ambiguous ways in which it reveals itself obliquely in the present. These liminal, often in Sebald twilit, spaces are metaphorically unsettling and disorientating, but, as I argue later, such lacunae offer a crucial imaginative realm in which Austerlitz can conceive of and communicate his trauma in a social context.

These arbitrary encounters between the narrator and Austerlitz are figurative of wider traumatic processes in Sebald’s work. Two decades later, the narrator reencounters Austerlitz in the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel in Liverpool Street. This unlikely coincidence, determined by an ‘internal logic’, leads to the narrative of Austerlitz’s early life in Bala, a rural village in North Wales. Before relating this story, however, Austerlitz describes the existence of an ‘agency’ which, superior to his own capacity for thought, has prevented him from discovering his origins or ‘embarking on the inquiries they would have suggested to me’.⁵³ Following in Freud’s propositions set out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), this suggests that Austerlitz’s trauma has an internal logic based upon repetition as a binding force that allows for post-traumatic working through.⁵⁴ However, where Sebald casts his emigrants in-between home and away, they fail to retrace their origins or become fully settled, thereby implying an

⁴⁹ Augé; ‘La Salle des pas Perdues’, which also translates to ‘hall of lost footsteps’, is a concourse or other transitory place which has become a key part of French judicial architecture and culture.

⁵⁰ Augé, p. 85

⁵¹ A, 6

⁵² A, 15

⁵³ A, 61

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick (London: Penguin, 2003)

ongoing process of binding which leads only to uncanny encounters and returns, but also – as I demonstrate – to startling discoveries.

As a result of a traumatic breakdown in the early 1990s, a decade which, beyond the fictional world of *Austerlitz*, heralded in the academic discipline of memory studies and intensified the culture of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in German memory literature of the newly unified nation, Austerlitz realises the extent of his repression and the limited practice he has had in using his own memory.⁵⁵ ‘Irresistibly drawn back’ to certain sites of memory which contain the mystery of his origins, he travels back to his birthplace of Prague, and in doing so discovers his real parents and their associated memories.⁵⁶ As a directionless wanderer, constantly on the move, Austerlitz’s identity is mobile and open to change, and is anchored only by the bricolage of disparate memories and cultural sources that he carries with him. This is represented by a subsequent photograph of his rucksack as ‘the only truly reliable thing in his life’.⁵⁷ Later on in Prague, Austerlitz is relayed a memory of his departure, where he carried ‘un petit sac à dos avec quelques viatiques’, or items for travel.⁵⁸ Walking through London on nocturnal, somnambulant ‘night journeys’ he experiences ‘a constant wrenching [...] a kind of heartache [...] caused by the vortex of past time.’⁵⁹ This quest-like narrative, tracing Austerlitz’s intuitive, repetitious travels, reconstructs the traumatic process in a literal depiction of spatial-temporal disorientation and return. This affective register is remarked upon by Mary Cosgrove, who conceives of the heart in *Austerlitz* as a symbol of intuitive behaviour that leads to the obscure regions of one’s identity.⁶⁰ Claudia Öhlschläger, on the other hand, proposes that this motif signals negative emotion and the disorientating aspect of trauma.⁶¹ This paradox highlights the precarious, ambivalent nature of Austerlitz’s disposition, as ‘a man locked into the glaring clarity of his logical thinking as inextricably as into his confused emotions’.⁶² In this representation, trauma has a momentum that cannot be conclusively worked through. Instead, where repetition leads down multiple and competing investigative avenues, Sebald

⁵⁵ A, 197; The German unification of 1990 necessitated not only social cohesion but a simultaneous integration of the distinct memory cultures of the GDR and the FRG, adjoined with a renewed determination to commemorate the victims of National Socialism.

⁵⁶ A, 180-2

⁵⁷ A, 55

⁵⁸ A, 245

⁵⁹ A, 182

⁶⁰ Mary Cosgrove, ‘W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*’, in Stuart Taberner (ed.), *The Novel in German since 1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 195–210

⁶¹ Claudia Öhlschläger, *Beschädigtes Leben. Erzählte Risse: W. G. Sebald’s Poetische Ordnung des Unglücks* (Berlin: Rombach, 2006), pp. 127–8

⁶² A, 55

draws implicit connections between the disorientations of trauma, travel and the exile's desire to return to a lost homeland.

1.ii: Uncanny Travels and Unhomely Homes

Common amongst Sebald's emigrants is a shared sense of *dépaysement*, an uncanny feeling of being in the presence of the familiar-strange. As John Zilcosky puts forth in two persuasive articles on travel and its relationship to the uncanny, Sebald follows in the footsteps of modernists such as Freud, Kafka and Thomas Mann in overturning a Romantic paradigm of travel which viewed getting lost as a method of self-definition.⁶³ Instead, oscillating between home and away, Sebald's emigrants are captive to their own limited memories which are often deceptive and misleading.⁶⁴ Sebald's narrators, Zilcosky notes, attempt to diverge from (literary) tourism's 'beaten track' in order to discover what Goethe calls the 'new', but fail to move beyond the confines of their trauma.⁶⁵ In this representation, traumatic repetition does not lead home, but only to a haunting spectre of it, thus casting Sebald's emigrants into a world of uncanny returns and deconstructing the traditional opposition between 'home' and 'away'.⁶⁶

As the representative interstitial site of what Homi Bhabha calls the 'unhomely' condition, that relates 'the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence', 'non-places' represent the extra-territorial, exilic, and, above all, ambivalent identity of Jewish emigrants.⁶⁷ During his time as a lecturer at a London institute of art history, Austerlitz's research into the monumental architecture of the 19th-century betrays an 'impulse [...] linked to his early fascination with the idea of a network such as that of the entire railway system'.⁶⁸ This impulse to map the complexities of modernity is emblematic of Austerlitz's dislocating trauma and its binding force, but also betrays a deep distrust of his own composite, multicultural identity and an attempt to orientate himself in an age marked by divisive nationalisms and the centralisation of state power. Doubly, this is with an implied aim of retracing the traumatic history of modernity, where the construction of the railways leads directly to the industrialisation of genocide in the 20th century, a point I expand

⁶³ Zilcosky (2004)

⁶⁴ Zilcosky (2006), p. 683

⁶⁵ Zilcosky (2004), p. 105

⁶⁶ Zilcosky (2006), p. 683

⁶⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), pp. 9, 11

⁶⁸ A, 44–5

on later. Austerlitz's impulsive wanderings take him 'to the most remote areas of London', and into previously unseen 'outlying parts of the metropolis'.⁶⁹ However, as he returns to the disorientating network of the London underground, he thinks he sees faces known to him from some much earlier part of his life.⁷⁰ For Sebald, as Long and Whitehead suggest, 'trauma is inescapably bound up with repetition'.⁷¹ Following in the footsteps of Freud therefore, travel replicates the discontinuities of trauma whilst exploring the inescapability of the past in the present.⁷² Thus, living in exile from a rooted home or clearly delineated cultural memory, Austerlitz's perambulations communicate the fact that, for the Jewish emigrant, Europe is an unhomely territory haunted by a largely traumatic history.⁷³

Like Austerlitz, the exiled German narrator also cannot settle. Despite all the years he has spent in the UK, the familiar landscape he witnesses from the train carriage as he travels to London, 'sights which are always the same', remains merely 'alien and incomprehensible'.⁷⁴ This emphasises Augé's observation that the 'journey narrative', 'compatible with the double necessity of doing and seeing', 'causes a break or discontinuity between the spectator-traveller and the space of the landscape he is contemplating or rushing through'.⁷⁵ Rather than a space of mere dislocation, however, this 'accumulation of places [...] constructs a fictional relationship between gaze and landscape', and so offers a space for imaginative discourse, exchange and recollection – a dialogic relationship I expand on in the following chapter.⁷⁶ In *The Emigrants*, the narrator's uncle – a German émigré named Kasimir who lives on New York's East Coast – relates that he remembers nothing of his emigration across Germany, 'except that everything seemed unfamiliar and incomprehensible'.⁷⁷ He takes the narrator to the beach and expresses, in Sebald's German original *Die Ausgewanderten* in disconcerting English, the sense that 'here I am a long way away, though I never quite know from where'.⁷⁸ For Kasimir, the coast delineates the fine boundary between home and away; he describes it as 'the edge of darkness' and, like Austerlitz, he is compulsively drawn back to this space of

⁶⁹ A, 179

⁷⁰ A, 179

⁷¹ Long and Whitehead, p. 8

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Zilcosky (2004), p. 103

⁷⁴ A, 49

⁷⁵ Augé, p. 84

⁷⁶ Augé, pp. 85–6

⁷⁷ TE, 81

⁷⁸ TE, 89

indeterminacy. Recalling the *Salle des pas perdus* in *Austerlitz*, the ocean represents the precarious, undisclosed trauma of exile which has the power to return unexpectedly.

As exemplified by Sebald's essay collection *Unheimliche Heimat*, or *Unhomely Homeland* (1995), which sheds light on Sebald's own literary and biographical position in an Austrian tradition of writers unable to escape their own *Heimat*, a nostalgia for home is contained within the German language and culture.⁷⁹ This idea of a German *Heimat* was further problematised in a post-war context that initially sought to repress the memory of the Holocaust and even the memory of German suffering in the war.⁸⁰ *Heimat* discourse is arranged around dialectical oppositions that set 'fixed, familiar, rooted identity against cosmopolitanism, hybridity, alien otherness, or the faceless mass'.⁸¹ Sebald unsettles these oppositions by reconfiguring *Heimat* as a dislocated phenomenon which exists only fleetingly through flashes of insight or mental stimuli, based on the tendency for trauma to resurface unexpectedly. These are, with reference to the thought of Walter Benjamin, *Bilder*, images from the past that arise in the material world, thus offering insight, or *Einsicht*, into the present and breaking the continuity of time: 'plötzliches Aufblitzen einer das Zeitkontinuum unterbrechenden Gleichzeitigkeit'.⁸² These contradictions, between fixity and flux, familiar and foreign, were explored by Freud in his essay *The Uncanny* (1919). Exploring the ambiguities in the word *Heimlich*, simultaneously referring to what is familiar or known and that which is concealed or kept secret, this essay highlighted the overlap between these porous categories.

Given the heightened presence of the uncanny in *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* – the texts are pervaded by hauntings, repressed traumas and travels to strangely familiar places – Sebald shows that, for the Jewish exile, the notion of home is deeply tied to the haunting trauma of being forever out-of-place, both geographically and in time. The Jewish-German painter Max Ferber in *The Emigrants*, for example, remarks that Manchester, being an 'immigrant city' composed 'chiefly of Germans and Jews', merely reminds him uncannily of everything he was

⁷⁹ Sebald discusses writers such as Kafka, Jean Améry, Gerhard Roth and Peter Handke. W. G. Sebald, *Unheimliche Heimat: Essays zur österreichischen Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995), p. 141; Mary Cosgrove, 'The Anxiety of German Influence: Affiliation, Rejection, and Jewish Identity in W. G. Sebald's Work', in Fuchs, Cosgrove and Grote (eds.), pp. 229–252

⁸⁰ Sebald's essay collection *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Munich, Carl Hanser, 1999) discusses the problematic position of German victimhood and the trauma associated with the allied carpet bombings of Dresden and Nuremberg which initiated a sense of both guilt and collective culpability.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Boa and Rachel Palfreyman, *Heimat, a German Dream: Regional Loyalties and National Identity in German Culture 1890–1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 2

⁸² Sigrid Wiegel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 344–345; Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte", *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I (2) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 691–704, p. 695

desperately ‘trying to forget’.⁸³ In relation to the sociology of Georg Simmel, who pits the metropolis against rural life, the former’s ‘discontinuity’ against the latter’s ‘steady rhythm’ and ‘uninterrupted habituations’, the notion of *Heimat* runs antithetical to the city.⁸⁴ Where rural life rests upon ‘deeply felt and emotional relationships’, the city assumes a ‘psychic prerogative’ which relies on the intellect.⁸⁵ Where Austerlitz navigates the city through intuitive feeling, as symbolised by the language of the heart, these oppositions are deconstructed. In this way, the modern networked city offers a route into a powerful undercurrent of memory which displaces *Heimat* from its rooted geographies and into the psychic life of its inhabitant.

Though embodied and affective, memories of home can also be encumbering. This can be seen throughout the four distinct narratives of *The Emigrants*, all of which explore German-Jewish relationships through a Sebald-like German correspondent. In doing so, ‘Sebald’ reconstructs the memories of three Jewish exiles, Dr Henry Selwyn, Paul Bereyter, and Max Ferber, and his own great-uncle, the German émigré Ambros Adelwarth. Striving to uncover the *Heimlichkeit* of each biography, ‘Sebald’ inevitably finds only *Unheimlichkeit* and repressed trauma. In the third narrative, based on the life of Ambros Adelwarth, the narrator discovers his mother’s old photograph album which contains pictures, all of which are ‘new’ to him, of his relatives who had emigrated to America in the Weimar years.⁸⁶ The longer he studies the photographs, the more he feels an urge to learn more about his family. Thus, in 1981, he travels to Newark and meets his expat relatives, Aunt Fini and Uncle Kasimir. Their personal memories of emigration however slowly transfigure into a deeper narrative of the ‘legendary past’ of the narrator’s great-uncle Adelwarth, once a major-domo and butler with the wealthiest Jewish family in New York – the Solomons.

Adelwarth’s life with Cosmo Solomon is decadent and, on occasion, verges even on the fantastical. This is reinforced by Fini’s comment that he suffered from Korsakoff’s syndrome, an amnesiac-like condition that ‘causes lost memories to be replaced by fantastic inventions’.⁸⁷ Acknowledging the fictionality of his sources then, Sebald happily blurs fact and fiction. Memory, and its fundamental unreliability, is thematised through the narrator’s

⁸³ *TE*, 191

⁸⁴ Georg Simmel, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’, in Georg Simmel and Kurt Wolff (trans.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 409–424

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *TE*, 73

⁸⁷ *TE*, 102

reclaiming of his great-uncle's travelogue from 1913, which offers an account of a pre-Holocaust German-Jewish relationship. In doing so, he retraces the events of Adelwarth's travels from the casinos of Deauville, to the cities of Constantinople and Jerusalem. On one journey to Heliopolis, in Egypt, the 'two globetrotters' attempt to 'regain the past', but 'fail in every respect'.⁸⁸ Walking through the Jewish quarter of Constantinople, 'for one awful heartbeat' Ambros imagines he is 'in Switzerland or at home again'.⁸⁹ Similarly, in Jerusalem, the ultimate homeland for the Jewish diaspora, both Cosmo and Ambros find only 'decay, marasmus and emptiness'.⁹⁰ In his characteristic style, Sebald catalogues exactly 55 religious denominations above a double page image of the sprawling city. Equally disorientating then, the Jewish exile can never truly arrive home, neither in Jerusalem nor in the modern metropolis. Their desire to regain ancient traditions belies a naïve effort to escape the shock of modernity, but, in doing so, memory and nostalgia becomes disorientating and, for both characters, eventually leads to madness. Even in America, Cosmo learns of the extent of the First World War's destruction and is 'unable to regain a footing' in its 'unchanged daily life'. For the already unsettled Jew, normality becomes merely discordant and isolating. He subsequently ends up hallucinating in a New York cinema a 'mirage image of an oasis' and disappears, both literally and psychologically, with a 'caravan' of other nomads. Likewise, gazing on snowfall over Jerusalem, Ambros muses on 'times long gone' and reflects that that 'memory' is 'a kind of dumbness'. From this vertiginous perspective, where recollection 'makes one's head heavy and giddy', the psychology of exile is ultimately disorientating.⁹¹

In *Austerlitz*, the narrator's return to the UK is followed by a journey to London where he visits a Czech ophthalmologist after discovering 'grey areas' in his field of vision.⁹² This journey, which puts the narrator 'in mind of an underground columbarium', prefigures Austerlitz's later revelation of his Czech origins in London Liverpool Street station.⁹³ Like Ambros, the narrator observes snow falling from the doctor's waiting room and experiences an uncanny flashback to his childhood in the Alps. This also recalls the earlier scene in Antwerp Station where the abstract space of the waiting room is employed as a liminal site in the emigrant imagination, a detention zone between home and away. This narrative chain leads, by

⁸⁸ *TE*, 95–7

⁸⁹ *TE*, 131

⁹⁰ *TE*, 137

⁹¹ *TE*, 145

⁹² *A*, 50

⁹³ *Ibid.*

coincidence, to the narrator's encounter with Austerlitz in the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel and the revelations of Austerlitz's personal story to the narrator. Not coincidentally, however, this occurs after the narrator's literal field of vision has been cleared and expanded.

*

In *The Emigrants*, Jewish trauma is revealed through the interstitial space of the journey, which, as a figure of ambivalence, also acts as a site of intercultural dialogue. These emigrants recount their journeys as attempts to flee persecution or war, but are always drawn back to the paradoxical image of the ruined, unhomely *Heimat* and its traumatic devastation. This paradox is most felt in the narrative of Paul Bereyter, who, as a German with Jewish heritage, was unable to teach in Germany and hence exiled to France in 1935. The narrator learns of Bereyter's railway suicide in 1984 via a newspaper article, precipitating a return to his hometown 'S' in order to investigate the life and death of his old schoolteacher. The narrator gradually realises that his brotherly affiliation with Bereyter as a schoolchild had merely been 'a fabrication' since 'we [the schoolchildren] had little idea of what he was or what went on inside him.'⁹⁴ The mysterious identity of Bereyter is uncovered through the narrator's own journey to his homeland in which he relates to Bereyter's exile and eventual return through his own nostalgia. Recollecting his arrival in S as a child, the narrator recounts that he had thought it 'auspicious' that 'the rows of houses were interrupted here and there by patches of wasteland on which stood ruined buildings'.⁹⁵ This disconcerting observation arises from the narrator's earlier visit to post-war Munich, thus binding him to the trauma of a ruined *Heimat* which operates in a dialectic of absence and presence. This use of prefiguration is reinforced by the ominous pull of S that prevents Bereyter from fully escaping his past and, eventually, his death.

Like Austerlitz, Bereyter is obsessed with 'the logistics' of railway networks. 'Perhaps' even 'headed for death', the railway alludes to the death drive as a libidinal 'beyond' that prefigures all future events and refutes logical causality, and so symbolises trauma's repetitious and destructive nature.⁹⁶ Bereyter's uncle underscores this Freudian model with his innocent, yet darkly portentous, comment that his nephew would 'end up on the railways'.⁹⁷ Simultaneously, the narrator travels to the town of S in order to uncover the *Heimlichkeit* of

⁹⁴ *TE*, 29

⁹⁵ *TE*, 30

⁹⁶ Freud (2003); *TE*, 61

⁹⁷ *TE*, p. 63

Bereyter's life, to 'discover the story I did not know [...] to get closer [...] to imagine' what it had been like.⁹⁸ Bereyter's tale, however, like the other discrete narratives in *The Emigrants*, fails to reveal any substantial conclusions but only the uncanny significances shared between railways, exile and death. In chapter three I discuss the symbolic function of Bereyter's railway suicide in the wider context of Jewish exile, but here the problematic dimension that fate plays in Sebald's narratives is clear. To engage a counter-argument, as in *Austerlitz*, where history is collapsed into abstract presentism, historical events become impossible to comprehend in terms of a chronological cause and effect sequence. Situating the Jewish victim in a cannon of suffering without drawing attention to any specific social or political context, Sebald's narratives oscillate between the implied desire for redemption on the part of the narrator, and simultaneous demise of the Jewish victim's subjectivity and their position in a traumatic history without beginning or end. Moreover, the fact that Sebald equates the uncanny with the figure of the Jew holds highly troubling connotations given the post-Holocaust persistence of German anti-Semitism.⁹⁹ From this perspective, Sebald actually constricts his Jewish characters' sense of historical agency.

In the opening narrative, 'Henry Selwyn', a Lithuanian-Jew living in Suffolk recounts his biography after raising the issue of homesickness.¹⁰⁰ Later in life, he informs the narrator that he has been drawn back to his childhood memories of a pogrom and exodus from his home country, which were 'returning once again and making their presence felt'.¹⁰¹ Selwyn's family, who had aimed to emigrate to New York, in fact landed in London, and were thus forced to adjust to the situation. However, some of these emigrants, 'in the teeth of all the evidence to the contrary, persisted for a long time in the belief that they were in America'.¹⁰² This uncanny revelation of being in an unexpected place communicates the traumatic nature of exile, where, suspended between cultural integration and the nostalgia for a lost home, the emigrant is forced to sustain themselves through hope and imagination. Like Austerlitz, Selwyn's identity is a contingent product of chance events which gives rise to a sense of being forever out-of-place and having a false consciousness, where he learns English 'as if in a dream'.¹⁰³ Unlike Austerlitz, however, Selwyn consciously relinquishes his name and represses his past.

⁹⁸ *TE*, 28

⁹⁹ Long and Whitehead, p. 15

¹⁰⁰ *TE*, 18

¹⁰¹ *TE*, 18–19

¹⁰² *TE*, 19

¹⁰³ *TE*, 20

Metaphorically severing his ties with the ‘real world’, his only companions are plants and animals.¹⁰⁴ This isolation, however, only leads to greater disorientation, denial and eventually suicide. Tellingly, travelling by train through the Swiss Alps years later, the narrator recalls Selwyn’s love of mountain climbing in the Bernese Oberland. He hence reads a newspaper article detailing the discovery of the lost body of Johannes Naegeli, Selwyn’s hiking companion, in the same glacier. This uncanny connection reveals the significance of media in Sebald’s work where ‘certain things [...] have a way of returning unexpectedly’ via chance encounters and acts of reading.¹⁰⁵ In Sebald’s texts, however, these encounters are transient and operate through travel, highlighting a dialectic of memory and forgetting and the protean nature of the traumatic process.

Ultimately, it is impossible for Sebald’s emigrants to return completely to their origins, which they relate to only through their fragmented memories and its traces. On occasion, where they discover their lost past, they also come dangerously close to the annihilating power of memory, discovering also the sites of traumatic displacement or Jewish genocide. This reinforces the fact that ‘in contemporary European culture’, as Dave Morley writes, ‘*Heimat* is not an innocent utopia’, the longing for which presupposes a ‘mythical bond rooted in a lost past [...] that has already disintegrated’.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, given the etymology of ‘nostalgia’, from the German *Heimweh* or ‘homesickness’, Sebald’s writing shows that nostalgia is deeply tied to a sense of homelessness. In this way, the nostalgic turn in his work towards childhood memory often results in greater disorientation, trauma, and ultimately, death.

Returning to the narrative of Paul Bereyter, Sebald constructs the traumatic process through photography as a mediating technology that, whilst offering a limited perspective, makes claims of objectivity. Constructing a relationality between a historical witness, their subject, and the present observer, Sebald’s photographs are two-dimensional objects that invite speculation and story-telling, relying as much on what is hidden from view as what is instantly visible or deducible. This dynamism, between secrecy and revelation, can be read as a discourse on the traumatic process, and its *Unheimlichkeit* discordances. Bereyter’s biography is related to the narrator by an acquaintance he meets in S, Lucy Landau, in a narrative frame that privileges recollection over immediate experience. Leafing through Bereyter’s photograph album, the narrator thus feels ‘as if the dead were coming back’ where the image offers a

¹⁰⁴ *TE*, 20–21

¹⁰⁵ John Zilcosky (2004), p. 118

¹⁰⁶ Morley and Robins, in Carter et al., pp. 7–8

glimpse into a secret life and its buried traumas.¹⁰⁷ These connections between trauma and photography have been remarked upon by Ulrich Baer. For Baer, photography provides a ‘mechanically recorded instant that was not necessarily registered by the subject’s own consciousness’ and so reflects the traumatic experience.¹⁰⁸ Sebald carries this process into the second-generation where these photographs retain a sense of shock for the observing narrator. In surveying Bereyter’s photo album, the narrator learns that his old teacher had returned to Germany in 1939 to serve in the Wehrmacht. This shocking revelation, Landau calls it ‘an aberration’, reflects the ambivalent relationship Bereyter had with his *Heimat* as a German-Jew.¹⁰⁹ Being a ‘free-thinker’, who, with an ‘aversion to hypocrisy’, endures the ‘intellectual infirmities of the world’, Bereyter rejects the totalitarian ideology of the Nuremberg Laws, which brand him ‘Jewish’ and therefore as an enemy of the racial state. He remains adamantly ‘German to the marrow’, and thus returns in both 1939 and 1945 to his native country.¹¹⁰ Simultaneously German and a state-enemy, this non-identical equivocation means that he was ‘profoundly attached to his native land in the foothills of the Alps [...] which in fact he loathed’ and even ‘would have been pleased to see destroyed.’¹¹¹ This paradox highlights the fact that Bereyter lives in constant flux between home and away; a paradox which ultimately leads to his suicide. As Landau remarks, ‘he belonged to the exiles and not to the people of S.’¹¹² Like uncle Kasimir’s confused sense of being at distance from an undefinable location, Bereyter felt that he was always about ‘2,000km away – but from where?’ Dislocated, he writes that ‘day by day [...] one lost more of one’s qualities, became less comprehensible to oneself, increasingly abstract’.¹¹³ This ambiguous statement highlights how Bereyter’s extensive travels, and his identity, were always anchored in some way to his unhomely homeland.

Raising wider issues of identification, the narrator’s inspection of Bereyter’s photographs instigates a form of secondary witnessing where he is privy to experiences that, in the words of Baer, ‘have remained unremembered yet cannot be forgotten’.¹¹⁴ Problematically however, Bereyter’s memory is employed in the service of nostalgia rather than any final working through, leading the narrator into a direct confrontation with his own *Unheimliche*

¹⁰⁷ *TE*, 46

¹⁰⁸ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 8

¹⁰⁹ *TE*, 56

¹¹⁰ *TE*, 57

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 57

¹¹² *Ibid*, p. 59

¹¹³ *TE*, 56

¹¹⁴ Baer, p. 7

Heimat. Given the fact that Sebald himself grew up in a small town in the Bavarian Alps, it is telling that each of his Jewish characters in *The Emigrants* originate from or travel to this region of Swiss Franconia, implying a nostalgic desire on the part of the narrator to re-establish a *Heimat* untouched by the ravages of modernity.¹¹⁵ Perhaps also haunted by the disappearance of an idealised German-Jewish coexistence, Sebald is arguably as much concerned with a specifically German loss as about the overall loss of the European Jewry.¹¹⁶ Somewhat disputably then, *The Emigrants* thematises the dilemmas of post-war German identity as much as it focusses on recovering damaged Jewish lives.¹¹⁷ However, given the fact that Sebald's books also dealt with pre-modern histories of German anti-Semitism, they simultaneously draw attention to a specifically Jewish history of racial segregation, highlighting that German-Jewish exchange has long been traumatic, discontinuous and far from innocent.¹¹⁸

Chapter Two

Engaging in Postmemorial Dialogue

Whilst *The Emigrants* attempts to redress the imbalance between German and Jewish identities in a nostalgic desire for a shared *Heimat*, the German narrator in Sebald's later book *Austerlitz* draws attention to the irresolvable epistemological gap between the two groups through strategies of textual mediation. Still however, the narrator's role as scribe to Austerlitz's testimony does somewhat imply a persistent longing to identify with the suffering other. As discussed previously, this is reinforced by the narrator's failure to diverge from literary tourism's beaten track, his own difficult periods of writer's block, and overall distrust of modernity.¹¹⁹ At the close of *Austerlitz*, the narrator finds himself returning to Breendonk, a concentration camp in Belgium, and is faced once more with the horrors of Jewish genocide, thus implying a sense of historical accountability. On the other hand, Austerlitz is imbued with a glimmer of hope as he journeys southwards through France in search of his father's memory.

¹¹⁵ *TE*, 14, 48, 129, 169, 173, 176, 186

¹¹⁶ Taberner (2004)

¹¹⁷ Ibid.; Susanne Fink, 'W. G. – der fünfte Ausgewanderte', in W. G. Sebald (ed.) Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Edition Klaus Isele, 1997), pp. 214–27

¹¹⁸ In the narrative poem *Nach der Natur. Ein Elementargedicht* (1988), Sebald depicts the mass self-immolation of Frankfurt am Main's Jewish population in 1349 – a troubling invocation of pre-modern German anti-Semitism.

¹¹⁹ *A*, 46

The narrator, not present in this final, perhaps redeeming journey of self-discovery, can only speculate on its deeper personal meaning and so refuses complete identification with Austerlitz's Czech-Jewish background.

Through this travel narrative, perhaps problematically, Sebald expresses a specifically Jewish form of creative reciprocity that relies on textual reinterpretation as a means of recovering a sense of historical agency; across both texts, Sebald's Jewish exiles are travel writers in the sense that they document their journeys across Europe and 'read' the environment for its historical traces. This pays homage to the Judaic tradition of scriptural figuration which 'refuses the distinction between the textual and the real'.¹²⁰ Seeing instead 'a continuous web of interpretations [...] an endless rewriting [...] This emphasis on the divinity of language radically ruptures the idea of totality and identity.'¹²¹ With this in mind, Sebald's unsettling of perspective, heightened use of intertextuality and embracing of epistemological uncertainty can be seen as valid representational methods that rejects hypostasis and embraces Judaic forms of knowledge. Sebald's engagement with contemporary aesthetic debates regarding the ethics of Holocaust representation and commemoration can therefore be seen in his intertextual use of travel writing as a mode of historical interrogation.¹²² These characteristics, as Cosgrove writes, 'especially the author-narrator link and the related issues of identity and identification processes', 'impose constraints on configurations of empathy, and on representation more generally'.¹²³

As I argue in this chapter, however, Sebald thematises the issue of historical transmission by excavating the deeper layers of history as they are contained and mediated in social environments and via individual subjects. As a 'methodology of memory', travel displaces dominant historical narratives in favour of a pluralistic memory culture which, to quote Cosgrove and Fuchs, 'embraces the idea that individuals and groups advance and edit competing stories about themselves that forge their changing sense of identity.'¹²⁴ Investigating, in the words of LaCapra, 'other dimensions of historiography', this reveals counter-narratives which question processes of historical transmission and reconfigures

¹²⁰ Grosz, p. 68

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 103

¹²³ Cosgrove (2011), pp. 195–210, p. 197

¹²⁴ Mary Cosgrove and Anne Fuchs, 'Introduction', *German Life and Letters*, 59, 2 (2006), pp. 3–10, p. 4

personal trauma into a productive discourse.¹²⁵ As Edwards and Grauland write ‘for just as travel (and its writing) can inscribe divisions separating self and other, familiar and unfamiliar, it is also capable of doing the opposite: it can blur attempts to maintain the coherent identificatory strategies of the traveller.’¹²⁶ With this in mind, Sebald’s use of travel draws attention to the role of dialogue, listening and interpretation in preserving the distinct identities of German and Jew whilst questioning the historical configurations that determine this binary ethical relationship.

2.i: Beyond the Anthropological Place

For Austerlitz, his childhood evacuation to Bala in North Wales is felt as a recurring trauma that prevents him from fully identifying with or feeling at home in his new abode. Placed in the care of a Calvinist preacher named Emyr Elias and his wife Gwendolyn, Austerlitz is prevented from discovering his true identity and instead feels he is living in a false life. Like Henry Selwyn in *The Emigrants*, Austerlitz never in Wales ‘shook off the feeling that something very obvious, very manifest in itself was hidden from me [...] as if I were in a dream and trying to perceive reality.’¹²⁷ As a periphery of Europe, Austerlitz’s Welsh locale seems to have escaped the debilitating traumas of the Second World War and preserved a state of prelapsarian innocence. For this reason, Bala can be read as an idealistic *Heimat* which, with the steady rhythm of rural life, dulls any sense of historical consciousness and excludes Austerlitz from his Central European trauma. This is equivalent to Marc Augé’s category of the ‘anthropological place’.¹²⁸ This place, as the ideal ethnologist’s object, recalls Marcel Mauss’ notion of the ‘total social fact’ where there exists an isomorphic relation between culture, society and individual, perceived as a unified whole precisely located in space and time.¹²⁹ This substantialist perspective ignores the complexities and vicissitudes of social life, instead inscribing a singular reference point for all those it assigns a position who occupy this place and call it ‘home’. In the words of Augé, this place offers ‘a principle of meaning for the

¹²⁵ LaCapra, p. xxxii

¹²⁶ Justin D. Edwards and Rune Grauland, *Mobility at Large: Globalization, Textuality and Innovative Travel Writing* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2012), p. 78

¹²⁷ A, 76

¹²⁸ Augé, p. 51

¹²⁹ Ibid., pp. 21, 48-49

people who live in it', where identity, relations and history are distributed in relations of coexistence and similitude.¹³⁰

Living in the Elias' manse, Austerlitz is exiled not only from his place of birth, but also his childhood memory. This dark and oppressive place 'drowns in a twilight' which extinguishes Austerlitz's 'every sense of self-awareness'.¹³¹ As he relates, 'just as cold reigned in the house [...] so did silence.'¹³² This repressed environment creates a sense of isolation, where Austerlitz feels 'not at home [...] but very far away, in some kind of captivity'.¹³³ As an 'anthropological place', the manse and Bala overall are treated as a historical environment where an organic sense of minimal stability reigns and its inhabitants are not conscious of the relationship between the past and the present. As Augé contends, 'the inhabitant of an anthropological place does not make history; he lives in it'.¹³⁴ For the orphan Austerlitz, however, his childhood displacement means that discontinuity, fragmentation and enigma are characteristic elements of his repressed memories. Retaining only the trauma of identity-loss, he states that 'I can recall almost nothing of my early days in Bala except how it hurt to be suddenly called by a new name.'¹³⁵ This said, Austerlitz cannot feel at home in a place where 'home', its identity, relations, and history, is a unified totality that fails to consider the variety of individual positions or marginal narratives that diverge from this norm. Given this fact, Bala is an exclusive space that, neither central nor marginal, is unhomely for almost all of its inhabitants.

In both *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*, Sebald shows that the 'anthropological place' cannot be a principle of intelligibility for the traumatised emigrant, whose 'unhomely condition' demands them to think their own otherness, and write their own history, as a composite of disparate cultural elements. Sebald's method constantly reminds us that the anthropological place is in fact near impossible to comprehend or access in the separate reality that Austerlitz inhabits; invariably, all such emigrants identify with traces rather than places. Journeying from place to place, they excavate buried or overlooked historical narratives and engage in a dialogue with the historical environment that troubles the unity of terrestrial space and its relations. This recentres marginality as an object of ethnography, and, where Sebald

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 52

¹³¹ A, 61

¹³² A, 63

¹³³ A, 62

¹³⁴ Augé, p. 55

¹³⁵ A, 61

pays attention to the vicissitudes of traumatic displacement, produces a ‘mobile home’ for the Jewish exile.

2.ii: Sebald’s Architecture of Memory

In the following section I propose that Sebald reworks the traditionally anthropological method of the journey as mode of historical mediation. Representing a dialectic of memory and forgetting, the journey narrative connects disparate sites of trauma in a constellation of memory traces. Thus, enacting new configurations of memory and history, this deconstructs the notion of rooted, situated histories, and the binary of place and ‘non-place’, whilst communicating the mobility of Jewish exile identity and memory. In doing so, Sebald articulates the shifting relationship between European history and individual memory in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Significantly, this method integrates marginal memory narratives into contemporary social space.

Through its establishing of illusory relationships between subject and object, ‘gaze and landscape’, travel is the primary means by which Sebald’s emigrants create meaningful, albeit it illusionistic, alignments with the traumatic fragments of the past.¹³⁶ Guided in his travels by Jewish history and memory, the narrator of *The Emigrants* finds hospitality in Henry Selwyn’s kitchen garden, reclaims the memoirs of Holocaust victim Luisa Lanzberg, and even includes a photograph of the German-Jewish painter Max Ferber bent over his writing as a child, all of which imply a potential for creative rooting on the part of the Jewish exile.¹³⁷ In regard to trauma, the narrator learns from his Aunt Fini that his great-uncle Adelwarth had possessed an ‘astoundingly precise memory’, ‘but that, at the same time, he scarcely allowed himself access to it’.¹³⁸ This meant that, whilst ‘telling stories’ of his life, Adelwarth was ‘at once saving [...] and mercilessly destroying himself’.¹³⁹ In both texts, traumatic repetition becomes a model for memory in general, through which the past effects, and effaces, the present. In this way, memory is both productive and destructive for Sebald’s emigrants.

In *Austerlitz*, on the other hand, this dialectic leads to a more positive conclusion in leading the protagonist towards his origins. The narrator is ‘astonished’ by the method in which Austerlitz relates his ideas; a ‘historical metaphysic’ that brings ‘remembered events back to

¹³⁶ Cf. p. 16; Augé, p. 86

¹³⁷ *TE*, 7; *A*, 326

¹³⁸ *TE*, 100

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

life' and dissolves the weight of the present.¹⁴⁰ This ignites Austerlitz's deep creative relationship with the observable environment as a semiotic link to the past and his own fragmented biography. This is most noticeable where the protagonist is himself engaged in the transmission of cultural and historical values.¹⁴¹ An architectural historian of the 19th-century, Austerlitz draws attention to the value of the historical environment as a text that relies on the interplay of place, identity and history. Irene Sywenky writes that:

Landscapes, whether natural, urban or industrial, are historical geopolitical constructs that can be interpreted as memory texts. Such memory landscapes, along with the material culture that constitutes them, offer multi-layered narratives of witnessing and documenting sociohistorical changes and events of collective traumas, and representing the organic connections between space, place, home, and the past.¹⁴²

In Sebald's texts, however, these so-called 'organic connections', key to Augé's notion of 'anthropological place', are displaced and reconfigured through the journey narrative. With the intended aim of reclaiming lost memory, this carries diasporic Jewish memory from the margins of social life and into the centre of ethical concern. On their first encounter in Antwerp station, Austerlitz discusses the history of the station with the narrator. He states that the building's modern design, 'uniting past and future', was 'a logical stylistic approach to the new epoch'.¹⁴³ Augé writes that 'what is seen by the spectator of modernity is the interweaving of old and new'.¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, the abstract space of 'non-place', in which 'three figures of excess' – temporal, spatial and individual – find their full expression, bears witness only 'to the coexistence of distinct individualities'.¹⁴⁵ Directly opposed to the 'anthropological place', 'non-places', for Augé, create 'neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude'.¹⁴⁶

Living in exile from a situated or social memory however, Sebald's emigrants compose, share and relate to their pasts in these places. 'Listed, classified, promoted to the status of

¹⁴⁰ A, 14, 124

¹⁴¹ Long and Whitehead, p. 5

¹⁴² Irene Sywenky, 'Memories of Displacement and Unhomely Spaces: History, Trauma and the Politics of Spatial Imagination in Ukraine and Poland', in Simona Mitroiu (ed.), *Life Writing and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), pp. 25–44, p. 32

¹⁴³ A, 12

¹⁴⁴ Augé, p. 110

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 77–8, 109, 111

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 103

“places of memory”, Austerlitz is infallibly drawn to these places ‘which have more of the past about them than the present’.¹⁴⁷ Train stations, hotels, ‘places of memory’, which document, in the words of Pierre Nora, all the ‘visible signs of what used to be’, are in fact integral for the Jewish exile who lives, emphatically, in their own memory. Interweaving multiple temporalities in these ‘non-places’, Sebald’s emigrants disturb their clear categorisation. Critiquing this binary notion, Austerlitz constructs a fictional relationship between place, identity and his unreliable memories, thus reimagining these spaces as relational, dynamic and productive of identity through personal memories of exile. In this way, Sebald resituates *Heimat* as a transnational construction, which, removed from its Germanic ties, is shaped by the dynamic relation between an individual and their environment.

Like Paul Bereyter in *The Emigrants*, whose fate was ‘systematically laid out’ in the railways, Austerlitz is obsessed with the logistics of modern travel as a monument to the unifying power of the modern state. This is symbolised by the Flemish motto ‘endracht makkt macht’, or ‘unity means power’, inscribed above the station clock.¹⁴⁸ This contrasts with his own sense of dislocation from a rooted sense of time, and communicates the alienating force of modernity that paved the way for industrialisation, colonialism, and finally, genocide. For the Jewish subject who occupies a place of ahistorical, ongoing exile, modernity’s unifying rationale can only be seen as excluding. Austerlitz, for example, who has never owned a watch, sees clocks as utterly ‘mendacious’ objects, and consciously resists the ‘power of time’.¹⁴⁹ In the words of Pierre Nora, this reinforces the fact that ‘time today is no longer a principle of intelligibility [...] let alone a principle of identity’.¹⁵⁰ In *The Emigrants*, on the other hand, this unifying power becomes enabling, where, on Kasimir’s emigration across the Atlantic by passenger liner, he notes a circular clock over which ‘was the motto *Mein Feld ist die Welt*’, translating loosely to the proverb ‘the world is your oyster’.¹⁵¹ In this way, Sebald reflects that the binary between place and ‘non-place’ cannot sustain itself for the Jewish exile.

Both enabling and alienating, the unifying power of modernity embodies the incompatible social forces that shape Jewish identity.¹⁵² Sebald repositions this identity, which often serves ‘as a metaphor for a more universal alienation’, in ‘non-places’ as a way of

¹⁴⁷ A, 359; Augé, p. 78

¹⁴⁸ A, 13

¹⁴⁹ A, 143–4

¹⁵⁰ Augé, p. 25

¹⁵¹ TE, p. 82

¹⁵² Grosz, p. 59

representing this social marginality without resorting to dominant or oppressive forms of representation. These social forces, composed of anti-anti-Semitism, a negative, oppositional position, and a more positive force based on shared narratives, ‘breeds a tension that both affirms and annihilates Jewish identity’ and ‘induces the position of the marginal, exiled, or alienated’.¹⁵³ In Sartre’s view, this ‘commitment to a collective narrative based on a paradoxical passivity and strength’ shows that the otherness of the Jew ‘is not self-chosen’ but ‘always an effect of power relations’.¹⁵⁴ With this in mind, Sebald’s work accounts for the alterity bestowed on the Jew by others by positioning them in spaces whose enforced homogeneity, ‘relative anonymity’ and ‘solitary contractuality’ are at once liberating and at the same time oppressive and disorientating.¹⁵⁵ With this in mind, Austerlitz relies on the fact that ‘to this day there is something illusionistic and illusory about the relationship between time and space as we experience it in travelling’.¹⁵⁶ In this way, travel highlights the breaks and discontinuities of traumatic exile whilst constructing a fictional relationship between memory and history, place and ‘non-place’.

The narrator’s multiple chance encounters with Austerlitz, of a similarly illusionistic quality, have an uncanny significance in the biography of the narrator where they remind him of his own exiled status. On a night Channel crossing from Belgium to England, the narrator discovers that Austerlitz is an academic at a London school of art history.¹⁵⁷ This initiates the narrator’s deliberate meetings with Austerlitz, who begins to reveal his traumatised condition through densely-woven allusions. Returning to the notion of ‘configurations of empathy and identification’, *Austerlitz*’s arbitrary sequence of events means that the narrator, in a ‘curious chain of circumstances’, returns to the UK and reencounters Austerlitz two decades after their first meeting, thus revitalising a relationship which had been ‘both a close and distant one’.¹⁵⁸ This highlights a metaphysical undercurrent which disturbs a rationalist historical perspective, blurs fiction and document, and brings together Jew and German in a pattern of accidental encounters that highlights exile identity, social space and their relations. In a bar of the Great Eastern Hotel at Liverpool Street, the narrator sights once more the ‘solitary figure on the edge of the agitated crowd’ – Austerlitz. This ‘non-place’ is transformed into a site for dialogue and

¹⁵³ Grosz, pp. 59–60

¹⁵⁴ Sartre, in Grosz, pp. 61–62

¹⁵⁵ Augé, pp. 94, 101

¹⁵⁶ A, 14

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. p. p. 42

¹⁵⁸ A, 46

exchange. In these mobile, rootless ‘homes’, in concordance with Augé, ‘the possibility of non-place is never absent from any place [...] where the experience that ethnologists traditionally called “cultural contact” has become a general phenomenon.’¹⁵⁹ Through conversation, this form of immediate cultural contact presupposes a source of identity for the displaced subject, whilst this overlap between ‘place’ and ‘non-place’ speaks to the otherness, marginality and ambivalence of the Jewish exile.

Austerlitz’s professional research into the architecture of railway stations, recalling ‘marks of pain which [...] trace countless fine lines through history’, introduces the metaphysical undercurrent of Austerlitz’s historical perspective, its spatial quality and its relation to his personal biography and exile trauma.¹⁶⁰ With their ‘excess’ of individual references and their points of intersection, these ‘non-places’ offer a discourse on Austerlitz’s atomised, multifarious identity and as a result engage imaginative speculation.¹⁶¹ With both positive and negative connotations, inhabiting train stations means that Austerlitz can ‘never quite shake off the agony of leave-taking and the fear of foreign places’, thus drawing attention to the way in which trauma is culturally and historically inscribed into spaces of travel.¹⁶²

Sebald regularly employs the literary trope of *katabasis*, common in the epic tradition as a symbolic descent into the underworld, as a method of representing silenced or buried trauma and bringing it to the surface. Returning from Theresienstadt to Prague, traumatised from what he has seen there, Austerlitz has ‘the impression of going steadily downhill’, of ‘descending a kind of ramp into a labyrinth’.¹⁶³ This downwards movement refigures history as a layered, labyrinthine phenomenon that, like a map, can be explored at will. In this way, travel is not only a geographical medium, but also a mnemonic one. Living in Mile End in East London, Austerlitz is compulsively ‘drawn back’ to Liverpool Street station as ‘a kind of entrance to the underworld’.¹⁶⁴ In characteristic ethnographic style, Austerlitz remarks on the history of the site, interpreting and visually excavating it through detailed description and documentary-style photography. Significantly, Austerlitz states that, until the 17th-century, a priory had once stood on the site, along with the hospital for the mentally unwell, Bedlam. With this historical awareness, Austerlitz obsessively attempts to picture ‘through the ever-

¹⁵⁹ Augé, p. 107-9

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 16

¹⁶¹ Augé, p. 39

¹⁶² A, 16

¹⁶³ A, 282

¹⁶⁴ A, 180

changing maze of walls, the location in that huge space of the rooms where the asylum inmates were confined', wondering 'whether the pain and suffering accumulated on this site over the centuries had ever really ebbed away'.¹⁶⁵ This is an historical vision which accounts for those denied a voice in society, institutionalised or marginalised as socially unacceptable, and is well suited to the representation of historical violence.¹⁶⁶ As Dr Abramsky, custodian of Ithaca sanatorium in upper state New York, reminds us in *The Emigrants*: 'I do not expect anyone can really imagine the pain and wretchedness once stored up in this extravagant timber palace.'¹⁶⁷ These memories no doubt will fade away, but Sebald reminds us of their causal effect on contemporary society.

The station's deep, palimpsest-like 'strata' of historical frames enables Austerlitz to conceive of his own repressed memory.¹⁶⁸ He thus feels 'as if the dead were returning from their exile and filling the twilight around me.'¹⁶⁹ Actively working against the power of social forgetting, Sebald reframes Liverpool Street station as a transit zone, but one which is not defined 'by the words and texts' it offers the traveller. Instead, through memory work, this so-called 'non-place' is transformed through the metaphysical relations Austerlitz constructs with his surroundings. Rejecting 'the shared identity of passengers', 'the passive joys of identity-loss', and the 'contractual relations' that determine a non-place's primary use-value, Austerlitz slows down in these spaces defined by speed, 'sitting on a bench with other passengers' or simply 'standing somewhere'.¹⁷⁰ His deep historical interest reframes this utilitarian environment as a zone of self-reflection. Thus, in contrast to Augé, what (doesn't) reign in Sebald's travelling spaces is 'actuality', 'the urgency of the present moment', but rather a deep history exiled from 'the present of the journey'.¹⁷¹ This ambiguous relationship between the emigrant and the temporal excesses of 'supermodernity' is utilised by Sebald. Because 'non-places are made to be passed through', the fact 'they are measured in units of time' is questioned through the complex interplay of subjective memory, history and identity as it is afforded by decelerated forms of travel, such as walking, commonly practiced by Sebald's narrators and characters.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁵ A, 183

¹⁶⁶ Katja Garloff, 'The Emigrant as Witness: W.G. Sebald's "Die Ausgewanderten"', *The German Quarterly*, 77, 1 (2004), pp. 76–93; LaCapra

¹⁶⁷ *TE*, p. 110

¹⁶⁸ A, 189

¹⁶⁹ A, 188

¹⁷⁰ A, 182

¹⁷¹ Augé, p. 104

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

Following Augé's proposition that 'individual histories (because of their necessary relations with space, image and consumption)' have never before 'been so deeply entangled with general history, history *tout court*', Austerlitz's archaeological interests are deeply tied to his own marginal Jewish identity and its history of cultural dispersion. On following a 'white-turbaned porter' into a doorway, Austerlitz remarks that 'we take almost all the steps in our lives out of slight inner adjustments of which we are barely conscious', and unknowingly crosses a threshold of memory, symbolised by his stepping 'past a heavy curtain', into an 'empty space' 'which had obviously been disused for years.'¹⁷³ This action underscores the relationship between travel and the unconscious mind in Sebald's work, where intuitive peripatetic movement takes Austerlitz into spaces of his memory and serves as a model for self-discovery. On entering the disused Ladies' Waiting Room of Liverpool Street Station, Austerlitz inhabits a site of temporal delay which in itself recalls a traumatic structure of anticipation and repetition.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, this female space is one of binary otherness which prefigures Austerlitz's vision of his foster parents, and 'the boy they had come to meet'.¹⁷⁵ His memory, which is exteriorised and represented as a third-person embodied other, highlights the fact that 'every immigrant has a second, spectral biography'.¹⁷⁶ This is reinforced by the idea, obsessed over by Austerlitz, of living in a false life and so is haunted by ghosts of lost lives, perhaps even un-lived.¹⁷⁷ On his necessary journey across Germany, made in order to 'retrace my journey from Prague to London by train' in 1938, he senses the presence of a twin brother accompanying him.¹⁷⁸ Thus, in Liverpool Street station, he observes this boy 'sitting by himself on a bench over to one side' and recollects himself as a small child, thus realising that this was the same waiting room he had arrived in fifty years before.¹⁷⁹ This liminal stage in Austerlitz's traumatic life reveals the limited practice he has had in using his own memory, in a crossing over of the threshold between history and memory, and his self-induced memory 'quarantine'.¹⁸⁰

This dreamlike sequence, almost mythological in its metaphysical orbit, combines the present and the past through a concrete, architectural site. Austerlitz sees 'huge halls open up,

¹⁷³ A, 189

¹⁷⁴ Duttlinger, p. 158

¹⁷⁵ A, 193

¹⁷⁶ Eva Hoffman, *Exit into History: A Journey Through the new Eastern Europe* (New York, Minerva, 1994)

¹⁷⁷ A, 298

¹⁷⁸ A, 286, 316

¹⁷⁹ A, 189

¹⁸⁰ A, 198

with rows of pillars and colonnades leading far into the distance’, with ‘viaducts and footbridges crossing deep chasms thronged with tiny figures [...] prisoners in search of some way of escape’.¹⁸¹ This imaginary space of endless travel represents the return of the repressed trauma of Austerlitz’s own exile through the medium of architecture. Again, the katabatic image of labyrinths as a symbol of temporal disorientation and as a container of traumatic history appears, Austerlitz’s incongruent memories ‘interlocking like labyrinthine vaults’.¹⁸² Significantly, this is a vision of both ‘imprisonment and liberation’, both ‘a ruin’ and ‘a building in the process of construction’.¹⁸³ This metaphor of spatial construction and destruction returns throughout the narrative and points to the ambivalent identity of Austerlitz where he exists in a state of memorial creation and erasure, between two poles of self-production and annihilation.¹⁸⁴

2.iii: Engaging in Dialogue with the Other

‘Emigrants’, writes Sebald’s narrator, ‘tend to seek out their own kind’.¹⁸⁵ Meeting each other in ‘non-places’, they share and create memories of cultural displacement. In this section, I examine the ways in which Sebald uses travel as a dialogic tool and the extent to which this is a successful mediating strategy which, whilst enabling a sharing of memory, retains the ethical distance between self and other. Paying homage to the discourse of *Bilderverbot*, in suggesting the ultimate unknowability of trauma, this also communicates, in the words of Aleida Assmann, ‘the aspects of involuntariness and inaccessibility in the experience of those who engage with the traumatic past, both those who are directly affected [...] as well as those who come after.’¹⁸⁶ Whilst *The Emigrants* reproduces a negative symbiotic model of German-Jewish relationality, Sebald suggests that the trauma of this relationship must be maintained through ethical memory work. As I discuss, travel reproduces the dynamics of this exchange, which exists in a process of self-construction and erasure.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸¹ A, 191

¹⁸² A, 189

¹⁸³ A, 191

¹⁸⁴ Grosz

¹⁸⁵ *TE*, 67

¹⁸⁶ Aleida Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity* (Fordham University Press, 2016), p. 5

¹⁸⁷ Taberner (2004); Zilcosky (2006)

In the fourth and final chapter of *The Emigrants*, the narrator relates the biography of the Jewish-German painter Max Ferber (based on the émigré artist Frank Auerbach who came to Britain on the Kindertransport in 1939), and traces multiple narratives of displacement. Firstly, recounting his own emigration to Manchester in 1966 in order to pursue research, he then relates his encounters and conversations with Ferber, and finally is passed on the memoirs of Ferber's Jewish mother Luisa Lanzberg which he goes on to narrate. Sebald argued that this framing structure – which he described as ‘periscopic writing’ – ‘makes for quite complicated syntactical labyrinthine structures and in one sense exonerates the narrator, because he never pretends that he knows more than is actually possible.’¹⁸⁸ This tripartite structure arguably resolves some of the more complex identificatory politics that Sebald negotiates throughout *The Emigrants*.

In the winter of 1966, Ferber shares his story with the narrator in his regular haunt at a transport café, both ‘non-place’ and ‘mobile home’, near Trafford Park. Almost a quarter of a century later, in 1989, it is Ferber's painting in the Tate, and a subsequent magazine article, that unlocks a ‘sort of gaol or oubliette’ of memory and ignites the narrator's deeper interest in the painter's German-Jewish origins.¹⁸⁹ These mediated forms of memory, as framed through story-telling and image making, place Sebald's emigrants in the realm of what Marianne Hirsch calls ‘postmemory’.¹⁹⁰ This model locates traumatic repetition in a specifically generational framework, reinterpreting repetition ‘not as an instrument of fixity or paralysis’ but as a creative vehicle for working through.¹⁹¹ As discussed earlier, Austerlitz's intuitive journeys are figurative of this traumatic process, but they also offer chance discoveries based on an environment's ‘unintentional traces’ through which Austerlitz can comprehend the specific historical injustices that inform his identity.¹⁹² Diverging however from Hirsch's theory that emphasises the role of the second generation, *Austerlitz* questions what it means to have witnessed and consequently repressed a traumatic experience. As a result of being orphaned at a young age, Austerlitz cannot access an intergenerational memory and must make use of what Hirsch calls ‘objects of return’ in an act of memorial self-construction.¹⁹³ In this way,

¹⁸⁸ W. G. Sebald, ‘Interview with James Wood’, *Brick*, 59 (1997) <<https://brickmag.com/an-interview-with-w-g-sebald/>> [accessed: 13/08/2021]

¹⁸⁹ *TE*, 178

¹⁹⁰ Hirsch (2012)

¹⁹¹ Marianne Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images, Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14, 1 (2001), pp. 5–37, pp. 8–9

¹⁹² Jacob Burckhardt, in Assmann, ‘Canon and Archive’, in Erll and Nünning, pp. 97–107, p. 99

¹⁹³ Hirsch (2012), p. 203

observation and dialogue, as facilitated by travel, engages in the fact that postmemory is mediated ‘not through recollection, but through projection and creation [...] often based on the invisible rather than the visible’.¹⁹⁴ In their conversations in the Wadi Halfa, the immigrant café in Trafford Park, the narrator of *The Emigrants* recalls that Ferber would always sit in front of a fresco that depicted ‘a caravan moving forward across a wavy ridge of dunes’.¹⁹⁵ Conversation thus turns to abstraction, where, squinting, the narrator imagines a ‘mirage’ taking shape, so that Ferber seems ‘to emerge or belong’ in this caravan.¹⁹⁶ In this way, dynamics of memory exchange are represented as a force for social integration, through which emigrants belong to a shared history of migration. Following Hirsch’s thinking therefore, Sebald highlights the importance of creative flexibility for the Jewish exile denied access to a situated memory culture. This enables the production of a ‘mobile home’ of memory composed of fictional and fragmented cultural traces, and resituates the marginality of the Jewish exile as a creative site of exchange.

As mentioned earlier, this two-way process can be related to Judaism as a textual, differentiating tradition; set against the linear, ‘logocentric’ thought of the Hellenistic tradition, this provides a history ‘that is uneven, scattered’, a ‘series of interruptions’.¹⁹⁷ In this way, Sebald’s work follows a French intellectual tradition which connects the Judaic to ethical issues of representing alterity without falling prey to the same structures of thought that marginalise it.¹⁹⁸ In the words of Elizabeth Grosz, this asks ‘how to engage in a dialogue that both connects with but also challenges dominant discourses and speaking positions’.¹⁹⁹ This can be seen in Sebald’s unusual use of time as a non-linear, spatial phenomenon, in which Austerlitz feels ‘as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry’.²⁰⁰ This reinforces Sebald’s anti-representational strategies which defer meaning, in which the condensed layering of different histories in one location, as Stephan Seitz comments, opposes a linear concept of time.²⁰¹ Doubly paying homage to this tradition

¹⁹⁴ Hirsch (2001), p. 9

¹⁹⁵ *TE*, p.

¹⁹⁶ *TE*, 164

¹⁹⁷ Jonathan Cohen, et al., (eds.), *Studies in Jewish Education: The Oral and the Textual in Jewish Tradition and Jewish Education* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2019)

¹⁹⁸ The Judaic has been discussed in the works of Edmond Jabès, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Jean François Lyotard who use the concept of the Jew to represent alterity and a tradition of textuality. See Grosz (1993).

¹⁹⁹ Grosz, p. 61

²⁰⁰ *A*, 261

²⁰¹ Stephan Seitz, *Geschichte als bricolage: W. G. Sebald und die Poetik des Bastelns* (Göttingen: V&R, Unipress, 2011)

of textuality whilst reinforcing the actual loss of Jewish memory as a result of the Holocaust, Sebald's narratives question 'how to speak differently, without falling into silence or non-sense', and thus bear witness to the marginal and fragmented identity of the Jewish exile.²⁰²

In 1989, 23 years after their first encounter, the narrator and the Jewish-German émigré talk sincerely 'for three whole days [...] concerning our exile in England, the immigrant city of Manchester and its irreversible decline, the Wadi Halfa (which had long ceased to exist), my year as a school teacher in Switzerland, and my subsequent attempt [...] to settle in Munich.'²⁰³ These experiences inform the wider themes of exile which run through the book and highlights the way in which travel is mobilised as a mediating device via which the German narrator encounters his Jewish subjects and bridges the gap between self and other. Comparatively, Ferber's biography is the most similar to Austerlitz's; they are both orphaned, dislocated Holocaust survivors, and, compared with the other characters in *The Emigrants*, neither end in death. Like Austerlitz, who has never 'set foot on German soil' and 'avoided learning anything at all about German topography, German history or modern German life', Ferber retains a deep distrust of Germany and, since his evacuation in 1939, has never returned.²⁰⁴ He describes Germany as a country 'frozen in the past, destroyed, a curiously extraterritorial place, inhabited by people whose faces are both lovely and dreadful.'²⁰⁵ This distaste for German culture marks the traumatic relationship Ferber has with his German *Heimat*. But, unlike the other characters in *The Emigrants*, a nostalgic connection with this *Heimat* is actively avoided. Ferber's belated trauma can instead be attributed to the fact that he gained knowledge of his parents' death through mediated forms of secondary witnessing, and thus fails 'to this day' to grasp the paradoxical weight of their absence. Mediated postmemory can therefore also induce trauma, where the course of Ferber's life 'down to the tiniest detail', was ordained not only by the deportation of his parents but also by the delay with which the news of their death reached him.²⁰⁶

The narrator orients himself in the foreign city through walks which document Manchester's disused and abandoned industrial ruins. At the Ship Canal, where 'nothing had moved for years', he remarks that the barges and freighters make a broken impression.²⁰⁷

²⁰² Grosz, p. 61

²⁰³ *TE*, 181

²⁰⁴ *A*, 260

²⁰⁵ *TE*, 181

²⁰⁶ *TE*, 191

²⁰⁷ *TE*, 160

Through this, the narrator expresses what Pierre Nora refers to as ‘the turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn’.²⁰⁸ This ignites an interest in ‘lieux de memoire’, or places ‘where memory crystallizes and secretes itself’.²⁰⁹ Later in the narrative, the narrator’s peripatetic travels on the Ship Canal are shared with Ferber. The artist’s interest in the history of the canal, like Austerlitz’s own research into the architecture of train stations, remarks on the dialectic, common to both narratives, of memory and history which is negotiated by travel.

The narrator remarks that the setting sun affords ‘an intimation of the marshes that extended to the city as late as the mid-19th century’, whilst Ferber remarks that the canal was once the world’s ‘industrial Jerusalem’, worked on by an army of Irish navvies.²¹⁰ The trauma of Jewish dispersion is equated to the general absence of a living memory in Manchester, where the lost *Heimat* of the exiled artist is felt as a recurring lack of community in his adopted city. This nostalgia for a lost community is symptomatic of our irrevocable break with the past which, as Nora describes, confronts us with the difference between real memory – ‘social, unviolated, unselfconscious’ – and history. This eradication of memory by history explains Sebald’s melancholic disposition. Mourning the separation of ‘the ancient bond of identity’ between memory and history, his exiled subjects attempt to bridge this gap through intercultural dialogue which opens a space for new shared cultural experiences. In this way, travel thus bridges the gap between subjective memory and collective history whilst drawing attention to the epistemological space between the narrator and his Jewish subject.

These discussions and perambulations, reframing the urban sprawl and its fragmented archival histories into a comprehensible sequence, relates to the linguistic turn in historiography and the will to make, in the words of Nora, ‘the history we are reconstructing equal to the history we have lived’.²¹¹ This relates to a representational form of memory which seeks for a defining ‘difference’ and, in this, the ‘ephemeral spectacle of an unrecoverable identity’.²¹² This ties in with Augé notion of the ‘individualization of references’ as an element of excess in contemporary society which favours ‘factors of singularity’ and identity and denies procedures of ‘de-localisation’ and interrelation.²¹³ This explains why, recalling his sightings

²⁰⁸ Nora, p. 7

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ *TE*, 165

²¹¹ Nora, p. 17

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Augé, p. 40

of freighters on the Manchester Canal in the post-war years, Ferber finds the transience and abstractedness of the ships, appearing out of and vanishing soundlessly into the winter mist, ‘an utterly incomprehensible spectacle which moved me deeply’.²¹⁴ Reflecting Nora’s claim that social memory is now ‘intensely retinal and televisual’, this image of mobility and migration is related directly back to Ferber’s own exilic state; his nostalgia is not so much for a lost home but for a living memory which, as a result of a traumatic childhood displacement, no longer exists. Like Austerlitz, for whom ‘certain moments had no beginning or end’ and who feels ‘as if time did not exist at all’, this clamouring for memory ignites a sense of temporal abstractedness. Ferber feels that ‘time is nothing but a disquiet of the soul’, so that ‘there is neither a past nor a future’.²¹⁵ Instead, his trauma means that ‘the fragmentary scenes’ that haunt him are ‘obsessive in character’.²¹⁶ Thus, it is the resultant complex narrativization of his fragmented memories which makes them comprehensible for both the engaged listener/narrator and in turn the reader.

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As the source of his trauma becomes clearer, Austerlitz comes to realise his exile status: ‘how isolated’ he has always felt ‘among the Welsh as much as among the English and French’.²¹⁷ He is unable therefore to relate to places through normative relations of history and identity. This is symptomatic of Austerlitz’s refusal to learn about German history as an expression of the traumatic blanking-out of the cultural space of National Socialism which, to Austerlitz’s unconscious, was the cause of his parent’s deportation and his exile. On a visit to Nuremberg, he is unable to therefore relate to the city. In the words of Augé, it becomes a place ‘in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense’.²¹⁸ Unlike the travelling, mobile ‘non-place’, which in actual fact is a figurative site of exile that holds meaning for Austerlitz, Nuremberg’s historical identity is abstracted of meaning. Emerging from the underpass of Nuremberg station, he is swept along by a huge crowd of people ‘going in not just one but both directions’.²¹⁹ The stream of people is likened to ‘water in a river bed [...]

²¹⁴ *TE*, 166

²¹⁵ *TE*, 181

²¹⁶ *TE*, 181

²¹⁷ *A*, 177

²¹⁸ Augé, p. 87

²¹⁹ *A*, 315

flowing simultaneously up and downstream'.²²⁰ This metaphor of the river is common in *Austerlitz* where it represents the unstoppable progression of time. In this scene, however, the two-way flow conveys the historical anomaly of the city where Austerlitz cannot relate to the past in any meaningful way. This incongruity arises from Nuremberg as both a historical and personal blank spot; Austerlitz is ignorant of its history, but it was also largely destroyed during the war and so offers few historical traces of the pre-war past. Troubled by the uniformity of Nuremberg, Austerlitz notes how people are dressed 'in general', and, architecturally, he fails to find any 'crooked line' or 'any other trace of past history.'²²¹ Because of this unnerving homogeneity, Nuremberg fails to offer any sense of continuity or identity. Austerlitz hence experiences a recurring sense of disorientation and panic which results in his loss of all sense of time.

This episode reinforces the direct link Austerlitz has with his environment which he relies on as a support of meaning and identity. This contrasts with the site of Liverpool Street station which retains multiple historical narratives and offers a palimpsest of memories which Austerlitz, in his own composite identity, can relate to. Sebald employs again a metaphor of water to represent the movement of people in space: 'innumerable people passed in great tides [...] coming together, moving apart, and being held up at barriers and bottlenecks like water against a weir.'²²² Unlike Nuremberg's abstracted identity, the 'non-place' of Liverpool Street station is dominated by fluidity and transit. Travel thus operates as not only as a mediator but as a symbol of Jewish identity; 'nomadic, meandering, indirect, yet not necessarily lost or abandoned', Sebald's Jewish subjects occupy multiple positions.²²³ Refusing to be assimilated into the 'status quo' and therefore 'disconnected from the history of one's own oppression', they occupy a position in-between the ascribed identity of place and history, and the powerless space of complete expulsion.²²⁴ This marginal, yet critical, position, to quote Grosz, allows access to 'two different kinds of discourse and history, one defined by exclusion [...] and one provided autonomously', and so privileges 'social transgression and renewal.'²²⁵ This brings me onto my final chapter in which I discuss the symbolic function of travel in *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ A, 314

²²² A, 181

²²³ Grosz, p. 69

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

Chapter Three

Travelling Spaces and Symbolic Sites of Trauma

Situated in a tradition of European exile literature, Sebald's travel narratives highlight the necessity of remembering historical injustices on a transnational level.²²⁶ Reflecting on the fact that, as Aleida Assmann writes, 'The Holocaust has left memory traces in virtually every country', these texts rework the immediate post-war discourse of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* by retracing the trauma of the Holocaust beyond the enclosed, monolithic histories of the German *Kulturnation*.²²⁷ In building bridges between traumatic memories, Sebald's exiled narrators deconstruct strictly national histories in favour of plurality and dialogue. In doing so, they extol Said's observation that 'exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience'.²²⁸ Given its ability to deconstruct singular identities and social positions, travel blurs the binary of place and 'non-place', and is therefore employed by Sebald not only as a mediating strategy but also as a symbolic and deconstructive tool which, providing multiple perspectives, gives voice to a variety of historical narratives. Augé, who uses the word 'space' to describe 'the frequentation of places which specifically defines the journey', highlights that 'the traveller's space', given its composite identity and 'coexistence of worlds', 'may be the archetype of non-place'.²²⁹ However, as I argue, this spatial excess is socially enabling for the exile. To quote Augé, 'movement adds the particular experience of a form of solitude and, in the literal sense, of 'taking up a position'.²³⁰ This self-defined solitary position, common amongst all of Sebald's emigrants, permits 'prophetic evocations of spaces in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense'.²³¹ These 'fleeting images' enable 'the observer to hypothesize the existence of a past and glimpse the possibility of a future'.²³² These relational 'placings', in Peter Merriman's critique of Augé, arise through

²²⁶ Assmann (2016); Said

²²⁷ Assmann (2016), p. 223; *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is a specifically German term that refers to the 'working through of the past', especially the history of National Socialism, in literature, society and culture. In literature, this was epitomised by certain 1950s and '60s German writers such as Günter Grass and Alfred Andersch. See W. G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Munich, Carl Hanser, 1999).

²²⁸ Said, p. 185

²²⁹ Augé, pp. 86–7

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

the diverse performances and movements associated with travel.²³³ Thus, rather than lacking identity, travel produces ‘unique assemblages’ and pays attention to the layered and ‘complex histories, geographies and sociologies of such spaces.’²³⁴ Embracing the speculative potential of travel, Sebald’s emigrants journey in order to comprehend their own marginal position, reclaim some sense of autonomy and redefine a history of expulsion and exclusion.

Returning to Sywenky’s notion of ‘memory texts’, the material environment in Sebald’s work represents multi-layered narratives of history which can be retraced through travel, revealing fragments of Jewish cultural memory, disappeared from European soil. These objects operate in a dynamic of absence and presence which speak to the way in which the Jewish exile is ‘splayed between’ cultural assimilation and exclusion, ‘one a tendency towards death, the other a positive movement towards self-production, critical resistance and transformative struggle.’²³⁵ This dialectic explains the fact that travelling spaces are highly symbolic for Sebald’s Jewish exiles. Austerlitz, for example, is compulsively drawn to the Parisian railways, ‘marked’ as they are ‘by both blissful happiness and profound misfortune’.²³⁶ This emotional divide occurs in train stations which symbolise the ambivalent status of post-war Jewish exile identity, bearing both the traumatic traces of deportation and simultaneously the redemptive but also painful memory of exile and refuge. Taking up a ‘position’ therefore in these transitory spaces, the Jewish exile is able to reinterpret the history of dispersion as a productive site of postmemorial dialogue.

This method underscores the importance of representational symbols for reframing Jewish trauma as not rooted in a static historical moment but ambiguously open to new interpretations, contexts and social conditions. In the context of trauma, to use Hirsch’s thinking, Sebald’s referential images thus assume ‘more than just evocative and representational power’, but also ‘symbolic power’.²³⁷ Critiquing Augé’s binary understanding of place and its related historical identities, Sebald shows that these ‘non-places’ are also, in Hirsch’s words, ‘objects of return’.²³⁸ Travel is in fact productive of memory; where it bears witness to signs of loss, this lack enables new symbols to be created in their absence. Following

²³³ Peter Merriman, ‘Driving Places: Marc Augé, Non-places, and the Geographies of England’s M1 Motorway’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21, 4/5 (2004), pp. 145–167, p. 147

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 151–2

²³⁵ Grosz, p. 57

²³⁶ A, 45

²³⁷ Hirsch (2001), p. 15

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

the Judaic tradition, ‘the text does not re-present: instead it generates and creates’.²³⁹ This transposes spaces usually thought of as devoid of identity as heavily symbolic. Paul Bereyter’s narrative in *The Emigrants*, as an example, opens with a photograph looking down the tracks of the railway on which he commits suicide. The railways, which for Paul ‘had always meant a great deal’, operate as a negative ‘lieu de memoire’: the ‘very image and symbol of Paul’s German tragedy’.²⁴⁰ Where it holds traces of Jewish-German history and recalls the deportation of Holocaust victims beyond their *Heimat*, Bereyter’s suicide is emblematic of the destruction of Jewish memory by the Nazis which is felt as a reoccurring trauma. As Grosz writes in regards to Sartre’s work on anti-Semitism, ‘Sartre’s underlying belief is that the Jew will ultimately strive for assimilation, for self-annihilation rather than assimilation by the other.’²⁴¹ Drawing connections to the object of trauma, these spaces emphasise the fact that ‘postmemory is a powerful form of memory’, ‘a dynamic mode of transmission’, rather than just an inert storage place for Holocaust memory.²⁴² This form of memory is ‘mediated not through recollection but through representation’ and can therefore disturb dominant historical forms through determined self-representation.²⁴³

On this note, Hirsch’s theory of postmemory as a dynamic medium can be related to the way in which Sebald employs the motif of travel as a symbolic site of self-creation and annihilation. In the social reality of ‘symbolic spaces and geophysical places’, memory and history overlap.²⁴⁴ As Sywenky observes, these are ‘sites of continuous production of meaning in social practices’ which ‘establish meaningful connections within discourses of memory’.²⁴⁵ This aligns with Nora’s notion of ‘lieux de mémoire’ as symbolic objects which mediate history in social space. These are ‘material, symbolic, and functional [...] created by a play of memory and history, an interaction of two factors that results in their reciprocal overdetermination.’²⁴⁶ As I go on to argue, the communicative space created between Austerlitz, the emigrants and their material environments highlights the fact that, in the words of Nora, ‘memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects’, being, ‘above all, archival. It relies

²³⁹ Grosz

²⁴⁰ *TE*, 61

²⁴¹ Grosz, in Carter et al (eds.) (1993), p. 64

²⁴² Marianne Hirsch, in Elke Heckner, ‘Trauma and Postmemory’, in David Bathrick et al. (eds.), *Visualising the Holocaust: Documents, Aesthetics, Memory* (New York: Camden House, 2012), p. 221

²⁴³ Hirsch (2001)

²⁴⁴ Sywenky, p. 82

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Nora, pp. 18–19

entirely on the materiality of the trace [...] the visibility of the image.’²⁴⁷ This space gives voice to a dynamic of absence and presence, memory and forgetting, which, working ‘both with and against’ Hellenic forms of representation and thought, restages Jewish lieux de mémoire as fluid sites of historical transformation.²⁴⁸

Operating in a dialectic of absence and presence, Sebald represents Jewish cultural memory through material traces such as cemeteries, monuments and depopulated sites of traumatic loss. For Emmanuel Levinas, a Holocaust survivor with a deep concern for the ethics of alterity, the Hebraic is a continual displacement of an ‘original’ [...] not a logocentric philosophy of presence, but an enigmatic concept of endless rewriting, remaking, interpretation and reinterpretation.’²⁴⁹ In Max Ferber’s narrative, from *The Emigrants*, the narrator arrives in Manchester and imagines that the city had ‘long since been deserted, and was left now as a necropolis or mausoleum’.²⁵⁰ The narrator remarks that ‘all that is left to recall the lives of these people is the grid-like layout of the streets’, as a consequence of the municipal clearing of space which empties out the working-class community so that children ‘strayed in small groups [...] as if they had nowhere they could call home’.²⁵¹ These ‘vast spaces’, like the ‘huge halls’ Austerlitz conceives in Liverpool Street station, hold a mythical position in the narrator’s imagination, who sees them as the ‘Elysian Fields’.²⁵² This void is transfigured into an imaginative zone, thereby highlighting the flaws in Augé’s thought that proposes that the space of ‘non-place’ lacks characterisation, being composed of ‘the non-symbolised surfaces of the planet’.²⁵³ Rather than a negative *katabasis*, the narrator’s perambulations through this Chthonic space honours those who have been silenced by history and communes their displaced memories into a symbolic landscape.

Sebald’s interest in ruins and cemeteries as containers of memory is communicated in his walking tours of Manchester with Ferber. This evokes Sebald’s materialist conception of history; where metropolises are framed as labyrinthine places of loss, and ‘nothing is so unambiguously linked to the word *city* as the presence of heaps of rubble, fire-scorched walls, and the gaps in windows through which one could see the vacant air’, the narrator draws attention to the ultimate unknowability of history which poses the question of how to relate to

²⁴⁷ Nora, pp. 9, 13

²⁴⁸ Grosz

²⁴⁹ Levinas, in Grosz, pp. 64, 67

²⁵⁰ *TE*, 151

²⁵¹ *TE*, 157-8

²⁵² *TE*, 157

²⁵³ Augé, p. 82

the absent other.²⁵⁴ This draws attention to the problems of representing historical trauma, and especially Holocaust related trauma, whose evidence has been damaged or destroyed. This can be understood in relation to Daniel Libeskind's work on Jewish history and his 'architecture of trauma'.²⁵⁵ These voids displace traditional coordinates of spatial orientation and refer to the foreclosed potential of the unlived, or 'the trace of the unborn', thereby communicating the Holocaust as a perpetual historical event which cannot be represented in a singular or final way.²⁵⁶ This relation, Libeskind suggests, must be 'informed by a dialectic of absence and presence, a dialectic that is structured by the "destruction of the community and by its real yet also virtual presence."' ²⁵⁷ Sebald's narrator walks amongst the 'one-time Jewish quarter', which had once been a centre for Manchester's large Jewish community until the inter-war years, but finds only 'one single row of empty houses'.²⁵⁸ The dispersion of Jewish communities is written as a Europe-wide phenomenon whose absence the narrator bears witness to in his travels through these voids, thereby translating 'the experience of rupture into a productive engagement with Holocaust memory'.²⁵⁹

This representational strategy can also be seen in Ferber's paintings which are abstract to the point of undecipherability and employ techniques of material layering. The narrator remarks that the artist 'felt closer to dust [...] than to light, air or water'.²⁶⁰ His paintings operate through processes of material accumulation and deterioration, tracing 'a long lineage of grey, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper.'²⁶¹ This ash renders visible the absent Jewish lives in Ferber's family who have been lost as a result of the Holocaust and evokes, on a material level, their ashes, scattered from the Nazi's genocidal chimneys. Later on, the German narrator visits Bad Kissingen's salt-frames and reflects on the water's 'steady mineral transformation'.²⁶² This conveys 'an impenetrable process' which imitates 'the growth patterns of Nature even as it is being dissolved'.²⁶³ Reflecting on processes of writing and erasure, 'obliterated by additions', as perpetual re-

²⁵⁴ *TE*, 30; Elke Heckner, 'Whose Trauma Is It: Identification and Secondary Witnessing in the Age of Postmemory', in Bathrick et al. (eds.), pp. 62–85, p. 63

²⁵⁵ Daniel Libeskind, *The Space of Encounter* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2000), pp. 202–220

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ Libeskind, in Bathrick et al., p. 64

²⁵⁸ *TE*, 157

²⁵⁹ Heckner, in Bathrick et al., p. 64

²⁶⁰ *TE*, 161

²⁶¹ *TE*, 162

²⁶² *TE*, 229

²⁶³ *TE*, 230

presentation, this conclusive image also mediates on dialectical processes of Jewish identity formation.²⁶⁴

These dynamics also operate in lieu de mémoire: ‘mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death’, these ‘only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis’.²⁶⁵ One such example of this in *Austerlitz* is the eponymous Gare d’Austerlitz. This train station is marked out in the narrative by complex associations of history, identity and memory, at the crossroads of national memory and history. Doubly a monument to the Napoleonic wars and the historical site of the deportations of Jews between 1942–44, both ‘lieux de mémoire’ and ‘lieux d’oubli’ in Guy Beiner’s term, the station embodies the silencing of the Holocaust which has been masked by the official memory of the French nation under Napoleon. This is underlined by the haunting similarity of its name with the destination of those deported to Auschwitz. Significantly, Augé identifies Paris as a city where transitory spaces have been raised to the level of landmarks and historical monuments: ‘Roads and crossroads in France [...] tend to become monuments [...] when the names they have been given immense them in history. These incessant references to history cause frequent cross-connections between the notions of itineraries, crossroads and monuments’.²⁶⁶ These connections, writes Augé, are especially clear in Paris, as the French capital where ‘historical references are always more densely encrusted’.²⁶⁷ It is no surprise therefore that Austerlitz chooses to study in Paris where its architecture represents the pinnacle of European modernity, Empire and the interstitial space where history and memory collide. Moreover, it is a city where his parents had travelled, ‘full of the most wonderful events and encounters’, both of whom had a particular fondness for all things French.²⁶⁸ Austerlitz perhaps retains a trace of nostalgia for French culture; he loses his Czech language and retains the French, and, being exiled, settles in this city which recalls his parents’ own émigré status. Moreover, the French capital, in the words of the librarian and friend of Austerlitz’s, Henri Lemoine, retains ‘the various layers which have been superimposed on each other to form the carapace of the city’, a description which recalls Andreas Huyssen’s notion of palimpsest memory which sees urban spaces as memory texts.²⁶⁹ Sebald’s narrative, constructing a plural space of multiple memories, works

²⁶⁴ *TE*, 230

²⁶⁵ Nora, p. 19

²⁶⁶ Augé, p. 69

²⁶⁷ Augé, pp. 69–70

²⁶⁸ *A*, 217

²⁶⁹ *A*, 401; Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003)

against a dominant memory culture by disturbing the relationship between name, identity and place. This ambivalent form of memory represents the ‘unhomely’ condition of the central character who occupies multiple historical points which mark out his ultimately fragmented identity. Pointedly, this narrative feature also works against the uniformity of national memory by elaborating on alternative historical narratives based on subjective, transient memories and witness testimony which all point towards, but fail to identify or name, the ultimate site of trauma – *Auschwitz*.

Retaining only the fragmentary traces of a forgotten history, the Gare d’Austerlitz is not a real ‘lieu de mémoire’, but merely a ‘lieu d’histoire’, its historical traces covered up and silenced by uniformity.²⁷⁰ These sites, in contrast to lieu de mémoire, are detached from a society’s intentional memory culture and are reinvigorated in Austerlitz through movement and dialogue as a mediator between invention, memory and historical objectivity.²⁷¹ Sebald’s characters both rely on, and play off, the tradition of verity and reportage in historical writing, projecting their own highly subjective memories onto these largely abstract spaces. It is in this interplay of invention and history, via the medium of physical space, that Sebald returns memory to a living, vital milieu or mobile community. Importantly, it is in these forgotten spaces, devoid of living memory and people, that Austerlitz connects with his own silenced personal memories. Whilst searching for the traces of his vanished father, presumably murdered at Gurs during the war, Austerlitz explores the depopulated Gare d’Austerlitz in Paris and imagines he is coming closer to his father. Changing trains at the Gare d’Austerlitz, Austerlitz comes precariously close to discovering the lost memory of his family, but they remain forever out of reach. He experiences a ‘premonition that he was coming closer to his father’, and, ‘in the unusual silence’ of the station due to a railway strike, an idea comes to him of his father’s leaving Paris from this station [...] soon after the Germans entered the city.’²⁷² This speculative history, whilst a product of the imagination, uses memory and the fragmentary knowledge Austerlitz has of his father’s biography to construct a subjective image of the past whose historical accuracy is irrelevant. As Austerlitz relates to the narrator, ‘I felt [...] as if my father were still in Paris and just waiting, so to speak, for a good opportunity to reveal himself. Such ideas infallibly come to me in places which have more of the past about them than the present.’²⁷³ As orphan and exile, the presence of the past is felt by Austerlitz all the more

²⁷⁰ Nora, p. 19

²⁷¹ Nora, p. 19

²⁷² Sebald, p. 405

²⁷³ A, 359

strongly where it offers a potential link to his disappeared family, *Heimat* and/or identity. This textual strategy is a recurrent one in Sebald's work, whereby narrative distance and implicit references to an invisible object or history keep his narrator from discovering an absolute truth, which perhaps does not exist. This mode of postmodern textuality constructs the past as a constantly evasive object of study that is informed and deformed by our own imaginations and plural subjectivities.

When Austerlitz is taken to the Salpêtrière Hospital after suffering a nervous breakdown he is symbolically situated in-between the Jardin des Plantes and the Gare d'Austerlitz, or life and death. He visualises himself:

[...] wandering around a maze of long passages, vaults, galleries and grottoes where the names of various Métro stations – Campo Formio, Crimée, Elysée, Iéna, Invalides, Oberkampf, Simplon, Solferino, Stalingrad – and certain discolorations and shadings in the air, seemed to indicate that this was a place of exile for those who had fallen on the field of honour.²⁷⁴

His sense of exile and disorientation is communicated by these 'non-places' that refer to various historical sites unified in a contrived and oppressive system of spatial organisation that evokes the Paris Métro. As Augé writes, 'anyone who regularly takes the Métro [...] its station names echoing the streets or monuments on the surface, experiences a sort of mechanized daily immersion in history that conditions Parisians to think of Alésia, Bastille and Solferino as spatial landmarks rather than historical references.'²⁷⁵ On the level of this contrived spatialisation, where history is reduced to the level of signs on a map, the traveller is doubly removed from history, firstly as monument (or 'lieu de mémoire') and, secondly, as event. As Nora writes, 'all lieux de mémoire are objects mises en abîme' with 'a double identity' that 'enables us to map [...] a set of limits', thus defining a relationship between past and present.²⁷⁶ Significantly, these French 'lieux de mémoire' all refer to historical events that have become homogenised under the centralised system of national memory where its most emphatic representation is in the capital city. As the defining factor of a national history, many of these monuments refer to historical battles and, like Austerlitz himself, their composite historical identity suggests a recurring mise-en-abyme. The significance of the name 'Austerlitz' has

²⁷⁴ A, 376

²⁷⁵ Augé, p. 69

²⁷⁶ Nora, p. 20

multiplied in this way over history, firstly a town in the Czech lands, then the site of a Napoleonic battle, and finally the name given to a Parisian train station where, between 1942-44, Jewish deportees were taken to various ghettos or concentration camps. This framing of history distances Austerlitz from his own identity where each historical reference leads to an invisible horizon.

This is emphatically conveyed in the last episode of the narrative where Austerlitz discovers the site of the old Austerlitz-Tolbiac storage ghetto.²⁷⁷ This ghettoization of Jewish possessions, a determined eradication of Jewish cultural memory in Paris, is reclaimed by Austerlitz as he walks through the ‘wastelands between the marshalling yard of the Gare d’Austerlitz and the Pont Tolbiac’.²⁷⁸ This marginal, ‘half-deserted area between the Gare d’Austerlitz and the Quai d’Austerlitz’, where a ‘cold mist’ has descended, is another liminal ‘non-place’. However, in this final narrative sequence, Austerlitz is not a solitary traveller, but with a female companion, Marie de Verneuil. These two figures slowly ‘find their way’ among abandoned dockyards and the uninhabited, disused spaces between the fixed locales of the quay and the station. In a surreal encounter, they discover the Bastiani Travelling Circus. This pop-up space hosts a musical troupe that plays ‘extraordinarily foreign nocturnal music’ to ‘a tiny audience, drawn from heaven knows where’.²⁷⁹ Amongst these strangers, Austerlitz hears ‘Welsh hymns [...] the revolutions of a waltz, a ländler theme, or the slow sound of a funeral march’.²⁸⁰ In the words of Alphonso Fitzpatrick, one of Austerlitz’s many father figures, these fleeting resonances kindle ‘our deepest feelings’.²⁸¹ This experience, recalling Benjamin’s notion of temporary *Einsicht*, concludes Austerlitz’s story with symbolic depth and meaning. His composite experiences fuse into unfathomable emotions, and he is unsure whether his ‘heart was contracting in pain or expanding with happiness for the first time in my life.’²⁸² Projecting his worldly experience onto the migrant, marginal site of the circus community, his heterogeneous identity becomes deeply affective. In this ephemeral community, situated between two immobile, delineated sites, Austerlitz feels for a moment at home. This framing of experience, in-between concreteness and consciousness, subject and object, both indoors and out, maintains Austerlitz’s distant horizon of assured identity. However, to quote Morley

²⁷⁷ In French, ‘Les Galeries d’Austerlitz’, A, 403

²⁷⁸ A, 401

²⁷⁹ A, 383

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ A, 132

²⁸² Ibid.

and Robins once more, when communities are uprooted, these ‘expanding horizons’ are essential for migrant self-understanding, where ‘home’ might materialise in the most unexpected places.²⁸³

Conclusion

Impossible Homecomings

To reconfigure slightly then Morley’s suggestion that ‘places are no longer the clear supports of identity’, we might say that ‘non-places’ are in fact the clear supports of exile identity. With this in mind, Sebald’s texts retrace the undefinable complexities of Jewish exile identity through the use of travel as a similarly multifarious mode of rewriting. Though this mode, as I have maintained, certain binaries are deconstructed that communicate the ultimate ambivalence of Jewish exile identity, its history of trauma, and the fluctuating positions of ‘home’. In the travelling circus, Sebald carries this mobility into the concrete world of contemporary society. From this marginal perspective, the émigré traveller’s relationship to the near and the elsewhere, home and belonging, shifts precariously; they become, themselves ‘a liminal figure’.²⁸⁴ As Edwards and Grauland perceptively write, standing on the borders between ‘subject and object [...] it is in this context that “home” is neither a lost presence for which the traveller longs nor a place outside discourse.’²⁸⁵ Discursively speaking, Sebald affirms that places, their identity and their relations, rely on exchange, a method that ‘unsettles empathy’ and returns historical agency to the exiled subject.²⁸⁶ As a writer embroiled in the unwritten, unrooted histories of Europe, Sebald’s untimely death in 2001 left a legacy of remembrance, reminding his readers that memory, and its meaningfulness, in fact relies on displacement, marginality and fluidity. Failing to return home, Sebald’s Jewish exiles show that this trauma is constantly being displaced and reframed, and cannot therefore be sealed-off, well defined or conclusively worked-through. Following Sebald’s method, I hope that this dissertation might be merely the beginning of a productive and boundless journey into further personal research on Jewish exile identity as open to processes of social and historical transformation.

²⁸³ Morley and Robins, in (eds.) Carter, Donald and Squires, p. 5

²⁸⁴ Edwards and Grauland, p. 120

²⁸⁵ Edwards and Grauland, p. 120

²⁸⁶ LaCapra

On these grounds, whilst the four narratives in *The Emigrants* describe an unredeemable *katabasis*, or journey into death or madness, *Austerlitz* is able to redeem the memory of Jewish exile in a decidedly ‘postmodern’ lost-and-found narrative.²⁸⁷ Whilst some critics have seen this as ‘a form of nostalgic foreclosure which runs counter to the demands of the Holocaust genre’, this, as I have hopefully shown, in fact distinguishes Austerlitz from his German counterpart in recovering some sense of Jewish historical agency.²⁸⁸ From this perspective, rather than merely uncanny and disorientating, the journey can be seen as a source of inspiration and creativity and Austerlitz’s primary tool in discovering his origins, coming to terms with loss and retracing a traumatic history. Sebald’s literary journeys thus bring the ethical discourse of psychological *Trauerarbeit* emphatically into the present, providing their reader with an enduring legacy of remembrance.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Zilcosky (2006); Cosgrove (2006)

²⁸⁸ Cosgrove (2011), p. 197; Brad Prager, ‘The Good German as Narrator’, *New German Critique*, 96 (2005), pp. 75–102; Mary Cosgrove, ‘Narrating German suffering in the shadow of Holocaust victimology: W. G. Sebald and contemporary trauma theory’, in S. Taberner and K. Berger (eds.), *Germans as Victims in the Literary Fiction of the Berlin Republic* (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), pp. 162–76

²⁸⁹ Cosgrove (2006)

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