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# Triangulating Trauma: Constellations of Memory, Representation, and Distortion in Elie Wiesel, Wolfgang Borchert, and W.G. Sebald

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**Abstract:** Even today, trauma theory remains indebted to Sigmund Freud's notion of belatedness: a traumatic event is not fully experienced at the time of occurrence, due to its suddenness and the lack of preparedness on the part of the human subject. In *Traumatic Realism* (2000), Michael Rothberg invokes the Benjaminian notion of the constellation of representation to address the shortcomings of any singular mode of trauma portrayal. Rothberg likens the realist, modernist, and postmodernist literary modes to the points of view of the survivor, the bystander, and the latecomer, respectively. I combine Rothberg's typology with insights from trauma theory to analyze Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Wolfgang Borchert's *The Man Outside*, and W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*—three texts that represent Rothberg's literary modes while at the same time problematizing genre. Dori Laub argues that distorted memory and untold stories are endemic to Holocaust representation. W.G. Sebald inscribes this distortion into his narratives, calling attention to but also repeating its effects. I argue that a perspective beginning with (but not limited to) a combined reading of these three texts yields a more complete understanding of trauma and the Holocaust than can be offered by any singular genre—even archives of documented testimonies, which, despite their necessary role, are unavoidably fraught with a problematics of memory itself.

**Keywords:** Holocaust; representation; postmodernism; collective memory; repression; hypermnesia; testimony; ghosts; realism

## 1. Introduction

As the number of living Holocaust survivors diminishes, society's contact with this trauma becomes increasingly vicarious and necessitates an invigorated engagement in order to preserve its experiential, in addition to its historical, memory. This essay investigates the benefits of an inter-generic approach to the literary representation of trauma, considering the cases of Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night* (*La Nuit* 1958), Wolfgang Borchert's radio play/drama *The Man Outside* (*Draußen vor der Tür* 1947), and the four narratives comprising W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* (*Die Ausgewanderten* 1992) as, respectively, testimonial, modernist, and postmodernist voices. I argue that the first two of these modes convey 'post-trauma' effectively, and that postmodernism adds the 'post-post-trauma' perspective to this typology—inherently both advantageous and difficult in its point of view regarding trauma, highlighting its own deficiencies as well as those of documentary/(anti)realist testimony and of modernism. These texts by no means form a complete picture of the typology of trauma representation, in which each source contributes to what might be visualized as a constellation. While on the one hand I argue that they represent the modes described by Michael Rothberg, on the other hand each of these texts complicates genre and extends the boundaries of the constellation of Holocaust representation. Furthermore, a reading of these three texts alongside one another points out the inherent difficulties and disfigurements within each text's approach to trauma, illustrating the merits of comparative and complementary examination. Each of the three texts approaches trauma as memory from a different

point of view: autobiographical realism can be seen as the memory of a victim, modernism as that of a witness (often a victim of vicarious trauma), and postmodernism as the next-generation's engagement with (post-)memory.

In *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch recalls a certain picture of a woman named Frieda, wherein, at face level, there is “nothing . . . that indicates its connection to the Holocaust” (Hirsch 1997, p. 19). Yet in the proper context, this picture functions as a “ghostly revenant” (Hirsch 1997, p. 20) not only in the sense that all photographs achieve a return of the past, but also in its connection to the trauma of the Holocaust. This is the primary operative mode of both the images and the text of Sebald's *The Emigrants*: the narratives approach trauma through contextualization rather than through content alone. If Wiesel's *Night* is to find its parallel in images of mass graves, discussed by Hirsch, then *The Emigrants* can be read alongside the picture of the woman Frieda, along with other family photographs of Holocaust victims—the difference is in “the work of reading that they require” (Hirsch 1997, p. 20). This is not to say, however, that Sebald's contextually-dependent text is superior in Holocaust representation to Wiesel's autobiographical depiction, which presents Auschwitz in the immediacy of realism, although it arguably exceeds Wiesel's narrative in complexity. According to Hirsch, “we respond with a similar sense of disbelief” (Hirsch 1997, p. 21) to both generic forms, and thus I argue that a combined reading of trauma influenced by realist, modernist, and postmodernist materials allows one to locate more accurately the phenomenological and ontological consistency of traumatic memory. When read in the context of Wiesel's earlier memoir written in Yiddish, *Un di Velt hot geshvigh* (1956), Wiesel's *Night*, written ten years after the fact, takes on new significations that further add to the constellation of representation. To the photographic perspectives offered by Wiesel and Sebald, Borchert's *The Man Outside* adds the sensation of horror experienced not only during the nightmare itself, or in remembering it, but, as Cathy Caruth puts it, “what happens upon waking up” (Caruth 1996, p. 64)—namely, waking consciousness as the reliving of trauma, emphasizing trauma as a break in the mind's experience of time (Caruth 1996, p. 61). Borchert's protagonist Beckmann is thus condemned to walk the earth as a kind of ghost, forced to view life through the metaphor of his wartime respirator glasses.<sup>1</sup>

Central to Caruth's theoretical perspective of trauma is Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness), referring to the phenomenon in which memory returns to haunt the victim of a trauma. The return takes place because the violence was not fully understood or known at the time of the traumatic event (Caruth 1996, p. 6). Trauma thus becomes the ongoing experience of having survived death (Caruth 1996, p. 7). Wiesel brings this death back to “life” once again, the *Nachträglichkeit* or delayed onset of his trauma positioned as an offering to the reader of *Night*, whereas Borchert's reader approaches trauma through Beckmann's experience of *Nachträglichkeit* after the fact. In *The Emigrants*, Sebald's task among others is to convey the burden of *Nachträglichkeit* from one generation to the next. These levels of belatedness find accompaniment also in the level of witnessing. Elie Wiesel represents the first tier of witnessing in Laub's (1995) typology of testimony—namely, *oneself* as a witness. In Michael Rothberg's terms, the self as witness constitutes the point of view of the survivor who attempts to document the undocumentable (Rothberg 2000, p. 13). Borchert's character Beckmann (to an extent) represents the point of view of the bystander, “who feels impelled to bear an impossible witness to the extreme from a place of relative safety,” and Sebald's narrator(s) in *The Emigrants* represent(s) the latecomer, or the “representative of the ‘postmemory’ generation, who, like [Art] Spiegelman, inherits the detritus of the twentieth century” (Rothberg 2000, p. 13). In *Family Frames* (1997), Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated,”

<sup>1</sup> One finds a parallel in other Borchert texts in which characters carry other wartime leftovers, such as a kitchen clock in “Die Küchenuhr” (“The Kitchen Clock”).

distinguished from original memory by “generational distance” and from history by “deep personal connection” (Hirsch 1997, p. 22). According to Rothberg, these three categories of witness form a constellation that more holistically represents an era of extreme violence and that roughly fits the literary personae of the realist, the modernist, and the postmodernist.<sup>2</sup>

On a microcosmic level, Rothberg identifies all three of these forms as components within a given text’s representation of history. The text’s realist component thus attempts to document the world; its “modernist” dimension “questions its ability to document history transparently”; and its “postmodern” component “responds to the economic and political conditions of its emergence and public circulation” (Rothberg 2000, p. 9). Rothberg here anticipates an “overlapping of representational modes” (p. 10) in Holocaust studies, advocating for the importance of this overlap. According to Rothberg, one thus avoids the risk of an ahistorical representation of culture that also grasps “historical particularity” (p. 10). He cites Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in which Benjamin conceives of a constellation that links the present to the past. I now begin to connect the points in an interpretive constellation for the representation of Holocaust trauma in Wiesel’s, Borchert’s, and Sebald’s texts.

## 2. Wiesel: Survivor in the Night

Elie Wiesel’s claim that Auschwitz can neither be explained nor visualized, especially in conjunction with Adorno’s maxim that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,<sup>3</sup> problematizes his testimony in *Night*, which attempts to offer an objective, realist account from a survivor’s perspective. Although Rothberg takes this claim of Wiesel’s—that the Holocaust “transcends history”—as evidence for Wiesel’s “antirealist tendency” (Rothberg 2000, p. 5), antirealism in this sense is dependent upon the context of Rothberg’s own classification of realists as those who convey the “banality of evil”,<sup>4</sup> whereas the antirealists forge “an unbridgeable rupture between the ordinary and the extraordinary” (p. 4). Irrespective of the distance between ordinary events and the uniqueness of the Holocaust, Wiesel’s *Night* constitutes realism in the traditional sense, because it attempts to convey his everyday life as it was experienced authentically in Auschwitz. As Rothberg contends, the realist “aims at the mimesis of a certain spatial world,” but is “caught in a traumatic temporality” (p. 13). This temporality, for Wiesel personally, creates a belated moral obligation: “to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory” (Wiesel [1956] 2006, p. xiii). Despite Wiesel’s self-abnegating claim,<sup>5</sup> then, one is able nonetheless to visualize Auschwitz through a reading of *Night*. One thus reaches in Rothberg’s typology the category of traumatic realism, which, he argues, mediates between realist and antirealist tendencies and the tensions between the ordinary and the extreme (Rothberg 2000, p. 6). Rothberg’s “rethinking of realism” as it applies to Wiesel’s *Night* makes apparent the usefulness of accompaniment by modernist and postmodernist texts, each in their own way to be understood as “persistent responses to the demands of history” (Rothberg 2000, p. 9).

In *Night*, Wiesel describes his first day in Auschwitz and the trauma of seeing the bodies of babies being dumped into a burning mass grave: “I pinched myself: Was I alive? Was I awake? How was it possible that men, women, and children were being burned and that the world kept silent? No. All this could not be real. A nightmare perhaps . . . Soon I would wake up with a start, my heart pounding, and find that I was back in the room of my childhood, with my books...” (Wiesel [1956] 2006, p. 32). Joshua Hirsch sees this moment of trauma for Wiesel as “the moment of finally seeing the unthinkable”

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the typology I describe on p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* [Cultural Criticism and Society] (1951): “Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben” [‘Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stages of the dialectic of civilization and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today’ (Prisms, p. 34)].

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963).

<sup>5</sup> His claim that Auschwitz cannot be explained or visualized, cited in Rothberg (2000, p. 13).

and also as an instance of Freud's concept of *Schreck*,<sup>6</sup> which Hirsch translates as "fright," although one might also translate it as terror (Hirsch 2004, pp. 95–96). Wiesel conveys his *Schreck* to the reader of *Night* in the form of traumatic realism, which emphasizes his role as a survivor in the typology of witnesses. His survivor identity also betrays his connection to the present, which occasionally erupts into and interrupts the diegesis of *Night*: "Many years later, in Paris, I sat in the Metro, reading my newspaper. Across the aisle, a beautiful woman with dark hair and dreamy eyes. I had seen those eyes before" (Wiesel [1956] 2006, p. 46). In this episode, as in others, Wiesel achieves narration of the present through its connection to a specific memory from the past: "Years later, I witnessed a similar spectacle in Aden" (Wiesel [1956] 2006, p. 100). To preserve his memory "against his enemy," Wiesel is also unable to erase it from his own life (in the metro station, for example), such that it invades his present-day, narrating self, conjuring Freud's notion of the repetition compulsion.<sup>7</sup> In this way, Wiesel's trauma is not only *nachträglich* for his reader, but as the unanticipated narrative interruptions reveal, also belated for Wiesel himself.

Significantly, Wiesel originally published his memoirs in Yiddish, ten years before the publication of *Night* in French, as discussed for example by Naomi Seidman and Jan Schwarz.<sup>8</sup> Seidman's (1996) article illustrates one way in which one can approach the anti-realist components of *Night*, though on the whole the work still strives to depict a "realist" narrative (as Rothberg indicates, literary texts have various categorical moments both in agreement with and against their general generic flow). The key differences between *Night* and *Un di Velt hot geshvigh* laid out by Seidman indeed show a shift in narrative voice concerned with speaking to a different audience. Whereas the earlier text was only one of many in a Yiddish anthology for Jewish readers, *Night* stands on its own and is for a French, European and perhaps global audience. Looking towards Dori Laub's argument, one might venture to claim that Wiesel's desire to be heard was not, and could not be satisfied by *Un di Velt hot geshvigh* due to the limitations of his audience. As Laub writes, the "imperative to tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory, and speech*" (p. 78). As Seidman describes, *Night* is about one third of the length of the earlier manuscript, but the true difference is in the details, for example Wiesel's desire for Jewish revenge which becomes more suppressed or dismissed by *Night* (p. 5). *Un di Velt hot geshvigh* is a more "realist" text in the immediacy of its depiction; still, the matured, distanced perspective of *Night*, especially with the help of the earlier text to aid in memory, offers another "realist," albeit less autobiographically accurate (and confessional) depiction of events (with more fictional license taken). The temporally distanced narrative produced by *Night*, especially in conjunction with the earlier version, instigates a problematics of memory and of (realist) memoir genre, in turn further informing readers' perception of the constellation of Holocaust portrayal.

Theodor Adorno's aforementioned assertion about the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz has frequently been invoked in relation to the limits of Holocaust representation. As Marianne Hirsch points out, one of the consequences of Adorno's assertion has been "the effort to distinguish between the documentary and the aesthetic" (Hirsch 1997, p. 23). Wiesel's retrospective lens raises concern about the divide between documentary factuality and aestheticization within the memory process, especially concerning one's memory (or repression) of trauma. Precisely because Wiesel's autobiographical representation of Auschwitz situates itself as a factual account, the traditional questions about Holocaust writing surface of their own accord: Wiesel's account problematizes "truth and fact, reference and representation, realism and modernism, history and fiction, ethics and politics" (Hirsch 1997, p. 23). Nonetheless, for Marianne Hirsch and her notion of postmemory, Sebald's fictional,

<sup>6</sup> See Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).

<sup>8</sup> See Schwarz (2007).

photograph-enhanced narratives engage with memory on a level (temporally and generationally) beyond Wiesel's testimony. Joshua Hirsch considers Wiesel's *Night* to belong to a "discourse of trauma" (Hirsch 2004, p. 101). Such discourses of trauma occur for "a society which has suffered a massive blow" and in the period of time "after the initial encounter with a traumatizing historical event but before its ultimate assimilation" (Hirsch 2004, p. 100). The massive blow for the society of Wiesel's trauma discourse is the Holocaust; the image he attempts to convey to the reader is that of the unthinkable. When one encounters such discourse, one comes to understand, according to Hirsch, a "failure of representation" (Hirsch 2004, p. 101). Thus originates a "second phase" in the discourse of trauma in which imagination attempts to measure up to actual experience, "defined less by a particular image content than by the attempt to discover a form for presenting that content which mimics some aspects of PTSD itself" (Hirsch 2004, p. 101). Here, one approaches the works of Borchert and Sebald.

### 3. Borchert: The Bystander Outside

As a theatrical play, Borchert's *The Man Outside* belongs to a literary form that is traditionally thought of as closer to literary mimesis, or mimicking, of life (than a fictional narrative which tells, rather than shows). This form of mimesis also approximates PTSD in a way that narrative perhaps cannot. Originally a radio play, *The Man Outside* further complicates the notion of genre, declaring itself in its theatrical script a play "which no theatre will produce and no public will want to see" (Borchert [1947] 1971, p. vi). Furthermore, Borchert's writing of the play occurred in temporal immediacy to the war, and the devastation and rubble is transcribed onto the page while it is still fresh (without any sort of belated editing, such as Wiesel's rewriting of his Yiddish memoirs into *Night* for an alternative readership). For Rothberg, the modernist "confronts a particular form of progressive time consciousness, but finds his attempt to establish a before and after frustrated as he is pulled back again and again toward the site of a genocidal crime" (Rothberg 2000, p. 13). Within the diegesis of *The Man Outside*, it is indeed difficult to imagine progress or moving forward, a time "after" the trauma experience. Borchert's protagonist Beckmann's displacement of time consciousness is represented in the metaphor of his respirator glasses.<sup>9</sup> His nightmares as well as his life-as-nightmare embody Ruth Leys's description of the "traumatic nightmare as unclaimed experience" (Leys 2000, p. 272). Although a survivor of Stalingrad like Borchert himself, Beckmann assumes after the war the role of bystander—specifically because those around him refuse to "hear" his testimony. In his transition from survivor to bystander, Beckmann calls attention to the function of seeing. As Dori Laub indicates, the silence resulting from failure to bear witness amounts to a sort of self-imprisonment based on lack. It is appropriate that Borchert begins *The Man Outside* with a prologue scene featuring a dialogue between an old man (God) and Death (the new God) in which the old man lacks a purpose.

Whereas *Night* features occasional intrusions of the present into the past, *The Man Outside* can be characterized as an intrusion of the past into the present, which is also how Joshua Hirsch sees the black and white elements of the Holocaust documentary film *Night and Fog* (Hirsch 2004, p. 117). He likens them to "hypermnesic or hallucinatory episodes; we see too much" (Hirsch 2004, pp. 116–17). Although the film explores the Holocaust in the realm of concentration camps' perpetrators and victims directly, and thus serves as yet another medium that ought to be combined with the texts considered in this essay, an examination of *The Man Outside* offers a more vicarious, neutral experience of a (traumatized) bystander—a German removed from, but privy to the concentration camp experience who experiences horrors of his own on the eastern front. As a bystander and returning soldier, Beckmann attends to Germany's destitute state after the war (and the citizens' ability to come to terms with their war memories), offering the play's listener, viewer, or reader a vision into the experience

<sup>9</sup> To reference another theatrical problematization of time consciousness, Shakespeare's Hamlet constitutes the classic representation of disjointedness of time. In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida (2006) selects Hamlet as the archetype of his "hauntology," condensed into the claim "The time is out of joint."

through his hypermnesia. This in turn resembles the past's hold on Beckmann, as in his repeating nightmare. Beckmann's is the "troubled gaze of the traumatized witness" (Hirsch 2004, p. 118), representing a post-traumatic consciousness.

Cathy Caruth, in a conversation with Judith Herman, asks about her so-called dialectic of trauma, described as "the simultaneous presence of knowing and not knowing, of intrusive and constrictive symptoms, in traumatic experience, as well as in the social context surrounding trauma and the study of trauma" (Caruth 2014, p. 144). Borchert exposes this dialectic in *The Man Outside*, where Beckmann's "knowing" of his past trauma constricts him when other figures in the play refuse to share in his knowledge. Beckmann is configured as the intruder, a representative of the bodies that float along in the Elbe when society wishes they were hidden beneath the earth. As such, Beckmann manifests the conflict outlined in Herman's "Crime and Memory" referenced in Caruth, namely, "individual disturbances of memory, the amnesias and hypermnesias of traumatized people" (Caruth 2014, p. 144). In this scenario the therapy's success depends on the subject's ability to come to terms with the truth and tell it to an audience, and Beckmann's attempts at telling are denied by refusals to hear. Beckmann is ironically refused amnesia, suffering the yet-worse hypermnesia evidenced by his nightmares and hallucinatory conversations with the "Other". This hypermnesic focus on the past distorts his vision of the present as well as other characters' perceptions of him and willingness to hear him out. As the girl who rescues him from the bank of the Elbe tells him, "Without the glasses you look quite different at once" (Borchert [1947] 1971, p. 92), attributing his discomforting appearance to them. Beckmann responds, "Everything's just a blur to me now. Cough them up. I can't see a thing" (p. 92). As a result of his trauma, which he must witness alone, time is a blur to Beckmann—both the present and the past, because of its imposition into the present. "With the glasses you look like a ghost," the girl tells him, to which he answers: "Perhaps I am a ghost. Yesterday's ghost that no one wants to see today. A ghost from the war, temporarily repaired for peace" (pp. 92–93). Beckmann's self-perceived temporary repair can be understood as a reflection of his sense of duty to bear witness and tell what he has seen.

The play's original title, *Draußen vor der Tür*, can be translated as "Outside, in Front of the Door". Those who find themselves "outside" are "old people who can't adapt themselves to new conditions" (Borchert [1947] 1971, p. 123). As Beckmann laments, "We're all outside. Even God's outside, and no one opens a door to him now. Only death, at the last only death has a door for us" (Borchert [1947] 1971, p. 123). Beckmann's state of being outside the door is ironically exacerbated by the Elbe's refusing his death, as well as by the voice of the Other, who plagues him with an encouraging drive to continue forward but ultimately abandons him when Beckmann puts him to the test of his reasoning. The Other reminds Beckmann of his perpetual state of dreaming, when Beckmann confronts the Colonel with the number of deaths for which he is responsible: "Two thousand and eleven plus Beckmann makes two thousand and twelve. Two thousand and twelve nocturnal ghosts! Brr!" (p. 126). Beckmann's inability to see the present as well as the refusal of others to hear him mark the play with a denial of the senses. In the play's "Prologue," a man arrives in Germany. One reads, "He's been away for a long time, this man. A very long time. Perhaps too long. And he returns quite different from what he was when he went away" (p. 82). It is not stated whether this man is Beckmann or another, allegorical returning soldier, but the effect is the same: the "return," although spatial, does not achieve an ontological domain, and the soldiers "remain" at war, to the extent that their memories of the war continue to traumatize them. As the preface continues, one reads that this man watches a film about another returning soldier, and, as in Wiesel's *Night*, "has to pinch his arm several times during the performance, for he doesn't know whether he's waking or sleeping" (p. 82). In *The Man Outside*, Borchert blurs the distinction between dream and reality to depict trauma as a waking nightmare. For Beckmann, the present day is blurred if he removes his glasses, but he himself is obscured and rendered ghostly to others by these same lenses. Beckmann represents a traumatized nation that is forced also to come to terms with the traumas of the Holocaust for which it is itself the perpetrator, and he suffers from the blindness that can result from such trauma.

#### 4. Sebald: The Latecomer in the (British) Fog

Having examined the means by which realism and modernism (refuse to) represent trauma, be it the Holocaust or the battles of the Second World War, I now turn to W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* to consider the crucial perspective that postmodernism's postmemory of trauma adds to the equation. Rothberg writes that the postmodernist "interrogates the reign of the pure image or simulacrum and attempts to negotiate between the demands of memory and the omnipresence of mediation and commodification" (Rothberg 2000, p. 13), and mediation is certainly a key word in paraphrasing the task at hand in Sebald's "novel"—if one elects to characterize the text as such. Consisting of four stand-alone narratives, *The Emigrants* could be seen as four novellas rather than as one novel. Yet all four stories are narrated by a voice that is stylistically indiscernible from the others. The preface to the first narrative within *The Emigrants*, entitled "Dr. Henry Selwyn," reads, "And the last remnants/memory destroys" (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 1). This sets up the complicated relationship between memory and the ambivalence of erasure and preservation. Whereas Borchert's primary metaphor is Beckmann's respirator glasses, Sebald's is arguably the photograph, especially in the informed, (mis)informing context in which he places the photographs he uses. Osborne characterizes Sebald's engagement with the Holocaust as "oblique" and "indirect" (Osborne 2013, p. 1). So, too, his pictures thematically resemble those family portraits that Marianne Hirsch describes as opposed to those of mass graves—Sebald's images serve as ghostly, indirect references to the Holocaust, for example those of everyday graveyards (as metonymic in relation to mass graves) and a cityscape dominated by chimneys (in relation to concentration camp crematoria). These two images, tellingly, are the first and the last in his narrative (Sebald [1992] 1996, pp. 3, 235).

In responding to "the non-viability of conventional forms of narrative after 1945" (Osborne 2013, p. 1), Sebald seems to agree with Joshua Hirsch's notion of a "failure of representation" (Hirsch 2004, p. 101) of the Holocaust, and could thus be seen as contributing to the second phase of trauma discourse that Hirsch describes. The memories collected by the narrator of each of the stories are often obtained from the removed perspective of other secondary characters who knew the men (Selwyn, Bereyter, Adelwarth, and Ferber). Apparently unconsciously, narrative authority slips back and forth between the narrator and the narrative's interlocutors, a characteristic gesture on Sebald's part, to be observed also in *Austerlitz* (2001). *The Emigrants* can be seen as a text dealing with four separate aftershocks of the same historical rupture. The *Nachträglichkeit* of the men's trauma after the war leads to their deterioration as well as their self-erasures. As a result of Dr. Selwyn's suicide, the narrator of the first episode is also plagued with shock in a manner that can be said to be *nachträglich*: "I had no great difficulty in overcoming the initial shock. But certain things, as I am increasingly becoming aware, have a way of returning unexpectedly, often after a lengthy absence" (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 23). Sebald constructs his narrative in this manner, with unannounced leitmotifs resurfacing intermittently in the four narratives. One such motif is the freezing and thawing of ice (a metaphor for the preservation and obscurity of memory), and another is the mountain climber Nabokov appearing first in the Selwyn episode and then in "Paul Bereyter". However, another climber makes a perhaps yet more powerful impression on the reader. Naegeli's body thematizes remains, traces, and the return of memory (*vis-à-vis* the dead), when it is released by the Oberaar glacier seventy-two years after his disappearance. The ice leitmotif is accompanied by one of water, especially shorelines, but also specific places: Lake Geneva surfaces in each of the four narratives as a representation of the tenuous collective memory of Holocaust victims.

As much as Sebald's text appears to be critical of the failure of conventional forms of Holocaust representation, it also emphasizes its own impossibility of success by positing the failure of memory. Nonetheless, Sebald continues to inspire authors such as his contemporary Christoph Ransmayr and the director Christian Petzold, as well as a new generation of present-day artists and authors—all of whom add to the existing constellation of engagement with Holocaust memory. The failure of memory, attached to the metaphor of literal and figurative blindness, is often accompanied by or results from seeing things all too clearly, evoking Joshua Hirsch's linking of amnesia with hypermnnesia. Photographs can instigate a literal and emotionally charged return of the past, as the narrator observes

in Edwin and Selwyn (Sebald [1992] 1996, pp. 16–17). Ironically, however, this emotion overpowers their sense of time, and the moment of the present invades violently as they stare silently at the picture of themselves for such a long time that the glass in the slide shatters. A dark crack forms across the screen, and in the narrator's memory as well—though later, it vanishes from his mind “almost completely” (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 17). The problem of first-hand authenticity of witnessing is introduced here, as the narrator concedes; he describes Lasithi as a place that he has himself never seen (p. 18). Lasithi can also be understood as the trauma of the Holocaust, which the second generation simply cannot experience.

History as collective memory also posits the dangers of forgetting, denial, and erasure. The narrator is disappointed that Paul Bereyter's obituary only remarks “that during the Third Reich Paul Bereyter had been prevented from practicing his chosen profession” (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 27), but gives no further explanation or biographical details, as though history itself slights Bereyter's life story. The reader, however, has the account of the narrator in this instance. That Bereyter dons his old *Wandervogel* windcheater when he commits suicide indicates an imposition of past traumas such that Paul views them not only as formative to his identity, but also as inevitably consuming it. Mme Landau describes her belated reaction to the hints of suicidal tendencies. She tells the narrator, “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” (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 63). The bird's shadow functions similarly to a photograph, described by Hirsch as containing “simultaneous presence of life and death” (Hirsch 1997, p. 19). Sebald's narrator describes the effects of such photographs on him personally: he leafs through the album over and over, returning to it years later. He finds that it seemed then, and indeed it still seems “as if the dead were coming back, or as if we were on the point of joining them” (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 46). The ghosts of the previous generation thus haunt the narrator through these photographs as well as in his memory.

Paul's eyes worsen, seemingly in connection with the trauma that he witnessed during the *Kristallnacht* as a child, but which has been repressed in his unconscious. After Bereyter's eyes are bandaged following an operation for cataracts, he admits “that he could [now] see things then with the greatest clarity, as one sees them in dreams, things he had not thought he still had within him” (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 51). The surgeon prescribes looking at leaves to improve his eyesight. However, according to Mme Landau, Paul disregarded the doctor's orders at night, reading works by authors who “had taken their own lives or been close to doing so” as a result of the war (p. 58). Eventually, the condition of Paul's eyes “began to deteriorate,” until “all he could see were fragmented or shattered images” (p. 59), recalling the shattered glass slide from the Dr. Selwyn episode.

Sebald begins the Adelwarth episode by calling attention to the failure of memory: “I have barely any recollection of my own of Great-Uncle Adelwarth,” the narrator writes (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 67). Because memory fails, the narrative shifts quickly to other authorities, but when Aunt Theres departs for America, disappears as easily as memory or as arbitrarily as the past—“for ever, as one might say” (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 69). The narrator, as a result, forgets his own *dreams* of America. Instead, he becomes interested in what appears to have been his great-uncle's desire “to escape the conventional structures of family, home, and community, structures which want to root the individual in a spatial sense, but also in terms of history” (Osborne 2013, p. 105). Aunt Fini seems, to an extent out of her own sadness and trauma, to refuse to participate in the genealogical and epistemological excavating of Adelwarth but passes this task on to the narrator.<sup>10</sup> The diary of Adelwarth's that Aunt Fini gives the narrator is written in a plethora of languages and in poor handwriting, making its decoding a substantial challenge. Aunt Fini's poor eyesight replicates the metaphor of blindness and vision in

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<sup>10</sup> She offers the narrator a photo of Adelwarth taken while they were in Jerusalem as well as a diary that she claims not to have been able to decipher herself.



connection to memory and recalls Bereyter's condition. Nonetheless, she is able to recall and share, quite vividly, the details of the relationship between Adelwarth and Cosmo Solomon. Cosmo, in turn, experienced episodes in which "he would be so beside himself that he no longer even recognized Ambros. And yet he claimed that he could see clearly, in his own head, what was happening in Europe: the inferno, the dying, the rotting bodies lying in the sun in open fields" (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 95). The metaphor of vision here is manifested in near-sighted and far-sighted components. According to Aunt Fini, Adelwarth and Cosmo's visit to Egypt "was an attempt to regain the past, an attempt that appears to have failed in every respect" (pp. 96–97).<sup>11</sup> As with the other emigrants, attempts both to regain and to forget the traumatic past ultimately fail for this generation.

The narrator himself becomes a sort of ghost in this episode, travelling to "what was once the most luxurious hotel on the coast of Normandy," which is now "a monumental monstrosity half sunk in the sand" (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 118). The few other guests at the hotel are also ghosts, "indestructible ladies who come every summer and haunt the immense edifice. They pull the white dustsheets off the furniture for a few weeks and at night, silent on their biers, they lie in the empty midst of it" (p. 118). White dust sheets often signify spaces haunted by memories, usually in private houses, although hotels are frequently haunted domains as well. Tellingly, the narrator is haunted on this night of his stay in the hotel by Cosmo and Ambros in a dream in which he is crossing the Atlantic, though they remain silent. When he tries to approach them, "they dissolved before my very eyes, leaving behind them nothing but the vacant space they occupied" (p. 123). All of the emigrants similarly dissolve from existence, although they have been preserved in narrative and photographic memory.

Of Sebald's characters, Max Ferber (or Aurach in the original German) represents "the most tangible link to the Holocaust" (Osborne 2013, p. 107), having escaped to England although his parents were deported to a camp and murdered. In this sense, Ferber's trauma was the least vicarious of the men belonging to the postwar generation under investigation by the narrating figure. Perhaps even more telling is the fact that W.G. (Winfried Georg) also went by Max Sebald, and personally felt a sense of vicarious trauma in connection to the Holocaust. The narrator seeks Ferber out in Manchester, which he describes as uncannily empty. The woman who lets him into his lodging has a "Lorelei-like air about her" (Sebald [1992] 1996, p. 152), and even on Saturday evening in the city, "there was no sign of life" (p. 155), as though the only residents were ghosts (recalling the Normandy hotel in the Adelwarth episode). Visiting Ferber, the narrator learns that the dust that is a byproduct of his painting "was the true product of his continuing endeavors and the most palpable proof of his failure" (p. 161). Ferber's technique involves "constantly erasing" (p. 162), but in the process also creates the sense of a genealogy of faces left behind in each new one. Creating and rejecting his own history in his art, Ferber seems to become the dust that results: "He felt closer to dust, he said, than to light, air or water" (p. 161). He tells the narrator about a man who absorbed so much silver in his photographic lab career "that he had become a kind of photographic plate" (p. 165), and it seems that Ferber sees his own fate as similar. A memory of a slipped disk and "the crooked position" he was forced to stand in reminds him also of a photograph his father took of him when he had been bent over his writing: "I began to remember, and it was probably those recollections that prompted me to go on to Lake Geneva after eight days, to retrace another old memory that had long been buried and which I had never dared disturb" (p. 172). Though Ferber does not explicitly reveal this second old memory here, we learn over the next twenty or so pages that he is painfully remembering his childhood, in which his family was

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<sup>11</sup> The trip to Egypt is also likely a reference to Ingeborg Bachmann's *Der Fall Franza* (*The Case of Franza*) (1966)—another account of the violent aftershocks of trauma.

deported to Dachau.<sup>12</sup> As a result of this recovery, Ferber comes to an ultimate judgment of Germany as a country.

Ferber tells the narrator that Germany is “frozen in the past, destroyed, a curiously extraterritorial place, inhabited by people whose faces are both lovely and dreadful” (p. 181). Rather than the blindness of forgetting, “he could see it all with painful clarity” (pp. 187–88). Yet the picture we see a few pages later, of a haunted-looking Victorian house, features a girl in front of the house whose face is blurred. And Ferber, too, tells of the barrier that is beginning to coagulate in front of his view of the past as a result of what he sees to be failed collective German memory: “I felt increasingly that the mental impoverishment and lack of memory that marked the Germans, and the efficiency with which they had cleaned everything up, were beginning to affect my head and my nerves” (p. 225). For Ferber, the speed with which Germany moved beyond the Holocaust added to the traumas of his youth, including the deportation of immediate family to Dachau.

## 5. Conclusions

In many ways, Sebald works with the remnants of the memories that comprise Wiesel’s text and haunt Borchert’s. The ghosts in *The Emigrants* belong to the realm of postmemory, which Marianne Hirsch describes as “as full and as empty, certainly as constructed, as memory itself” (Hirsch 1997, p. 22). Hirsch’s notion of postmemory is indebted to Henri Raczymow’s “*mémoire trouée*,” his “memory shot through with holes” (Hirsch 1997, p. 23), and finds its embodiment in the photograph. Hirsch characterizes the connection between photographs and life as “umbilical” (p. 23), a designation which also stages the intergenerational function of photographs. In *The Emigrants* many photographs have vanished, while the remaining ones must be tracked down. Once again, we face the question of whether Sebald’s *The Emigrants* is superior to Borchert’s *The Man Outside* or Wiesel’s *Night*—whether Sebald’s indirect approach to (Holocaust) trauma conveys it more accurately. Dominick LaCapra argues that “history is a field of framed hyperbole” (LaCapra 2001, pp. 194–95) and thus one might be inclined to favor Sebald’s hyperbolic postmodernism. However, LaCapra also points out that “history faces the problem of both writing about and writing out trauma” (p. 194), and given this pattern of trauma in history, one ultimately turns back towards Benjamin’s notion of time (the past and present) as a constellation. As with Marianne Hirsch’s emphasis on the role of context for the photograph of the woman Frieda, Sebald’s *Emigrants*, too, requires appropriate contextualization. As different expressions of the same collective trauma, the three texts examined contextualize one another, demonstrating the significance of comparing various representations of the Holocaust to understand its experience as completely and preserve its memory as holistically as possible.

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<sup>12</sup> Ferber then recounts his father taking him up the Jungfrauoch to the largest glacier in Europe, telling the narrator that he recollected these memories on his train journey through Switzerland thirty years after the fact. During this later visit, Ferber recalls, he was led down the mountain in his state of dizziness with a man with a butterfly net (here, Sebald draws inspiration from Walter Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood around 1900*). In this roundabout way, Ferber approaches his childhood traumas, including the deportation of his family to Dachau.

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