

# Some Remarks upon the Memorial Writing of W. G. Sebald

## A Ricœurian Approach

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In two well-known passages from Paul Ricœur's work (Ricœur 1990b, 187; 2006, 260), the author proposes approaching memorial writing of the Holocaust not necessarily in the same terms as historiography. On the basis of these passages, the aim of this article is to further explore Ricœur's intuition by suggesting a comparison with the prose of a contemporary author who intentionally seeks to create a hybrid between history and fiction: W. G. Sebald. Although Sebald never considered himself a novelist, his writing explicitly addresses the challenge of representing trauma, particularly in relation to the Holocaust. This article applies Ricœur's insights on the function of the productive imagination and the effect on the reader to Sebald's fragmentary style of writing. My thesis, derived from this application, insists on viewing memory in the face of horror and trauma not as something merely representational, but as a dynamic process we actively engage in, highlighting Ricœur's emphasis on the role of reader in shaping our understanding of the past.

*To Laura, who finished it.  
To my reading club, who started it.*

### Problematization

According to Ricœur (1990b, 180–92), recognizing narrated time means recognizing an intersection between historical and fictional intentionality. However, it is important to recognize that Ricœur does

not want to overlap them in order to show their reciprocity. As *Time and Narrative* states, the historian continues to look for evidence, while the novelist does not. Theoretically speaking, historians do not require in advance a “reading pact”, as the novelist does (1990b, 163; 2006, 276). As trivial as it may sound, Ricœur well states that the act of reading a novel requires a reader who relies *in advance* on the writer's intentions: we simply do not expect a documentary proof of what is written within the novel. Surely, one can discuss a *posteriori* if the declared (or inferred) intentions of the writer have been effectively accomplished; but at the beginning of our reading, we do not have any other choice than that of giving a minimum of reliability to the intentions of the writer—minimally about whether that story is worth telling.

On the contrary, a history book does not require the reader to trust the writer's intentions *in advance*. Certainly, we may discuss *a posteriori* if the intentions of the historian have been accomplished—as we should have done for those of the novelist—but the crux of the matter remains that reading a history book means *a priori* relying on the documentary proof that a

historian brings to the attention of the reader. Ricœur clearly states this point:

The question of reliability is to the fictional narrative what documentary proof is to historiography. It is precisely because novelists have no material proof that they ask readers to grant them not only the right to know what they are recounting or showing but to allow them to suggest an assessment, an evaluation of the main characters. (Ricœur 1990b, 162)

Since *Time and Narrative I*,<sup>1</sup> Ricœur thinks that maintaining a “critical distance” is precisely what distinguishes a historian from a narrator: documentary evidence should remain the main character of a historical research (1990b, 181–92). In other words, historical and fictional narrative maintain their specific intentionality due to a different approach to documentarity. However, it is also worth acknowledging that history tells its stories with the objective of “imagining that” (*se figurer que*), whereas fiction constructs its own within the frame of a time-narration analogous to history (*quasi-passé*).

1 The author (Ricœur 1990a, 175–225) never renounces the idea that the historian has to maintain a critical distance (“ethical neutrality”) in order to make a specific proof effective. Obviously, Ricœur (1990b, 142–57) also discusses the ontological status of “documentary evidence” by avoiding both a realistic approach and a completely topological one and by preferring the idea that documentary proof “represents” the past as a *trace* of it. F. D’Alessandris offers a broad discussion of this question in his book *La persona e la traccia* (2023).

Nevertheless, there is a passage in *Time and Narrative III* that suggests a slightly different idea, which has already been developed in several critical studies<sup>2</sup> and constitutes the point of departure of this article as well:

However, when it is a question of events closer to us, like Auschwitz, it seems that the sort of ethical neutralization that may perhaps be fitting in the case of the history of a past that must be set at a distance in order better to be understood and explained, is no longer possible or desirable. In this regard, we should recall the biblical watchword (from Deuteronomy) *Zakhor*, “Remember!” which is not necessarily the same thing as a call to historiography. (Ricœur 1990b, 187)

Ricœur seems to return on this point in *Memory, History and Forgetting*:

Must we then conclude the exhaustion of these forms, above all of those inherited from the naturalist and realist tradition of the nineteenth-century novel and history text? Undoubtedly, yes. But this assertion must stimulate rather than preclude the exploration of alternative modes of expression, eventually connected to other supports

2 The point has been developed with particular attention by R. Kearney (1998). In his essay on narrative and an ethics of remembrance, the author carefully develops the Ricœurian idea of a narrative capable of suffering with the victims (*sym-pathein*) and, at the same time, of distancing itself from them in order to explain the causes of past events.

than just that of the printed book: drama, film, the plastic arts. (Ricœur 2006, 260)

Here it seems that Ricœur is implying a significance beyond the standard cross-reference (*entrecroisement*) between history and fiction. Indeed, he suggests a different mode of historical narration, in which “that sort of ethical neutralization” must be abandoned, *de facto* confounding the board between fiction and history. In other words, according to Ricœur there are events in need of narratives that require closeness to them: these events invite us to re-discuss the condition for the historian’s writing—namely, his neutrality. In the attempt to understand what *Zakhor* means, we find ourselves in a situation that Ricœur does not seem to contemplate: a hybridization between history and fiction, where the latter maintains an essential role in the narration of time. In fact, the fictive element is what makes facing *tremenda facta* possible, thus bringing a decisive contribution to the construction of a (collective) narrative identity.

A clue to understand what kind of writing Ricœur is referring to is provided by *Time and Narrative* III, when the author alludes to this hybridization with “epoch-making” events, such as the Shoah.<sup>3</sup> When

3 This question remained essential throughout the author’s philosophy. Indeed, beyond the specific interest that will lead the author to elaborate some of the essential pages of *Memory, History and Forgetting* and that derive from his positioning with respect to the debate known as *Historikerstreit* (1986–88), Ricœur has maintained his interest in this question since *Finitude and culpability*. In spite of his critical approach, F. Lévy reconstructs with punctuality all the

considering events like this—which serves as a paradigmatic example—we find ourselves faced with a twofold failure of representability: the first is related to the singularity of the event itself (we have no chance of comparing the Shoah with anything similar that happened before); the second is related to the systematic will to erase the traces of it. This twofold failure presents a significant challenge to the historical narrative as we conceive it—that is, research that seeks to describe an event by grounding it in documentary traces and comparing it with other events. Additionally, this twofold failure, despite deserving philosophical exploration,<sup>4</sup> should compel those same philosophical positions to engage with actual narratives that attempt to blend fiction and history in order to overcome the *impasse* of irrepresentability.

Therefore, the aim of this article will not be to provide a philological study of Ricœurian thought, nor an analysis of its historical or philosophical context. Rather, my proposal is to delve into and test Ricœur’s intuition, suggesting a comparison with the prose of a contemporary author who wants to intentionally create this kind of hybridization between history and fiction: W. G. Sebald.<sup>5</sup>

places where Ricœur dealt with the question, revealing a transversal interest of the author in such an issue that begins with his commentary on K. Jaspers’s *La culpabilité allemande* (1946) and ends with the reflections contained in *Memory, History and Forgetting* (Lévy 2017).

4 See below, footnote 14.

5 This point is essential for understanding Sebald’s writing style, and particularly that of Austerlitz. As proof of this, when Sebald is questioned about the very nature of *Austerlitz*, he argues that “it is a prose book

## Fragments

Indeed, even though Sebald never considered himself a novelist, he explicitly addresses the issue of *writing about trauma*, specifically in relation to the Shoah. Because of the intrinsic difficulties of comparing authors from different traditions and contexts, it is useful to restrict the field of investigation mostly to the two main elements of Sebald's writing, as seen in his most famous novel, *Austerlitz*.<sup>6</sup> Conceived without interruptions—neither chapters nor paragraphs—the novel follows Jacques Austerlitz's search for his own identity. Austerlitz is a young professor of history of architecture who is trying to piece together his personal history but can only do so from a certain point in his childhood. In fact, even though he knows that he is not the son of his preceptors, he is nevertheless unable to recall his true origins. The novel thus recounts from the perspective of the first-person narrator—also a character in the story—the progressive search for these origins, which dramatically intertwine the story of Austerlitz with that of the deporta-

of an indefinite nature [...] because a true novel needs dialogue and a whole set of ingredients that are absent there" (Doerry and Hage 2001). Moreover, he himself had declared that he avoided "all forms of finalisation, claiming prose as his medium and not the novel" (Löffler 1997).

6 It is certainly true, as M. Carré points out, that this book is all in all unique within Sebald's oeuvre. For the first time, we can say that the author renounces here a completely fragmentary writing where the plot gives the impression of not being there. Indeed, the dialogue between the protagonist and the narrator becomes the dialogue in which we discover the former's story, thus giving an important logical thread to the entire Sebald corpus (Carré 2017).

tion of Prague children during the Second World War. The role of the narrator is crucial for the whole story: it is indeed during the fortuitous encounters and the resulting long conversations between him and Austerlitz that the reader himself receives explanations about the dramatic story of the protagonist.

In this work, the author explicitly endeavours to intertwine fictional and historical elements, aiming to evoke memories of events deeply linked to the Shoah.

The first element is a continuous confrontation with fragments: Sebald structures his prose so that documentary traces (both literary and photographic) reference one another, and the events they symbolize are recalled by the protagonist (1), referred to the narrator (2), and finally revealed to the reader (3). The act of reading is thus constituted by the effort of following a complex amount of information, adhering to a sort of principle of randomness:<sup>7</sup> diary

7 There is a marked difference with the idea of documentarity as conceived in the other masterpiece by Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*. In this book, the author clearly theorized a fragmentary mode of writing: as much in content as in form, it was the randomness of the journey and its encounters that constituted a (non-)plot (McCulloh 2003). What emerged was a "flat" and "impersonal" writing style (Persson 2016), to such an extent that critics questioned Sebald's inability to provide criteria for having "any moral distinction" (either in a trivial sense or regarding a "test of the formal limits of what can be included in a story") (Walkowitz 2006). In *Austerlitz*, it is a solid structure that underpins the entire narrative structure and which, despite its extreme complexity, finds two fundamental directions in the events of Austerlitz discovering his own story and in the exchanges between Austerlitz and the narrator. The result is a narrator

pages, stories of men and women of the past encountered by chance, photographs and their descriptions, documents, architectures... This accumulation of information pervades Sebald's writing on a three-fold level (i.e., that of the author, that of the character, and that of the reader), but finally allows us to grasp the whole tragic story of the protagonist's search for identity.

This kind of narrative construction is perfectly exemplified at the beginning of the novel. Here, the narrator enters the Nocturama in Antwerp and notices the animals stored there for study. As he reflects on his visit, a possible meaning slowly emerges: in the gazes of the animals he reads the cluelessness of beings unable to grasp the reasons behind their captivity. As a matter of fact, the narrator quickly adds that this same destiny of incomprehension is also shared by humans—painters and philosophers above all others. The accompanying photo, depicting the intense gaze of the philosopher L. Wittgenstein, vividly captures this idea.<sup>8</sup>

who is anything but neutral: invested with a maieutic function, he becomes the other pole of a dialogue in which Jewish and German memory intersects, generating an unprecedented attempt at memorial writing.

8 It is particularly interesting to note that Austerlitz shares similarities with Wittgenstein. The latter introduced the concept of “family resemblance” which problematizes the vast possibilities that language offers in performing various functions, often leading to significant differences among them (Wittgenstein 1986, 31–34). Like the Sebald narrative, the very structure of language presents itself in a fragmented manner while still appearing cohesive. This mirrors the notion of a “family resemblance”, where each member may differ greatly yet retains a common air. As we will see, Sebald's

The choice of Wittgenstein is not accidental: while he may initially seem like just another philosopher, the reader will soon discover that Wittgenstein is the one whom Austerlitz, the protagonist, most closely resembles. Before his official presentation, Austerlitz thus peeps out almost casually in a photographic/textual fragment, but virtually including the whole plot that concerns the search for his fragmented identity. From the very beginning of the text, therefore, a structural fragmentariness, ultimately symbolic of a search for identity, becomes the hallmark of Sebald's prose, in an even more stable way than in *The Rings of Saturn*.<sup>9</sup> Fort Breedonk and Theresiendstadt are powerfully configurative places where the reader is able to glimpse the thread that binds the story of the two characters and the very structure of the novel itself. Nevertheless, it is also worth underlining that they are not that symbolic themselves: they become such because somehow the reader is confronted with a dialogue that provides him with an elementary filtering of significant events.

On a structural level, the randomness of the encounters between the two protagonists (like that of Austerlitz's own discovery of the documentary traces) mirrors the pattern developed in Sebald's previous work, *The Rings of Saturn*: a narrative that is fulfilled through the recall of fragments to one another and whose subject is only implicitly present (García-Moreno 2013).

Another example can be found in the final part of *Austerlitz*. The narrator is

narrative technique reflects this idea, as it combines diverse elements and styles to create a unified exploration of memory and trauma.

9 See above, footnote 7.

reading a book given to him by Austerlitz himself, in which the author/protagonist (Dan Jacobson) is in search of the traces of his grandfather, Heschel (Sebald 2001, 296). The pivotal point is that this story, which evidently recalls that of Austerlitz and has at this stage the function of recollecting the whole plot of the novel, is read mostly *by chance*. Moreover, it is possible to make sense of it only retrospectively and from the reader's perspective: the narrator is sitting "beside the moat surrounding the fortress" (i.e., Fort Breendonk) when he decides to take "the book Austerlitz had given me on our *first meeting* in Paris out of my rucksack" (italics mine). We thus come across the history of Dan Jacobson, discovering that the memory of his grandfather is lost, leaving behind "only signs everywhere of the annihilation from which Heschel's weak heart had preserved his immediate family" (Sebald 2001, 297). Among these signs, there are fortresses built by Russians and utilized by Nazis to imprison Heschel and others. But above all, there are fortresses quite similar to the one where the narrator is. By ending his novel with this image, Sebald confirms that his essential narrative procedure is founded on randomness. Even though the narrator has never opened Dan Jacobson's book before, he finds that his condition on a fortress is analogous to that experienced by Dan Jacobson's father, and the latter's story analogous to Sebald's. Only the reader and the narrator (but, to a certain extent, the narrator alone) will be able to weave together these links which are essential for understanding a story that would otherwise remain a mere accumulation of facts.

Now that I have described this procedure, I will focus on its direct effects.

Indeed, by proposing such a form of writing, the author continually shifts the characters' attention to minimal and forgotten facts, often placed out of the spotlight of institutional history. The use of photographs shows it clearly: generally employed as evidence of horror, they are now focused on another place instead of the one where events have taken place (Furst 2008; Ercolino 2011). No photographs are devoted to Austerlitz's visit to the Theresienstadt deportation museum. When we most expect to *see* something about the horror perpetrated by Nazis, our gaze is forced elsewhere, suggesting a different usage of the documentary trace.<sup>10</sup> The door of Theresienstadt is closed, as the photographs are generally devoted to small objects.

It is thus a matter of redirecting our gaze to the intuitive logic suggested by fragments, far from the historical induction that seeks to represent events directly. In such a process, fragments cross personal experience with the history of major events, not to be understood in their light, but to *indicate* the catastrophe they produced, thereby allowing the history of those involved to be written without their personal intervention.

10 It may be interesting to compare these analyses with the two renowned examinations of the gaze presented by Jean-Paul Sartre (Sartre 1992) and Primo Levi (Levi 2014). Sartre's notion of the gaze objectifies and limits individual freedom through intersubjective conflict, while Levi reflects on how the absence or avoidance of the gaze in concentration camps signifies the annihilation of subjectivity and humanity. As we will see, W. G. Sebald offers a different approach that can be seen as mediating between these two extremes, using the *presence* and *absence* of the gaze to explore trauma and memory.

In this way, it is also possible to face from a philosophical point of view the peculiarity of Sebald's writing experience, namely, the involvement of the reader. This peculiar use of the documentary source must stimulate the intuitive juxtaposition between the signs of the past and the present contingencies that occasioned their recollection, in an inexhaustible process. Despite the fact that *Austerlitz* relies on documentary research, and even though the resulting product of such research is quantitatively large,<sup>11</sup> Sebald's writing *does not constitute a memorative process in which documentary evidence is the ultimate referent*. Fragments serve to *make* memory, in a fundamental dynamization of Ricœurian *Zachor*. The author substitutes the realistic (and naive) idea that documents and research should *reproduce* facts as they took place, with the idea that they contribute *productively* to creating a personal and collective memory about epoch-making events.

Thus, in Sebald's novels, documentariness serves more to *indicate* the singularity of a trauma than to represent it as it was. Imagination upon documentary traces opens a necessary and vacant space, where we can think of a possible understanding of the horror displayed by written or iconographic documents—a unique means of encountering the *tremendum*, not as a direct reference, but as *the singularity*

11 See, for example, the lectures held by the author in Zurich (1997) and dedicated to "Air War and Literature", later published as *On the Natural History of Destruction* (Sebald 2004). The author does his utmost there to research the (non-)narrative of an "unprecedented national humiliation", punctually reporting and summarizing all the literary attempts to talk about post-World War II Germany.

*that continues to look for the possibility of its representation*. Only in this way will the reader be forced to imaginatively fill in the information that the documentary evidence fails to fully bear witness to; only in this way will they be able to approach respectfully the spirit of novels such as *Austerlitz*. Memory is something we *make*, and that enables us to remember the *singularity* of events such as the Shoah.

### A possible synthesis

At this point, it might seem logical to think that *Austerlitz* determines a hybrid literary genre, because it imposes *an innovative work of synthesis*—a synthesis that, mostly with the aid of fictional imagination, allows for a different utilization of documentary evidence. This idea needs to be clarified, since critical literature is unanimous in recognizing that such a synthesis does not emerge from Sebald's characters.<sup>12</sup> If this

12 Particularly interesting is the summary produced by S. Tedesco (2019) in this regard. He in fact attributes this pessimism in Sebald's writing to the desire to trace all his stories back to the concept of the "natural history of destruction". Indeed, in the moment of catastrophe and ruin—categories both borrowed from Benjamin—there exists for Sebald the possibility of thinking effectively about a moment where nature and culture meet. But above all, they forcefully indicate the impossibility of a new "symbolic unity and harmony", characterizing themselves rather as the first and last end of human history. In a less recent essay dedicated to the question of identity in *Austerlitz*, it is K. Bauer who highlights how Sebald's writing is "the inverse of a *Bildungsroman*", configuring itself rather as a perpetual quest and never as "a resolution, a discovery of the self, a personal growth or a reassuring return home within the walls of the home" (Bauer 2008).

were the case, there could be no dialogue with Ricœur's work and, perhaps, no sense in Sebald's writing either, which would appear only capable of dispersing both his characters and the narrator in the myriads of piled-up fragments. Yet, as stated, this impression does not occur in Sebald's *reading experience*.

Surely, reading Sebald's novel is not an experience of omniscient comprehension. Nevertheless, it succeeds in configuring itself as essentially meaningful because it is able to connote an interstitial and not a representative space of memoriality. An *aesthetic* space, in Kantian terms: that is, a space capable of referring to an experience without exhausting it in a concept or in a well-defined object. For that reason, it is therefore worthwhile distinguishing between the level of the narrated story and that of literary experience.<sup>13</sup> At the first level, where characters (and among them the narrator himself) play the fundamental role, there is no chance of any salvation: they all succumb to what the author would have called "a natural history of destruction" (Sebald 2004). Austerlitz is unable to find any trace of either his mother or father. At the end of the novel, even the narrator himself abruptly breaks his function of dialogical counterpart "setting out his way back to Mechelen" (Sebald 2001, 298).

13 Sebald himself seems to suggest this, when he proposes to use the description of *historia calamitatum* to enliven the category of teaching and learning. In it, in fact, the "possibility of its overcoming" is given (Sebald 2016, 13), as the figure of the narrator symbolically shows: it "sheds light on the conditions that allow the transmission of a story and give someone the right to tell it" (Garloff 2008).

On the second level, on the contrary, the reader is continuously forced to *find a possible link between pieces of information that are provided by the author*. In a sense, the process is the opposite of succumbing to the mass of information with which the reader is confronted. Conversely, he is called upon to interpret it, and to understand what connection might exist between the photographs proposed by the author, as well as the stories narrated through the voices of the novel's characters. The link he will find will never be definitive, since it may vary with each act of reading. Yet, this personal and *per se* involved way of confronting documentarity remains the only possible way to glimpse that horizon of irrepresentability.

It may be necessary to provide an example to better demonstrate this non-synthesizability of the fragment and to illustrate the aforementioned active experience of reading. The last part of the novel is indeed dedicated to the search for the story of Maximilian, Austerlitz's father, whose whereabouts were lost (Sebald 2001, 254). Jumping from one association to the other, Austerlitz eventually finds himself in the National Library of France. In the eyes of the reader, the space of the library becomes a symbolic key to interpret Sebald's work itself, since both the library and the author's work are places where written information accumulates. Yet, despite its size and mass of documents, this library does not serve to re-establish the memory of a forgotten man. Austerlitz says this clearly, unable to escape this destiny of meaninglessness:

I for my part, said Austerlitz, found that this gigantic new library, which according to one of the loathsome phrases now current is supposed to



serve as the treasure house of our entire literary heritage, proved useless in my search for any traces of my father who had disappeared from Paris more than fifty years ago. (Sebald 2001, 281)

Therefore, if Sebald's work were merely an attempt to accumulate fragments of history like inert data, it would fail—just as the project of the National Library of France fails to re-establish the memory of someone lost: an accumulation of documents cannot achieve synthesis because, the more they accumulate, the less effective they become. In *The Rings of Saturn*, Max Hamburger recalls this concept more vividly:

Whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs and fragments such as this surface, we believe we can remember. But in reality, of course, memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable. (Sebald 2016b, 95)

Thus, if there is meaning in Sebald's writing, it is not to be sought in an attempt to represent a past saturated with information. Meaning and memory must be realized not at the character level and maybe not even at the authorial one. On the contrary, it is at the level of "teaching" that this synthesizability should be found—not as moral teaching, nor as content teaching (although both are present in Sebald's writing), but in the work of fictional imagination on historical documents, which the reader is continually called upon. In both examples, it is clear how memory is something impossible to conceive in a documentary manner, because "too many buildings

are collapsed" and a new immense library turns to be "useless" to "set out on the trail of my father who had disappeared in Paris." As readers, our experience *is* nevertheless an experience of memory. Indeed, even though it must be situated within the realm of imagination, it may still stand as the sole conceivable experience of memory, when confronted with the specific trauma of the Shoah or the broader trauma of history, as exemplified by Jacques Austerlitz and Max Hamburger.

Creating a memory of irrepresentable facts thus means identifying a possible—though never explicitly stated—link between documentary and fictional aspects of the novel. The pivotal aspect of Sebald's novel will therefore be to see a permeability of these two facets, replacing the question "is what is told real or not?" with "what does this possible link between facts compel me to think and in what manner?" In other words, creating a memory of unrepresentable events should not only require the use of documentary evidence, as it could merely present us with the facts as they occurred. Instead, it should involve utilizing them (along with historical research) to bring forth their unrepresentability. Re-establishing truth in the face of the unrepresentable would therefore also entail questioning why we should remember something unrepresentable, knowing that the answer will not primarily lie within the realms of historical research or moral philosophy, but in the productive power of fictional imagination. What Sebald is pointing out in *Austerlitz* is thus a different way of constructing memory, one that requires the contribution of the fictional element to establish a mutual link among (otherwise forgettable) fragments. Not a synthesis, but

small and never definitively complete horizons of inexhaustible meaningfulness.

Programmatically, we will examine the theoretical aspect touched upon by Sebald in *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* (1985, 9–13) and suggested by the role of the narrator in *Austerlitz*: even amidst the acknowledgment of being enveloped in a *historia calamitatum*, redemption is conceivable “in the order of teaching and learning” that history. In other words, redemption becomes feasible through the text, yet extending beyond it, thanks to the labour of imagination and interpretation that afford us the ability to perceive potential connections, assured of their inexhaustibility.

### Zakhor

Here we find ourselves revisiting Ricœur’s discourse, albeit not strictly from the standpoint of the constitution of historical consciousness. Certainly, several commentators have already attempted to think of the Ricœurian position within the problem of the *historical* writing of the Shoah and it would be redundant to re-open here a debate that has already achieved classic status.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the theoretical focal

14 In this regard, it is worth mentioning the interest Ricœur devotes to the issue in *Memory, History, Forgetting*. In that text, the author reads in a realistic manner the theses already argued at the time of *Time and Narrative* III. If, however, such a reading has generated a critical approach aimed at emphasizing a real epistemological break between the two texts (Bouchindhomme *et al.* 1990; Rochlitz 2001), we stand for the continuist thesis proposed by J. Michel (Michel 2006; 2013) and earlier by A. Escudier (Escudier 2002): writing about the events of the Shoah can only be a realist writing. However, such realism does not coincide with a purported “narrative

point remains to observe the two elements that arise from the preceding analysis of Sebaldian discourse: the implications, that is, of writing the irrepresentable (1) and the involvement of the reader (2).

Indeed, beyond questioning the logical and philosophical legitimacy of a historical writing that encompasses both the fictional and the realistic, Ricœur (2006, 254) admits that this particular intersection of the boundaries of historical discourse is introduced to address the issue of singularity. What happened in Auschwitz needs to be remembered in its singularity, in its impossibility of being compared with other similar events. This necessity makes historical research difficult, “if not impossible”, when conceived in broad terms of categorizing events.

On a philosophical level, Ricœur’s answer is to firstly theorize different forms of singularity, in order to successively individuate a proper narrativity to it. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, the idea emerges that the Shoah has to be considered a singular event from multiple points of view, ultimately re-collecting themselves in the idea of singularity as *exemplarity* (Ricœur 2006; Breitling 2013). It is, of course, a negative exemplarity, which must be communicated to prevent us from being repeated in itself and its logic. Nevertheless, the point is theoretically crucial, since the notion of *exemplarity* takes a specific connotation throughout Ricœur’s pages (1998),<sup>15</sup> allow-

reduplication” of the same facts. Rather, it is a writing in which the narrative structure—dependent on the discursive modes—must be taken care of and thought of as a condition for making memory of that historical event, irrespective of documentation alone.

15 In this regard, it is worth mentioning the

ing us to see in what terms we can approach Sebaldian writing. Exemplarity is indeed always conceived by the author, following Kant, as an event *in search* of a rule. Unlike an object of knowledge, which is singular insofar as it is the *manifestation* of a rule, the exemplary event achieves its status by demanding a continual process of search: a quest for an adequate narrative, a search for an adequate communication, a method capable of categorizing that event. That is, it involves interpreting the reference to the Jewish commandment—*Zakhor*, remember—in dynamic and processual terms.

Of course, akin to Kant's perspective, the essential point lies more in the process of an ongoing search than in the eventual stability of its outcomes. It is this continuous search that recalls a proper work of memory throughout fictional imagination. Indeed, Kant's thought allows us to see that this imperative, precisely because it has to do with this hybridization of genres, coincides more with the processuality of a memorative act than with the creation of a memorial object. Thus, it is not the hybridization

only two texts dedicated by Ricœur to the aesthetic question (Ricœur 1998; 2010) and a famous text dedicated to the Ricœurian reception of Kantian schematism (Fœssel 2019). In them, there is an interesting rapprochement between the question of artistic exemplarity and moral exemplarity. There, the author explicitly says that "moral exemplarity" must be "instructed" by artistic exemplarity. The latter teaches us to "think more" because in it we witness a free play of the faculties that aims to say something otherwise unspeakable in the frame of historical-scientific categorization. It becomes a model because it is not the manifestation of a law, but of its *continuous search*, presenting itself as the "principle of an inscrutability" of temporality.

of genres *per se* that determines the possibility of narrating *tremenda facta*, but rather the fact that this hybridization guarantees a non-fixity of genre that necessarily requires the active intervention of the reader or the community of readers. They must pause in an indefinite space between history and fiction, ultimately questioning the event that necessitated such a narrative. In other words, they will be called upon to translate into an extremely specific sense that Hebrew commandment—*Zakhor*—which for Ricœur must dramatically arise in the face of the tragedies of history: "remember" in the sense of *make* remembrance.

Narrating the events epitomized by Auschwitz thus becomes the pursuit of a narrative that truly befits them, within a perpetually unfinished work. Philosophically speaking, conceiving singularity as exemplarity entails a reversal of the typical scientific mode of reasoning: events such as the Shoah become objective not only as a result of historians' labour on documentary evidence, but primarily because they demand continuous engagement from our individual and collective memory.

On this point, we thus find a fundamental agreement with Sebald's narrative style, as previously analysed. On those pages too, albeit within a fictional context, the aim was to forge diverse connections that would enable a "work of memory" (*travail de mémoire*) remarkably akin to what Ricœur advocates here. In front of the horror of the Shoah and its systematic loss of traces, the only viable approach to preserving memory is one that denies a direct referentiality (unbearable and impossible) in favour of reasserting it as a horizon.

Moreover, it is not just this overarching agreement regarding exemplarity that

allows for a Ricœurian interpretation of Sebald's work. When, indeed, Ricœur finds himself explaining the possibility of narrating singularity, he states the coexistence of two movements within it: one involves certainly a (re)reading in narrative terms of Kant's pages on the *Genius*, precisely starting from the critique addressed by Gadamer to Kantian subjectivism (Gadamer 1981, 39–72). The second involves, on the other hand, a declination of that intuition at the level of *reception*, in a manner distinct from Gadamer (Ricœur 1990b, 157–79). That is, Ricœur does not only conceive of exemplarity in broad terms as the quest for suitable narratives, but also considers it at the level of their collective and individual reception. In other words, Ricœur himself thinks that the reader has a *structural* role in the quest for narratives about the exemplarity of those facts. The point of detachment from Gadamer thus becomes the juncture where a Ricœurian approach to Sebald's writing is conceivable: for the German author too, it remains essential to involve the reader in the memorial process concerning the events of the Shoah. His prose, indeed, transcends being merely a form of authorial quest for appropriate narratives to the singularity of the Shoah. If this were the case, the reader would also be lost in a structurally unsuccessful attempt to think of characters *who succeed in the task of remembrance*. What Sebald does instead, exactly as Ricœur advocates, is to think of a memorial text that finds a grounding element of its structure *outside itself*, at the *reception* level: the memorial text co-constitutes itself in the communicative interaction with its reader, delivering to the latter the crucial task of remembering.

Of course, both for Sebald and Ricœur, the outcome of this endeavour will not be

a historical account. Rather, it could provide us with the foundation of historical narratives, anchoring them in the capacity to narrate those events that *par excellence*, by their unbearable nature and the erasure of their traces, demand remembrance. It thus becomes a task of uncovering the folds that intuitively connect them with our present and our spaces. This is not a discourse about history as an external morality upon it, but rather a discourse capable of narrating our existence within it (Tengelyi 2009). Thus, with Austerlitz, we can say:

It does not seem to me, Austerlitz added, that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like [...]. (Sebald 2001, 185)

Or, more technically, with Ricœur:

Here again, part of the function of “standing for ...” belonging to imaginary acts is to “depict” by “making visible”. The new element here is that the controlled illusion is not intended to please or to divert. It is placed in the service of the individuation produced by the horrible as well as by admiration. Individuation by means of the horrible, to which we are particularly attentive, would be blind feeling, regardless of how elevated or how profound it might be, without the quasi-intuitiveness of fiction. Fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator. Eyes to

see and to weep. (Ricœur 1990b, 188)

Once again, we thus find ourselves, alongside Ricœur, in a sort of effort to force the philosophical (and maybe historical) reflexion to confront what lies beyond it, that is the possibility of discussing permeability of spaces in terms of the intuitiveness permitted by fiction. This is exactly what Sebald accomplished: generating the illusion of a presence, which allows for the indication of events, even horrible ones, without fully exhausting them. It is an experience of literature, that Ricœur might ascribe to a “historical explanation that is difficult, if not impossible to write”. However, we might now perceive that, in the face of traumatic events or, as with Sebald, in the face of history as trauma, words are indeed possible: they can articulate time, making it human. But this is contingent upon one condition: that such words do not claim to be referential, limiting themselves to indicate that something has taken place. On the contrary, they *connote* the ever-changing relationship between us and the traces of our past (no matter how horrific), leaving the task of *denotation* entirely to the reader’s imaginative faculty. In the words we have already used, “Remember”—*Zakhor*—in the sense of “make remembrance”, without believing that its task is exhausted in the compilation of a research or the writing of a novel. Important as they are, they seem to be only a part of a more important movement that Ricœur would like to intercept and that, ultimately, has to do with the capacity for active involvement of the reader or an entire community to *continuously* find an adequate narrative for *tremenda facta*. In Ricœur’s famous words: “the mystery

of time is not equivalent to a prohibition directed against language. Rather it gives rise to the exigence to think more and to speak differently” (1990b, 274).

The challenge, therefore, lies in finding new words that allow us to refrain from simply “counting the dead” or “praising the victims” (Ricœur 1990b, 188) in the face of a trauma. It entails maintaining a suitable distance, where we can assert the nexus suggested by the events themselves, momentarily silencing all other possible nexuses and thus leaving that sense of inexhaustible yet unspoken experiences, proper to *tremenda*. At this distance, Sebald’s reader is always wisely placed, dramatically aided by characters. Even if they are destined to succumb in the eyes of the reader and find no salvation, they still retain one crucial distinction from the mute occurrence of the destruction they witness. To paraphrase Levi (2014, 2), they “have been there”. They have been told. ■

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the last Merleau-Ponty”), *DIVUS THOMAS* 124, no. 3 2021: 237–73; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48664389>) and for the journal Balthazar “‘Colline come elefanti bianchi’ di E. Hemingway. Una proposta di studio” (“‘Hills as White Elephants’ by E. Hemingway. A study proposal”), Balthazar 2 no. 6–7 2023: 102–21 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54103/balthazar/22320>.  
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