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Dislocations of Memory: (post)modern narrative

1. Postmodernism and the hypertext

Many a scholar claim that our present age is marked by a gradual loss of cultural memory due to the technical devolution of the acts of recalling[1]. As Edward J. Casey puts it, nicely summarising a complex story, "we have turned over responsibility for remembering to the cult of the computers, which serve as our modern mnemonic idols. The force of the remembered word in oral traditions […] has given way to the inarticulate hum of the disk drive. Human memory has become self-externalized: projected outside the rememberer himself or herself and into non-human machines. These machines, however, *cannot remember;* what they can do is to record, store, and retrieve information—which is only part of what human beings do when they enter into a memorious state. The memory of things is no longer in ourselves, in our own discerning and interpreting, but in the calculative wizardry of computers. If computers are acclaimed as creations of our own devising, they remain—whatever their invaluable utility—most unsuitable citadels of memory, whose "fields and spacious palaces" (in St. Augustine's phrase) they cannot begin to contain or to replicate. […] Computers can only collect and order the reduced residues, the artfully formatted traces, of what in the end must be reclaimed by human beings in order to count as human memories. In this respect, *our memories are up to us.* But for the most part and ever increasingly, we have come to disclaim responsibility for them."[2] In fact, in the successive stages of writing, printing and electronic word- processing, we have gradually entrusted a significant part of our memory to technical reproduction, triggering a far reaching modification in our whole psychic economy: memory, imagination, intellect and feeling. This by now pervasive interaction with machines modifies the processes of our mind and in particular, for our present concern, those of literary and artistic reproduction. The instruments used for the retrieval, selection and storage of data, not only influence the messages and codes of a given culture but also create dominant metaphorical fields, within which thought locates and evolves. Rhetorical figures, tropes and *topoi* of a given historical language are dependent on the technical manipulation of experience (present, past, future, possible). This was the case, for long time, of the master trope of *the book of the world*, inside of which the collective imagination of literary civilisation has unfolded for many a hundred years. Drastically simplifying this complex matter, I am surmising that this present, so-called postmodern, phase of civilisation is shaped by the instrument/model of the *networked hypertext*, translating technical reproduction from the field of objects to that of symbols, and radically changing the modes of literary invention and disposition.

Intuitively we all know what a hypertext is, but it may be useful briefly to define it, starting out from the notion of text that is most congenial to us as still children of the literary civilisation. A text is linear, bounded and fixed; in relation to this, we can define the hypertext as "...." The new way of perceiving a text as an image on the computer screen brings in fact the graphic sign into a different dimension from that of the printed page and changes both the practice of writing and that of reading. We can say that we are presently in the way of moving from a rhetoric that is

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[1] See for instance, Yates 1966, chapter XVII; Nora 1984, pp. XVII-XLVII; Steiner 2002, chapter V.
[2] Casey, 1987, p 2.

prevalently *typographical* to one that is rather *topographical*, aiming firstly at the positioning of textual chunks in a whole discursive frame, and that as a result of this the places of our literary memory and imagination are changing.

2. Memory and dislocation

Memory by its very nature involves the possibility of dislocating experience[3]. In the act of recollection, in fact, an event is removed from its original space-time co-ordinates and re-located in our present living experience. The event thus recollected is, so to speak, duplicated in its space-time identity: it holds inside it temporal distance as part of its significance for the thinking subject. This also implies that the recollected event contains an index of meaning that goes beyond the mere immediate experience. Recollection amounts in fact at incipient reflection. In an impersonal and linguistic perspective, we might say that a memory contains a metaphorical index. It may be considered as a temporal metaphor: memory is to the perception of an event as metaphor is to the letter of a text. The imagery inherent in all language and thought, the capacity of bringing together distant semantic fields, works on a memorial ground.

Space and time obviously constitute the a priori conditions of all experience[4]. If it is true, therefore, that memory (in the sense of the retrieval of an event in time) is always linked to a *composition of place*, it is also true that the particular mode of translation of an object from one semantic field to another, that is each single figure of speech in a given field of discourse, expresses a form of temporality that is accessible to a given culture in a given phase of its development. Acts of recollection are essentially analogous to figurative speech acts. The characteristic *topoi* of a certain genre of discourse or of a culture as a whole are none other than points of intersection between ways of remembering and figures of language; places in which the significance of the speech act manifests its inherence into the temporality of the human being. On the premise of the recurrence of these cultural *topoi*, one can hope to grasp the entire map of a culture through the perusal of a partial section, that is of one of its documents. In *fictional narrative* (which represents action in a whole figure of discourse) the imagination creates semantic fields under a temporal index; in other words, in avoiding making reference to facts that have happened and in bracketing the whole question of truth, it shows the workings of *active memory* (memory as *vis*), by the same token of bracketing the truth of object-memory (memory as *res*). Fiction in fact implies a temporal distension of the metaphorical tension of language. It linguistically instanciates that *distensio animi* which is a possibility inherent in our being in time. This is why storytelling will probably never die. However, in each single age it is subject to a series of constraints and possibilities, mostly dictated by the material conditions of our existence, among which the instruments of the technical reproduction of goods and messages stand out. The technical equipment of the present age, and the figurative range that derives from it, can be summed up, in my view, in the dominant metaphor of the hypertext as the mnemo-technical index of the postmodern age.

Some of the co-implications of memory and material techniques of reproduction I have just outlined appear in a concrete and effective form in the work of Winfried Georg Sebald, and in particular in *The Emigrants*, which I now shall briefly examine.

3. Landscapes and links of memory

Sebald's work is a narrative dealing on one hand with the dislocation of memory and on the other with the material link between text and image. It is difficult to attribute this work to a precise narrative genre, above all because it is collocated in a middle space half way between the photographic and the typographical medium, but also because the

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[3] Casey 1987, pp.182 ff.
[4] Kant, 1997, Part I, *Transcendental Aesthetics*.

four biographies it is made up of turn out in the end to be part of the one fictional autobiography of the narrator. The protagonists represent four different types of German Jewish emigrants: a doctor explorer, a school master, a highly placed butler and an introverted and genial painter. They also represent four types of repining memory, four ways of tentative escape, and four styles of life, which the narrator retraces through embedding, interventions, montages, changes of perspective, and still shots, making use of various testimonies and documents - family albums, notebooks, diaries, pictures and mementos – in his effort of reconstructing a composite memory out of which the meaning of individual lives can be drawn. More than anything else, this inquiry uses photographs that serve as *lieux de memoire*[5], but also as frames, on which the narrative is articulated. Here, the image functions as the fulcrum of memory and as the material link of the whole narrative rather than as a simple ornament or illustration of the text.

Let us take, for example, the initial image of the first of the four episodes that make up the story: " it did not take us long to find the house the agents had described. One of the largest in the village, it stood a short distance from the church with its grassy graveyard, Scots pines and yews, up a quiet side street." $I1^6$ (3)[7] We have here a landscape of the memory that develops out of a snapshot, the picture of a country cemetery that takes on a symbolic value, since the story eventually concludes with a symmetrical photo, a newspaper cutting showing the body of a mountain climber brought to light after decades in a glacier. The climber was someone known to Dr. Swewlyn, the protagonist of the story, and the narrator has just learnt of the man's death. The theme of the story is the unearthing of the dead, the coming and going between past and present; the cemetery-glacier of memory in which figures of the past are buried deep, and sometimes by chance they are returned to us with their sharp glassy profile. This is like Sebald's prose, which cuts like a scalpel into the scarred deposit of collective memory, impressing in the rough path it takes angular diamond-clear figures of migrating lives and of wounded memories, memories that gather and depart from the images inserted into the text, in a sort of pulsation, of mysterious, hidden, morainic algorithm of a mind in search of the common meaning of separate experiences.

In Sebald's stories, the memory that brings us together is always indirect and filtered by a number of witnesses, in a play of refractions that makes it possibly meaningful and bearable to us. It is the filter of these intersecting memories that allows the shape of the destiny of the protagonists to show through, as happens in the case of the reconstruction of the life of the schoolmaster Paul Berayter, through the accounts of his French friend Lucy Landau, the key witness of the second episode.

As the first episode closes, the second one opens with a suicide, the ensuing newspaper account and the photograph of the railway track where it took place. (27) $I2$ The newspaper story only in passing mentions the deep reasons for what happened: at the time of the Third Reich the Jewish teacher was forced to leave the school where he taught. The narrator traces the design of that life, between the trauma and the death, a design that is revealed at the end in the dual aspect of a map of the railway depot (62) $I2$ and of the reported occasional witty remark of Berayter's uncle's ("that he would end up on the railways": 62) that expresses the hidden meaning of the protagonist's life. Destiny as graphics and as oracle. Bend in the road and turn of phrase.

In this way, the initial *scene* of the suicide, the railway track that has always obsessed the mind of Paul Berayter, with its suggestive and partial perspective, is resolved at the end in the skeletal *map* of the station representing

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[5] Cfr. Nora 1984, p. XVII.
[6] With "I" plus number, in the text, I shall refer to a few images in Sebald's book I am going to show during my talk.
[7] Sebald 2002. The numbers in brackets in the text refer to the pages of this edition.

the graphic of a destiny marked by an obsession with the railways (symbols of a prefigured track) that gradually took possession of the mind of the persecuted Jewish schoolmaster: " Railways had always meant a great deal to him – perhaps he felt they were headed for death. Timetables and directories, the logistics of railways, had at times become an obsession with him, as his flat in S showed. I can still see the Marklin model railway he had laid out on a deal table in the spare north-facing room: to me it is the very image and symbol of Paul's German tragedy. " (61) The interplay of scene and map, which supports the whole imaginative framework of the story, is however anticipated in a dazzling alpine landscape described again in the words of the French friend of the protagonist, Lucy Landau: "Clearest of all, though, were the memories of their outing […] up Montrond, from the summit of which she had gazed down for an eternity at Lake Geneva and the surrounding country, which looked considerably reduced in size, as if intended for a model railway. The tiny features below, taken together with the gentle mass of Montblanc towering above them, the Vanoise glacier almost invisible in the shimmering distance, and the Alpine panorama that occupied half the horizon, had for the first time in her life awoken in her a sense of the contrarieties that are in our longings." 45

It is in fact the idea of predestination as trace, imprinting, memorative orientation that is incarnated in the narrator's archaeological dig, which cuts out and sews together the partial memories of its witnesses[8]. Destiny here appears as the composition of some innocuous and casual suggestion of childhood that sediments in the memory until the painful events and traumas of life (Nazi persecution in this case) transform it into an inevitable end: " Paul told me that as a child he had once spent his summer holidays in Lindau, and had watched from the shore every day as the trains trundled across from the mainland to the island and from the island to the mainland. The white clouds of steam in the blue air, the passengers waving from the windows, the reflection in the water - this spectacle, repeated at intervals, so absorbed him that he never once appeared on time at the dinner table all that holiday, a lapse that his aunt responded to with a shake of the head that grew more resigned every time, and his uncle with the comment that he would end up on the railways." (62) This oracular sentence and the final comment that follows give us the cypher of the story, in the elusive and epiphanic link between memory and presentiment of death: " I suppose I did not immediately see the innocent meaning of Paul's uncle's expression, *end up on the railways*, and it struck me as darkingly foreboding. The disquiet I experienced because of that momentary failure to see what was meant – I now sometimes feel that at that moment I beheld an image of death – lasted only a very short time, and passed over me like the shadow of a bird in flight. " (63) The anamnestic inquiry has transformed the initial scene of the crucial event, the suicide of the protagonist, into the graphic of his destiny.

Sebald's investigation is one that uncovers indirect relationships; a torch that illuminates on a slant, like a ray of sun between the clouds, lighting up outlines and figures. Sideways, slant, translucid, black and white pictures, cuts of memory. Precise, delicate, nuanced. But without colours, all black and white. And without sounds: in a total attention to the echoes of the past. A composition of place, a spiritual exercise. Calligraphy matching photography. The noise and fury of the world subdued in this pondered play of media. No relation of direct filiation between the people or between the events of the various episodes, but a web of memories that intersect on different planes, like unexpected vistas opening up by the clicking of a *link*. Hypertextual and hypermedial memory. Like in the reconstruction of the life of an uncle who emigrated to America, of whom the narrator at the beginning of the third episode shows "barely any recollection." (67) Ambrose Adelwarth, adventurous and impeccable man of the world, whose life is marked by the intimate and perhaps morbid friendship with the bizarre son of a Jew magnate of American finance. He is a person of

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[8] Agazzi (2003), in her book on German post-war narrative, rightly insists on the heuristic value of Sebald's memorative quest.

whom the narrator has a few vague recollections, of when for instance this uncle used to visit him as a child in a town without a name in Germany. The mythical figure of his uncle remains linked in the narrator's mind to the American dream of his youth, to a fabulous America, which in his adult years he decides to visit again. The reconstruction of the life of this uncle and of the circumstances of his death in a mental asylum coincides in fact with the deconstruction of the narrator's mythical adolescent vision of America. If anyone were to think that the digging into the memory and the testimony of the past imply here only the denouncement of the crimes of Nazism, and not also of those of present-day consumer society, they would have failed to grasp the meaning and value of Sebald's work (cf. for example p. 105), which consists, especially in this episode, in a demystification of the American which, by contrast, allows the narrator to delineate his identity as a European Jew. To this end, the narrator visits the rest of his relations in the USA and through their testimonies, those of a doctor at the mental asylum, and the examination of a diary belonging to his uncle that he comes into possession of, he eventually reconstructs the traits of this mysterious and reserved character and the unusual circumstances of his life, gradual alienation and painful death (as a result of the electric shock treatment) in a mental asylum. The link between photograph and text, which is always structural in Sebald's narrative, here becomes thematic, and of particular salience in this episode are *the photographs that portray texts*, as for example in the case of the uncle Adelwarth's elegant leather-bound diary containing an account, written in shorthand and full of gaps, of his travels in the fabulous East (Jerusalem, Turkey, the banks of the Dead Sea, etc.) (127) I3   This image is also a symbol of the material support of literary memory (short-hand, incomplete, fable-like), that is nearby here revealed to us by some photos of the open diary, which somehow add up to the photographic archaeology of Sebald's narrative: (132) I4 This is a note on the residue of fantastic suggestion of a literariness that is laid bare and transfigured, preceded by the comment of the narrator: " The route they took from Constantinople can be followed very closely from the diary notes, despite the fact that they are farther apart now, and at times stop altogether." (135) I5 And the cypher of this story consists precisely in the gloss in the margin of a place of memory and of identity (fetish, relic, object, *lieu de memoire*): in the photograph of one of Ambrose's calling cards, with a few hand written words containing a message for his niece as for his final decision to retire; his choice to be shut away in a mental asylum in Ithaca, in New England, where he was to end his days. "I have gone to Ithaca. Yours ever. Ambrose". (103) I6 The calling card thus takes on an ontological quality. It shows us the place of memory as that which allows us to sense the frame of Adelwarth's destiny; it presents itself as a snapshot around which the whole account of the event by a cousin of the narrator unfolds: " One morning when I went out to Mamoroneck, Uncle Adelwarth was gone. In the mirror of the hall stand he had stuck a visiting card with a message for me, and I have carried it with ever since. " (103) Here we can sense the full significance of Sebald's poetic of multimedial framing, exploiting the play of text and image, in order to convey the process of foundation and deposit (*Gestell*)[9] of shared memory as it unfolds between the trauma of the event reported and the constraints of the technique it uses and by which it is shaped.

Sebald's is an impersonal and sober elegy that contains a quiet but no less effective denouncement of the responsibilities not only of Nazism, as the exceptional event, but also of the unbridled free market as its ordinary practice of the banality of evil, as the material basis of the degradation of the human mind and of its environment that are shown, for example, in the fourth episode, in the glimpses we are given of post-industrial Manchester, " anthracite coloured Manchester, the city from which industrialization had spread across the entire world, displayed the clearly

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[9] See Heidegger 1977.

chronic process of its impoverishment and degradation to anyone who cared to see. " (156) Where " whole square kilometres of working-class homes had been pulled down by the authorities, so that, once the demolition rubble had been removed, all that was left to recall the lives of thousand people was the grid-like layout of the streets." (157) A vast desolate expanse of waste that appears to the narrator as a modern reversal of the Elysian Fields, (158) I7 traversed only by bands of children roaming like tormented souls with nowhere to go.

City of industrial residues that come to coincide with the debris of memory[10] in a vast fresco of neglect, squalor and alienation, in which postmodern architecture, like a melting-pot of waste, refuse and *maquillage,* becomes the indicator of a whole phase of civilisation[11], in which the violence of the new, the uncontrollability of our collective destiny and the planetary risk we are sensing, are compensated by a complacent and indiscriminate historicism which cancels the sense of history and resolves it in the reconstruction of places that combine accuracy of detail and deadness of atmosphere.

Sebald's poetic denounces the posthumous condition in which we now find ourselves; the diffuse and impalpable sensation of having arrived too late, in a world that has undergone some damage we are not able to locate and heal. He does this through an investigation of personal memories, and through a radical collage of texts and photographs, pictures from an archive that is no longer only paper but also multimedial, electronic, ubiquitous and phantasmatic. The archive of of postmodern narrative invention that alongside the registers of the hysterical and camp sublime, made in USA, will count this other more subdued and decidedly European register of a painful memory marked by open and incurable traumas, which preclude innocence, initiative and *joie de vivre*. A catatonic sublime, a quiet lucid folly in which rhetorical *inventio, dispositio* and *elocutio*, elegant, punctilious and precise turns of phrase, aim at the disconsolate definition of a collective memory in which the banality of evil precludes the sense of an active life and a taste for it.

If on one hand this text is a monument to the aching Jewish and European cultural memory, on the other it is a masterly exercise in hypertextual rhetoric, opening up oblique breaches of abandoned Elysian Fields and squeezing in the re-visitation of a family album the epitaph of the whole literary civilisation

The degraded and mortiferous space of consumer society, the "glacis around the heart of the city" (158), gravitates inexorably, in the last episode, towards the empty, silent centre of its representation, the studio of the painter Max Ferber, where he obstinately redesigns landscapes of collective memory, leaving a mass of debris, dust, residue; a sediment of colours that accumulates endlessly in this black hole of the reproduction of the real in the civilisation of the image: " the entire furniture was advancing, millimetre by millimetre, upon the central space where Ferber had set up his easel in grey light that entered through a high north-facing layered with the dust of decades. […] the floor was covered with a largely

hardened and encrusted deposit of droppings, mixed with coal dust, several centimetres thick at the centre and thinning towards the outer edges, in places resembling the flow of lava. " (161) This is also the centre of the memory of the text, attracting inexorably to itself all the images and all the recollections that become rough material for the tireless work of the painter (the alter ego of the autobiographical narrator), who for twenty years has scrupulously and uselessly pursued trajectories of images that slip away, in an attempt to give meaning to his past: " This, said Ferber, was the true product of his continuing endeavours and the most palpable proof of his failure. […] the debris generated by painting and the dust that continuously fell and which, as he was coming to realize, he loved more than everything else in the world. He

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[10] See Assmann 1999.
[11] See Jameson 1984.

felt closer to dust, he said, than to light, air or water. There was nothing he found so unbearable as a well-dusted house, and he never felt

More at home than in places where things remained undisturbed, muted under the grey, velvety sinter left when matter dissolved, little by little, into nothingness. " (161)

"Dust", "sinter" are the results of Ferber's effort, but these terms connote also Sebald's work: a poetic of fine dust that, disturbed by the torch of memory searching in the lofts of the past, suddenly comes alive forming ephemeral trajectories, relics of lives that are no longer or that never were, just like an old black and white newsreel film where live shots are put alongside repertory pictures to form optional versions of reality. It is in the image of silt, to which all landscapes of memory are eventually reduced, that Sebald's *topos* of emigration encounters, for example, the apparently antithetical *topos* of "the land reclamation", as a survival strategy of memory, developed by Graham Swift in *Waterland*. And it is also reminiscent of the dense, ghost ridden, bogs of Seamus Heaney: quicksand, reserve and infrastructure (*Gestell*), layout of our memory in an age of indiscriminate production of consumer goods and inorganic waste.

The postmodern world of silt, of the thrash of consume and throw-away society, of the deposit/reserve of products of technological violence on our environment, which is so well represented in the metaphor of salt sediment, of inorganic residue, is the object of Sebald's inquiry. This is carried out in the protagonist-narrator's visit to the salt-frames, which constitutes the final destination of his entire journey of memory and of writing: the visit to a crumbling spa resort, where Farber's parents, victims of the Nazis' persecution, once used to go on holidays, and where the salt residue now encrusted on the buildings manifests the coincidence of nature and technology, in the inorganic residue. (228, 229) I8,

I9 The narrative caption goes as follows: " Mineral water raised by a cast-iron pumping station was running down them, and collecting in a though under the frame. " (228) But in these snapshots of the spa establishment all the valences of the term "frame" come to life, particularly those inherent to the field of photography and of the use of photography in the text: " mound, scaffold, construction, constitution, structure, chassis, size, bodywork, order, system of reference, set of standards, plan, attitude, disposition, frame of mind, mood, case, border, edge, photo framing, photogram, setting, scene, angle, viewpoint." They are all meanings that connote both the undertaking of memory and that of narrative, and give a metaphysical meaning to these final images. They define the existential commitment of the narrator, as well as that of the painter Ferber, as a work continually effacing itself in the way of its accomplishment, a desperate enterprise issuing in a residue of dust or salt that is the result of a continuous rewriting of memory, a continuous in-organic exhaustion in which the working of nature, technology and art collaborate in "finishing" the fluid scenario of the world: " I […] immersed myself in the sight and sound of that theatre of water, and in ruminations about the long term and (I believe) impenetrable process which, as the concentration of salts increases in the water, produces the very strangest of petrified or crystallized forms, imitating the growth patterns of nature even as it is being dissolved. " (230) "Silt" is the issue of this "theatre of water" and the common denominator of both the theatre and the book of memory in our postmodern era in which the care and worry for technology shape the destiny of the West.

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Memory Process - retrieve information. It involves three domains: encoding, storage, and retrieval. Visual, acoustic, semantic. Recall and recognition. Sensory memory stores incoming sensory information in detail, but only for a fraction of a second. The capacity of sensory memory is very large, but the information in it is unprocessed. Short-Term Memory. Some of the information in sensory memory transfers to short-term memory. Any account of modern art that leaves. pound or contradictory images demands at least as great an. such a manifold tendency out is incomplete, just as any that. Dislocation, therefore, implies calculated shifts of loca. ronment, inhospitable to the lived forms he collects and. tion and point of viewand the indirect collaboration of artist. his work survivesonly in memory or in photographs. Besides. 3. "David Hammons," by Kellie Jones, RealLifeMagazin(eAutumn 1986),p. 4. â€˜Oblivious silenceâ€™ and its corollary â€˜latent memoriesâ€™ represent certain stories that were marginalized and ultimately obliterated from the collective memories of the organisation as the charity underwent a period of steep organisational restructuring. After delineating the particular organisational situation at HCH, the research further establishes links between the process of professionalization and the various mechanisms through which oblivious silence is produced. Finally, the implications of oblivious silence on workersâ€™ self-narrative and identity are theorized. Discover the world' MARTELLA, G. Dislocations of Memory: (post)modern narrative, Urbino: University of Urbino 51. PETERSEN, R. Memory and Cultural Schema. Linking Memory to Political Action In: Memory and World War II. SKULTANS, V. The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and memory in post-Soviet Latvia, London: Routledge, 1998 57. SIMPSON, M. Dying, death and grief; a critically annotated bibliography and source book of thanatology and terminal care. London & New York: Plenum Press, 1979 58. VINCENT, G. A History of Secrets. In: PROST, A.; and VINCENT, G. A History of Private Life. V. Riddles of Identity in Modern Times. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvsrd University Press, 1991, 640p. 59. WALTER, T. Modern Death: Taboo or not Taboo?.