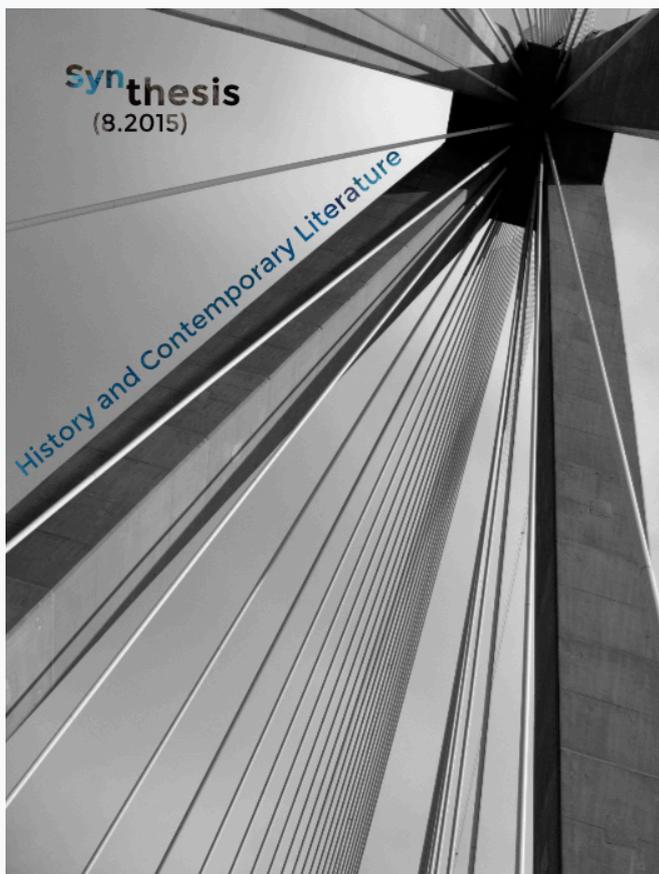


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Historiography in Photo-textuality: The Representation of Trauma in W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*

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Historiography in Photo-textuality: The Representation of Trauma in W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*

Angeliki Tseti

Abstract

This paper springs from the issues raised with reference to the historiographical representation of limit events and the challenges presented in the attempt to address collective trauma, and wishes to contend that fictional works of photo-textuality—in other words novels which consist of verbal as well as visual (photographic) components—carry the potential to place such ‘unrepresentable’ or ‘indescribable’ events among the historically narratable. While focusing predominantly on word-image interactions, this paper reads W. G. Sebald’s photo-text *The Emigrants* (1992) as an example of photo-literary narratives of trauma, to examine the ways in which these bimedial structures enable the surfacing of memory in multidirectionality. This is achieved, I argue, via the employment of the valuable functions of testimony and witnessing, the establishment of polyphony and multi-perspectivity—consequent, predominantly, to the reciprocal relationship between verbal and visual narrative— and the ensuing involvement of the respondent viewer/reader in the production of meaning. Within this context, the insertion of the photograph in the verbal narrative, and the aporias raised by the interaction of the two components, allows for an affective mode for addressing the singular traumatic event to be developed, and for historic calamity to be approached in a manner that echoes the experiences of other victims and/or survivors of catastrophic events. Thus, the traumatic past may be re-constructed by analogy and, while singular, also meet Paul Ricoeur’s definition of the historical as contributing “to the development of a plot.”

Introduction: Limit events and the challenges of representation

In his essay “Narrative Time,” Paul Ricoeur claims that “to be historical, an event must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot” (171). Hayden White, in his turn, in “The Historical Event,” while acknowledging the necessity to embrace a singular event as historical, emphasises the condition that it be “validly describable” (21), in accordance, again, with the elements of a narrative plot.

Recent advances in Trauma Studies, however, and especially the field's preoccupation with singular historical instances of collective trauma, predominantly the Holocaust, raise important issues concerning the historiographical representation of experiences that are deemed unrepresentable or even ineffable and, what is more, have yet again brought to the fore the problematic of mnemonic accuracy with relation to the rendition of the historical event. More specifically, Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). According to Caruth, these events are not fully grasped as they occur, which results in their return in repeated flashbacks or nightmares; the inability to articulate these horrific experiences lies precisely in the lack of pre-existing schemata that could provide a prior scheme of knowledge and thus possibly absorb the traumatic experience and integrate it. Hence, what is needed, is a space where traumatic memory, "inflexible and invariable...a solitary activity" —as was described by Van der Kolk and Van der Hart in "The Intrusive Past"— becomes "narrative memory" (163), a social act that can be shared. In tandem, Dominick LaCapra raises similar questions by discussing the task of the historian, whose role as a secondary witness proves contestable, since s/he is bound by a commitment to objective modes of understanding and knowledge; LaCapra highlights the challenges presented in the attempt to reconstruct and represent such 'limit events,'¹ and suggests that the excess with which these events are bestowed enhances our disbelief of historical grand narratives and their alleged comprehension of the past that sharply contrasts the disruption of linearity and distortion of knowledge that trauma entails. For LaCapra, such challenges can be overcome when the historic event is approached through testimony; in his own words: "testimonies are significant in the attempt to understand experience and its aftermath, including the role of memory and its lapses, in coming to terms with – or denying and repressing – the past" (86-7).

In parallel, photography's recognition as a legitimate domain of intellectual inquiry and its establishment as the subject of rigorous academic investigation have paved the way to the articulation of important theoretical work relating to the issues raised by the medium's properties, but also its intricate relationship with language. Within the context of Trauma Studies specifically, critical theorists such as Ulrich Baer and Marianne Hirsch —investigating the Holocaust and 9/11 respectively— have turned their gaze to alternative *tropoi* of representation and have promoted photography, and the visual in general, as the traumatic genre *par excellence*. Focusing on the 'frozen' temporality of the photograph, proponents of these theories underline the similarities between the workings of the photographic apparatus and the structure of traumatic memory, with reference not only to the

capturing of instances that are not readily available to the eye or conscious memory accordingly, but also to the deferral of understanding inherent in both. Ulrich Baer, for instance, suggests that: “because trauma blocks routine mental processes from converting an experience into memory or forgetting, it parallels the defining structure of photography, which also traps an event during its occurrence while blocking its transformation into memory” (8-9). Similarly, Marianne Hirsch writes about trauma and loss and suggests that photography:

[I]s the visual genre that best captures the trauma and loss...this is related to photograph's temporality. Photography interrupts time...to photograph is to look in a different way – to look without understanding. Understanding is deferred until we see the developed image. Deferral connects photography to trauma, which is characterised by a delayed understanding. (“The Day Time Stopped” 2)

With reference to the enunciation of the traumatic experience, however, and, by transference, the narration of the historical event, the photographic still, in its frozen ambiguity and provisionality, eventually reenacts the inaccessibility of the experience, the distortion of reality and, in effect, the suppression of memory. Thus, the photograph can potentially prolong the impossibility of narration and, far from resolving the incompleteness of memory, perpetuate what Dori Laub calls the ‘collapse of witnessing’ in numerous of her works; in other words, the impossibility of telling represented by photographic silence signals a failure to give testimony and reproduces the inability to bear witness. How, then, can the photographic proceed from performing trauma to articulating it so that it can be historically narrated? Further still, given the proclaimed singularity of ‘limit’ historical instances – to return to Ricoeur and White— should trauma be articulated, how can the expression of the indescribable event find its place among the historically narratable?

Historiography's affinity with fictional narration proves especially pertinent within this context. Given the impossibility of empirically affirming historical events that breach the limits of representation, and, simultaneously, the inability to place the limit event within “schemes of prior knowledge” highlighted by Cathy Caruth as a dominant factor of the perpetuation and inconclusiveness of trauma, the literary text surfaces as a privileged historiographical site. While imaginatively reconstructing, rather than mirroring, the historical events, literary narratives, I argue, provide the desired familiar schema which bears the potential to integrate and absorb the traumatic experience. Thus, while counteracting the failings that stem from the established grand narratives' positivist claims to truth, these narratives may eventually lead to the articulation of traumatic memory; this is enabled to become narrative memory, as the text undertakes the responsibility for testimony, so that meaning can be restored not only individually but also culturally. Indeed, as suggested by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, the act of writing and

reading literary texts can be compared to the act of bearing witness, and so they propose “considering...literature and art as a precocious mode of witnessing –of accessing reality– when all other modes of knowledge are precluded” (xx). Still, how can a novel, other than a memoir or an autobiography, rise against the ineffability of a traumatic event? How is it possible for a work of fiction to reliably explore inexpressible facts or distorted realities rather than perpetuating what Felman and Laub term the “crisis of truth”? And how can the novel remedy the “collapse of witnessing,” in other words, the failure to give testimony, and be considered as a “precocious mode” of bearing witness (xx)?

While reading W. G. Sebald’s photo-text *The Emigrants*, this paper takes these positions and questions as a point of departure to contend that works of photo-textuality² –in other words novels which consist of verbal as well as visual components– enable the construction of multidirectionality in bimodality as a mode of transcending the aforementioned problematic. I wish to suggest that photo-texts which make part of trauma literature specifically employ the photograph’s potential to convey meaning beyond the images contained within it as a key element towards forming a narrative where historical memory is reconstructed and reinstated by being given space to flow multidirectionally, by drawing analogies. More specifically, while focusing predominantly on word-image interactions, it will be argued that the choir of voices W. G. Sebald stages in order to testify to the life-stories of his characters is complemented and enhanced by the insertion of the photographic element, so that, in effect, this prose narrative approaches historical calamity in a manner that resonates the experiences of other victims and/or survivors of catastrophic events. This is achieved as the *bricolage* form of these narratives, specifically their photo-textuality, actively engages and assigns the pivotal role to the reader; in Sebald’s work the reader is invited to become a participant in the fiction-making by distinguishing between different narrators and sorting out blends of life stories, and moreover to make the connections and provide interpretations, based on the interaction between verbal and visual, thus becoming a ‘viewer/reader.’³ Within this context, the viewer/reader assumes the role of the witness while testimonies – now mediated through the author/narrator – are delivered in both verbal and visual terms and ‘the truth’ lies in the combination and complementarity of the two elements; within this mode, there are as many listeners as there are readers, the possibility of addressing the traumatic experience is amplified and the surfacing of memory – and, consequently, the narration of traumatic history – finds fertile ground to unfold.

The “Sebaldian device”

W. G. Sebald’s work has received wide critical attention and has been internationally acclaimed for the high lyricism of his linguistic and pictorial landscapes but also, mostly, for the originality of his prose, the hybrid quality of his mosaic narratives that are neither purely biographies, nor exclusively travelogue memoirs; Sebald himself has used the term “documentary fiction” (Schwartz 103) to describe *The Emigrants* and has characterised his last work, *Austerlitz*, as a “long prose elegy” (103) or “a prose book of indefinite form” (123), strongly refusing to designate them as novels.⁴ Blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, Sebald’s works employ both elements to constitute *loci* of encounter between private stories and public histories, investigations of the individual’s place and interaction with(in) the collective and, more importantly, representations of personal narratives developing in the midst or aftermath of a historical calamity. In fact, W. G. Sebald’s writings perform a return to the past as the author delves on the intricate workings of remembrance, the resurgence of memories and an incessant sense of haunting. In Arthur Lubow’s words: “Sebald, temperamentally, preferred to keep his eyes averted from the future, which for him impended heavily with disaster...he regarded remembering as a moral and political act” (Schwartz 161). This persistent “return of the dead”⁵ that the author delves on is especially dominant in *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, where, during the process of articulating their repressed memories and the experiences that have determined their lives, Sebald’s characters bring to the centre stage the works’ haunting theme, the Holocaust. Although never directly confronted or explicitly mentioned, specific references in the books draw direct, albeit subtle, parallels to the horrific experience that led to the disappearance or dislocation of European Jews. Sebald complies with the idea that the magnitude of the atrocities committed in the Holocaust prohibits the representation of the event. In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, he expressed his views stating:

to write about concentration camps is practically impossible. So you need to find ways of convincing the reader that this is something on your mind but that you do not necessarily roll out, you know, on every other page. *The reader needs to be prompted...*and this is why the main scenes of horror are never directly addressed. I think it is sufficient to remind people, because *we’ve all seen images*, but these images militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things. And also paralyse, as it were, our moral capacity. So the only way in which one can approach these things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation. (emphasis added. Schwartz 80)

Consonant with these views, Sebald’s photo-texts, as will be discussed by example of *The Emigrants*, engage in the representation of the mind-numbing historical event “tangentially, by reference.” The author approaches the horrors of the Holocaust by shedding light to its residual impact on the fragmented lives of his

characters; he highlights testimony as a privileged medium of unraveling the victims' life stories and representing the traumatic experience and its manifestations, and intersperses his verbal narrative with photographic stills that do not only re-enact the frozen temporality of trauma, but also, predominantly, endow his storytelling with an element of multi-perspectivity. Hence, the singular past is reconstructed and narrated as a kaleidoscopic image that —via the employment of the photograph— can be subjected to multi-prism viewings and interpretations and, potentially, be placed in the collective narrative plot.

The Emigrants (1996) traces the life stories of four émigrés: Dr Henry Selwyn, a retired surgeon from Lithuania who migrated to London with his family when he was still a boy and now spends his days working in his garden in Norwich; Paul Bereyter, a German school teacher, who struggled to find his place in a country that would not allow him to teach because he was “only three quarters an Aryan” (50) and who eventually ended his life by lying down in the railway tracks; Ambros Adelwarth, who sought his fate in America, traveled the world in the service of a wealthy employer, Cosmo Solomon, and finally retreated to a sanatorium in Ithaca, where he was willingly and without protest subjected to electroshock treatments until he quietly passed away, defeated by his depression; and Max Ferber, an obscure German painter who was fled to London with the promise that his parents would soon follow him and is now residing in Manchester, a choice ordained by the deportation of his parents, the news of their death, and his wish not “to be reminded of [his] origins by anything or anyone” (191). These men are all stigmatised by their family stories and fates and bear the scars of the traumatic experience, the memories that elude repression and resurface, manifesting themselves in diverse ways. Dr Selwyn confesses that, having “concealed [his] true background for a long time” (21), and while still unable to work through the years of the second war that “were a blinding, bad time for [him], about which [he] could not say a thing even if [he] wanted to” (21), he is haunted by that first migration, the departure from Lithuania. He tells the narrator how the images of that “exodus,” which had been erased from memory for so many years, have recently begun appearing again, persistent and vivid “as if it were only yesterday” (19). Paul Bereyter progressively loses his eyesight, to the point where “soon all he could see were fragmented or shattered images” (59) and Max Ferber suffers from severe back pains, due to a slipped disk, that paralyse him and instigate a “flood of memory,” as well as the realisation that “being utterly crippled by pain in this way was related, in the most precise manner conceivable, to the inner constitution [he] had acquired over the years” (172). Ambros Adelwarth, accordingly, is described by a physician in Ithaca as the embodiment of melancholy: “every casual utterance, every gesture, his entire deportment (he held himself erect until the end), was tantamount to a constant pleading for leave of absence” (111). Having spent a large

part of his life in a peculiar relationship of companionship with Cosmo Solomon — an idiosyncratically sensitive personality himself who was so deeply affected by the war that estranged himself from his friends, succumbed to visions of the devastation, and spent his days steeped in melancholy while at night he paced the rooms of his estate in rage— Uncle Adelwarth is described as a strong, impressive yet solemn and reserved man, a globetrotter who constantly roams the world but can never escape from his ghosts.

The four protagonists' stories are relayed through an obscure I-narrator to whom all characters are related through familial or social ties, and are reconstructed via personal accounts but also testimonies provided by material documentation such as diaries and photographic albums. Sebald scholarship has elaborated on the I-narrator extensively, predominantly with reference to the specificities of his persona and his autobiographical identification with the writer — as suggested by the occasional odd detail about the narrator's personal or professional circumstances at the time of his encounter with the protagonists— but also his function in the narrative technique and content.⁶ The different perspectives formulated as to the extent and nature of his investment notwithstanding, the narrator is appointed the role of the listener, collector and disseminator of these stories and assumes the responsibility to bear witness; more than that, as he is depicted engrossed in these stories and struggling with the challenge to reproduce these accounts in writing, he is transformed into a "true witness," what Dori Laub calls "a co-owner of the traumatic event." Laub defines this listener as someone who "through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (57), while simultaneously preserving his own position and perspective, protecting his own private space and acknowledging his status as a separate entity that will relate to the victim but will not identify with them: "The listener, therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself. It is only in this way...that he can become the enabler of the testimony — the one who triggers its initiation, as well as the guardian of its process and of its momentum" (58). Indeed, Sebald's narrator reaches further than merely voicing the testimonies of the exiled; a wanderer himself, he seeks to make connections, by traveling to the places mentioned in the narratives, by making enquiries with people who can shed light to the stories, provide details or the missing links, and by retrieving the material objects that would authenticate the accounts. Hence, in the third story, for example, the narrator reconstructs his great uncle Ambros Adelwarth's life story through family accounts and photographic albums, ponders over his uncle's travel diaries, but also retraces his subject's steps by traveling to the United States, visiting a sanatorium in Ithaca, where Ambros voluntarily retreated to spend the final years of his life, and interviewing one of the doctors who were there at the time, a witness to his uncle's end. In the fourth part of *The Emigrants*,

Max Ferber narrates his story to the narrator, albeit reluctantly at first, and then entrusts him with his family documents, thus sharing, although mostly transferring, their traumatic impact with his witness:

[A] number of photographs and almost a hundred pages of handwritten memoirs penned by his mother...like one of those evil German fairy tales in which, once you are under the spell, you have to carry on to the finish, till your heart breaks, with whatever work you have begun – in this case, the remembering, writing and reading. (192-93)

In other words, this narrator acts not only as an active facilitator of the testimony and communicator of the experience –rather than restricting to the role of the passive interviewer– but also as an idiosyncratic historian, very similar to the model promoted by LaCapra, who embarks from and relies on testimony, rather than objective knowledge and empirical data, in order to retrieve the supporting documents and eventually reconstruct the past.⁷

Consequent to this process, the image of the past is formed as a composite picture, a mosaic of separate, yet similar, experiences of individuals who have been traumatised by the same event. This “prose book” constitutes, in effect, a choir of voices joined by their experience of persecution, uprooting and exile, dislocation and estrangement. Apart from the explicit multi-vocality established by its being structured in four parts, each dedicated to the story of a different person, polyphony in *The Emigrants* is also constructed by the fact that these stories are told through different (always noted) sources, as the narrator proceeds with his visits and research and, therefore, more instances of traumatic experience are brought to the fore and testimonies multiply. The narration shifts smoothly and seamlessly as the author changes from third to first person without using quotation marks and each character steps forward to unfold their own story in monologues that eventually efface the narrator. Max Ferber’s mother’s diaries, for instance, constitute a blend of perspectives narrated in indirect discourse where Ferber’s, his mother’s and the narrator’s viewpoints interchange freely and unobtrusively. In the second story, Paul Bereyter, the protagonist’s life story is recounted by Mme Landau in a hypotactical manner interspersed with constant reminders of the source: “continued Mme Landau” (48), “Paul once described...said Mme Landau” (51), “as Mme Landau emphasized” (53); Ambros Adelwarth’s story, the most mediated of the four, is delivered through the perspective accounts of the narrator’s aunt and uncle, as well as the physician in Ithaca, while also complemented by the protagonist’s own voice, resonating in his diaries. Arguably, the enunciation of the traumatic experience in multivocality bears the potential to compensate for the mnemonic inaccuracy and factual distortion inherent in the narration of a ‘limit event’ and, with reference to the event’s fictional rendition, facilitates an exploration of the indescribable experience that would foster the

attempt to delineate it. As mentioned above, this process is further enhanced with the insertion of the photographic element which not only anchors the fictional account to the realm of the real but also, by creating caesura in the narrative, paves the course of interpretation.

The visual is central to W. G. Sebald's work, as the great majority of his texts are interspersed with reproductions of photographs, cards, paintings, blueprints or diary pages. Accordingly, images play a pivotal role in *The Emigrants*, functioning multifariously as elements of the plot but also as carriers of memory and materials of constructing relationships between the verbal and the visual, the individual and the collective, the familial and the historical. The type and subject matter of the photographs embedded in Sebald's photo-texts are seminal for the birth of mental associations and, consequently, the establishment of a multidirectional type of memory. Captionless and ambiguous, often grainy and unclear, occasionally of indeterminate origin, they often prove more destabilizing and disturbing rather than illustrative and documentary. As Samuel Pane suggests, "[T]hey paradoxically reinforce and undermine the credibility of accounts offered and recorded by Sebaldian characters...they manifest the disparity between the catastrophic events of history and the ability of human memory and archival technology to accurately recall them" (37).

The seventy-seven photographs included in the photo-text⁸ are, as often mentioned by the author himself in several interviews, authentic in their majority, collected from the personal archives and family albums of the protagonists in the book. Their primary function, therefore, is to equip the text with veracity and act as testimonial evidence in its simplest, crudest and most literal form. Upon their initial encounter with the photographic element of the book, the viewer/reader may detect numerous examples of informative accordance between the verbal and the visual narratives, for instance, the images of Ambros Adelwarth's diaries accompanying the account of their contents (132, 135), or the family album photographs performing a visual diegesis of Aunt Fini's recollection of the family history (74, 75, 78, 92, 94, 101, 102). Sometimes these very photographs also acquire a symbolic function, since, as Silke Horstkotte observes, "a single, isolated photograph can hint at a larger context with which it stands in a conventional relation" (35). Photographs of cemeteries (222-25), for instance, symbolizing absence and loss, bear direct and explicit connotations, in the same way as the photographs of railway tracks (27, 62) in the context of the Holocaust. An equivalent symbolic weight is born in *The Emigrants* by the image of the tree (3, 180) which is especially relevant in the context of a novel that unravels the stories of the exiled; it encompasses tales of the de-rooted and the drifting within an image of deep rooted-ness and firm standing and thus symbolises both the lack of and the striving for belonging.

Nevertheless, viewers/readers soon realise that for every image corresponding to the verbal narrative there are others that stand in isolation, without written referents, such as the initial photograph of a cemetery dominated by a huge oak tree (3), which actually inaugurates this photo-text.⁹ Subsequently, a closer examination of the visual element in this prose narrative destabilises the initial impression of the visual intended to be solely a marker of authenticity or an anchor to reality. The uncertainty over their provenance notwithstanding, vagueness and lack of clarity inherent in the photographs embedded in the book render the stills pregnant with multiple meanings and alternative associations, an embodiment, in effect, of the author's notion of "oblique, tangential references," but also the carrier of a parallel, visual narrative that interacts with the verbal narration in complementarity. As the viewer/reader soon realises, the same photographs that are presumably used to authenticate the tales occasionally prove to be deceiving, one of the most blatant examples being, in the second storyline, the image of Paul Bereyter's notebooks: whereas the verbal narrative informs us that Paul had been obsessively reading writers "who had taken their own lives or had been close to doing so" and that "he copied out passages into notebooks" (58), when we turn our gaze to the photographic reproductions of the notebooks we realise that what they truly contain are descriptions of "Tante Olga" (58) and "Tante Lula" (59) respectively.¹⁰ Similar is the case with the story of Dr Henry Selwyn which includes a photograph of the protagonist (16) that is, in reality, a photograph of Vladimir Nabokov¹¹ and a newspaper clipping supposedly cut out of a Lausanne paper (22) that, when closely examined, bears a stamp and a handwritten note, which leads us to believe that it has been retrieved from an archive.¹²

Prima facie, then, as its intricate workings render the photographic element inconclusive and interrogatory rather than enlightening and explanatory, in tandem with the instability established as text and image overlap and intertwine, the very possibility of narrative is brought into question and the "crisis of truth" and "collapse of witnessing" appear to be re-enacted, even perpetuated. This sentiment is considerably intensified when, later in the book, Sebald reminds viewer/readers that photographs are subject to the photographer's perspective, intent and staging, which he palpably exemplifies with a reference to the infamous Nazi book burning photograph (184). This picture denotes a blatant example of manipulation since, as Max Ferber explains, the burning took place in the evening and the darkness precluded all possibilities of taking "any decent photograph" (183). The story that the Nazis used a photograph of another gathering, to which they added the swathe of smoke and the dark colors of the night, is verified with the narrator's visit to the Würzburg archive and the tracing of the photograph in question; the notion, therefore, that, since "the photographic document published

in the paper was a fake” (183), “so too everything else had been a fake, from the start” (184) is explicitly and firmly established.¹³

Far from undermining the process of witnessing to the point of impossibility, however, the photographic indeterminacy established by Sebald seems intended, precisely, to “prompt the readers,” whose involvement in the construction of meaning is vital for the placement of the limit event among the historically narratable.

The historiography of trauma in photo-textuality

Despite the perplexity of the visual narrative and its disruptive quality, within the photo-textual mode witnessing is reshaped and restored since, during the process of exploration and interpretation, the viewers/readers potentially resort to their own knowledge and assumptions and so, along with their efforts to assign meaning, they may also bring to the fore different instances of catastrophe, lying in their own backgrounds; they engage in acts of testimony and witnessing that expand further and include more historical instances of trauma. Specifically, the disruption and fissures created by the insertion of the photographs and photographic reproductions of documents in the text —when these are arranged in a bimodal layout¹⁴— but also, more importantly, their relation of “interference”¹⁵ with the text play the most crucial role in the viewer/reader’s interpretative processes. The aporias raised by the interplay of the two media and their spatiotemporal relations incite the viewer/reader to pause in contemplation and thus, in Liliane Louvel’s words, “a seesaw movement between photograph and text” (45) is generated, that opens up a third space where the “pictorial third” is formed. Louvel has defined the “pictorial third” as:

[T]he in-between image conjured by a ‘pictorial reading’, that is, one in which word and image combine and intermediality fully plays its role. This in-between image floats in the reader’s mind...a phenomenological event, a visual movement produced in the viewer-reader’s mind by the passage between the two media. It is a virtual image engineered by the text and reinvented by the reader. (45)

Evidently, this image will differ from the images created in the mind’s eyes of other viewer/readers, as well as from those of the narrator. As mentioned above, the “pictorial third” image is reliant on each recipient’s personal reservoir of experiences and so two of these can never fully coincide. Louvel proceeds to suggest that the “pictorial third” is used in the Sebaldian universe and system as a device that will, among other things, reduce “the free play of the imagination” (46) and lead either to the recognition and identification of the photograph or to the creation of doubt concerning its origins and authenticity — a process that she terms the “sebaldian device.” Given Jean-Christophe Bailly’s supposition, however, that all images, irrespective of their uniqueness, also belong to an infinite nexus of other

images and that the more singular an image is the greater its power of connectibility (126),¹⁶ the observation of the photographs interpolated in the verbal narrative can also lead to the triggering of mental images and associations, perhaps of a different traumatic event.

The subject matter and grainy quality of the photographs facilitates the birth of these associations. Documentary, rather than 'artistic,' whether they depict landscapes or people or everyday objects, these pictures are ordinary and banal and invite what Marianne Hirsch calls "affiliative looking," the type of looking we employ when looking at family photographs: "we all have pictures like these in our own albums, and thus we invest them with a form of looking that is broadly shared across our culture" ("I Took Pictures" 75). The ordinariness and familiarity inherent in these photographs eliminates the distancing and consequent possibility of failure to bear witness that can result from viewing disturbing images and instigates the viewer/reader's involvement. Their connectibility to a number of other, similar photographs in our own albums, to pictures we might have taken or seen, establishes a relation of affect¹⁷ and, in turn, this affective encounter triggers the thought processes that will evoke diverse associations and forge the links between different traumatic experiences.

Within this context, the mnemonic or interpretative lacunae which define the singular, indescribable event can potentially be filled through a process of dis- and re-association and, therefore, understanding may ensue from multidirectionality. "Multidirectional Memory" has been described by Michael Rothberg as a "productive, intercultural dynamic" that refrains from "privatism," debates assertions of uniqueness and focuses on the analogies and similarities between diverse historical traumata. For Rothberg, "the model of multidirectional memory posits collective memory as partially disengaged from exclusive versions of cultural identity and acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites" (11). Seen under this light, *The Emigrants* constitutes a site of encounter and convergence for diverse experiences of dislocation and expatriation; the sense of exile, loss and non-belonging represented by Aunt Theres who "really did seem to be crying most of her life. [Aunt Fini] had never known her without a wet handkerchief in her hand" (73), could, arguably, describe the feelings of any one migrating after a civil war, or even a refugee abandoning his homeland for political or financial reasons. These parallels and connections are drawn by any one whose national, collective or family memory includes similar experiences. Let us not forget, after all, that none of the four exiles have experienced the Holocaust directly; yet their lives have been shaped by the residual impact of the event. Thus, what is constructed as the main pre-occupation is the "history of destruction"¹⁸ itself, consisting of the encompassing circumstances but also the plight of the survivors, the importance of

memory and the catastrophic consequences of silencing and forgetting, regardless of the name of the event that lies at the root.

Albeit an incipient schema, the photo-text has been used in the last decade in several literary endeavours, in relation, predominantly, to the rendition of life stories and memoirs. Significantly, however, this form of literature has also been recruited as the most eloquent *topos* and *tropos* of addressing seminal historic instances of collective trauma, in Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project* (2008), for instance, which is overflowed with the stories of a Sarajevo war photographer, or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) which is set in the aftermath of 9/11. As a wide range of voices attempts to chronicle, address, and potentially represent historic events of collective trauma – as well as the shock and loss suffered in their aftermath – and as literary responses to the intrinsic obliteration of meaning vary from experimentation with formal innovations and hybrid forms to the production of alternative versions of more conservative narratives, photo-textuality appears to emerge as a privileged mode of historiographical representation. While adopting the fragmentary, multi-perspectival mode of narration privileged by the paradigm of historiographic metafiction, photo-textuality arguably crosses the frames established between history and fiction by espousing the postmodern ideology of plurality not as an acknowledgement of difference, but as recognition of the analogies between diverse historical traumata. In other words, this form of literature bears the potential to address the postmodern issues of subjectivity and provisionality by creating indeterminacy not as a means of contestation of the historical truth, but as a mode of re-writing, re-appropriating and, specifically in instances of historical trauma, perhaps restoring the postmodern loss of cultural similarity.

Conclusion: Placing the limit event among the historically narratable

In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, W. G. Sebald talked about the ethical questions raised by the intrusiveness entailed in witnessing and documenting the life-story of an individual:

It's a received wisdom that it's good to talk about traumas, but it's not always true. Especially if you are the instigator of making people remember, talk about their pasts and so on, you are not certain whether your intrusion into someone's life may not cause a degree of collateral damage which that person might otherwise have been spared. (Schwartz 60)

Yet, the commonly acknowledged necessity to find a schema that might address and perhaps even assess and heal the traumatic impact of such historic ruptures prompts the quest for a new *locus* of expression. Arguably, photo-texts can provide such a context. Photography functions in ways that are similar to memory; it offers

no direct access to the event and thus alters or distorts it. But when reciprocally engulfed in a fictional text, a new image is engineered, that of the “pictorial third,” which is anchored both on the verbal and the visual narrative and which signals the resurrection of memory. This new image flashes like a traumatic memory and “links its apparitions together into a visual net cast upon the written text” (Louvel 46). Hence, the interplay between the verbal and the visual narrative, the anachronistic quality photography bestows on reading by arresting the text and, accordingly, the illustration the text endows to the photograph by framing it, the bimodality, in other words, in Sebald’s photo-texts testifies to a will to enunciate the ineffable, or, as per Muriel Pic, to work towards constructing the legibility of the historical instance that eludes history.¹⁹ Eventually, bimodality reshapes and restores the acts of testimony and witnessing. And it does so productively, by bringing together different (traumatic) experiences and associating them in the mind of the viewer/reader. Within this context, the relevance of literature for history acquires renewed weight and meaning, since, albeit only potentially, it may offer a ground for the elusive, singular occurrence to be historiographically reproduced, effectually addressed, and eventually contribute, to return to Ricoeur, “to the development of a plot.”

¹ I am referring to Saul Friedlander’s formulation of a non-numerical concept of ‘uniqueness,’ according to which something is unique when it passes a certain limit, when it becomes “an event which tests out traditional conceptual and representational categories” (3). This formulation of an “event at the limits” carries a special significance, I would argue, in that, by shifting the focus to the event’s ontology, rather than its singularity, it suggests that an analogous experience can be, paradoxically, repeated in history.

² An abundance of terms has been used to describe the works in question, which is only too indicative of the fluidity surrounding them: we explore “pictorial fiction” or “photo-textual fiction” and we elaborate on “mixed texts”, “photo-texts”, “photo-literature”, “iconotexts”, “photonarrative constructs” or simply “bimedial artifacts.” I have opted for the term “photo-texts” as the most appropriate in this context, since it refers specifically to the photographic image and is inclusive of all written narratives, both factual documentation, such as diaries, and fictional accounts.

³ The term has been introduced by Liliane Louvel, in her article “Photography as Critical Idiom and Intermedial Criticism,” to discuss the reader response aspect of intermediality. For Louvel, there is a distinction between the “viewer/reader” of photography-in-text fiction and its counterpart, the “reader/viewer,” in cases when the photographs are ekphrastic, in other words rendered verbally. Silke Horstkotte as well uses the term “reader/spectator” to discuss the interpretative processes of intermediality.

⁴ In his interview to Eleanor Wachtel, Sebald also used the term “prose fiction” to describe *The Emigrants*: “everything is related round various corners in a periscopic sort of way. In that sense it doesn’t conform to the patterns that standard fiction has established...But what exactly to call it, I don’t know” (Schwartz 37).

⁵ Inspiration for this phrase has been provided by the author himself when, in the second story of *The Emigrants*, Paul Bereyter, the narrator leafs through Paul's family albums and observes that: "looking at the pictures in it, it truly seemed to me, and still does, as if the dead were coming back" (46). For further elaboration of the theme, see Harris.

⁶ Ana-Isabel Aliaga-Buchenau, for instance, has focused on the narrator's simultaneous absence and presence in the narrative to discuss *The Emigrants* as a "fictional autobiography" (144); Katja Garloff notes how the narrator's dual nature as a narrative device and a literary character constructs an inherent dynamic, whereby, on the one hand, the presence of the narrator highlights mediation of the experience, while, on the other hand, his role as a literary character consists primarily in his facilitating the reconstruction of the events, thus resembling the work of a therapist; this view is also shared by J. J. Long who sees the narrator as occupying an in-between space, at once assuming an empathic stance as a listener and invested with a "kind of emotional proximity and overt affective investment" while progressively moving to the background, "swamped" by the life-stories of his interlocutors (122). Anneleen Masschelein and Marc M. Anderson discuss the narrator's significance in the development of a "periscope" type of writing and the manner in which this effect directly relates to issues of omniscience and knowledge.

⁷ A similar argument has been formulated by Lynn L. Wolff who underlines the importance of Sebald's "autobiographically-reflected narrators" and the process of "self-inscription" as a prominent feature of the author's attempt to approach historical reality via individual encounters with the past, and, thus, as a salient factor in the establishment of this "hybrid fictional prose" as a "new form of literary historiography [that] reveals an aesthetic representation and rewriting of history...through individual memory, historical documentation, and literary imagination" (270). An interesting discussion of the role of the narrator has also been provided by Katja Garloff, who explores Sebald's work within the context of the literature of testimony. Garloff highlights the narrator's oft-failed attempts to retrieve, reconstruct but also represent – through his writings – the historical past and, therefore, suggests that Sebald's prose fiction is more attuned to Giorgio Agamben's notions of "impossible return and irretrievable speech" (87) than to Felman and Laub's concept of testimony as a return and an initiation of the working through process. Nevertheless, Garloff also notes that the narrator in Sebald's prose embodies the possibility of "the establishment of new chains of transmission and, ultimately, guarantees that the story is passed on" (82).

⁸ Interestingly, the original German edition of the novel, *Die Ausgewanderten*, includes two more photographs that have been removed from the English as well as all subsequent translations and editions, owing to their close relation to Frank Auerbach, the painter who inspired Sebald in the creation of the character. Specifically, in the fourth story, Max Ferber, the author embeds a photograph of one of the painter's multi-layered portraits. The verbal referent pertaining to this picture, "when I watched Farber working on one of his portrait studies" (161), and the description of the painting process, which is not as demonstrative as the ones referring to specific photographs, refrain from alerting the viewer/reader of the missing photograph. Obviously, however, the viewing/reading experience can differ significantly. The second photograph that is missing from the English translation is a close-up view of a man's face *vu de trios-quarts*, focusing on the eye, an explicitly illustrative still that, in *Die Ausgewanderten*, was placed in the midst of its description: "I studied Ferber's dark eye, looking sideways out of a photograph that accompanied the text, and tried, at least with hindsight, to understand what inhibitions or wariness there had been on his part that had kept our conversation away from his origins" (178).

⁹ The reading of this photograph across Sebald studies, in fact, provides a very interesting example of the ways in which image interpretation is based on the viewer/readers' observations and associations, as well as the ways in which the blurriness and distance characteristic of the landscape photographs in Sebald's work may result in contradictions

and indecisiveness. Carol Bere, for instance, discusses the image of what she considers to be a yew tree—"the tree of the dead"—as a device that "sets the scene" and introduces the novel's main theme of absence (189); although Silke Horstkotte agrees that the image is a marker of the novel's main themes, she reads this photograph as a reminder of the *presence* of the dead. Horstkotte also suggests that the cemetery could be Jewish—given the abandonment and neglect—and, therefore, the photograph functions as a symbol of "the condition of Jews in post-Holocaust Europe," only to proceed with a different interpretation a few lines later and suggest that the cemetery could also be Christian, as "two of the grave markers in the background of the photograph, right by the horizon, seem to be crosses" (38).

¹⁰ Florence Feiersein and Daniel Pope, in "True Fictions and Fictional Truths: The Enigmatic in Sebald's Use of Images in 'The Emigrants,'" on the other hand, suggest that a closer inspection of the stills—specifically the initials K. M. imprinted on the top— would actually verify the photographic reproductions' relation to the diaries described in the verbal narrative; according to the two authors, the initials indicate the author Klaus Mann, who is one of the writers allegedly studied and referenced by Paul Bereyter, and the female names in question would belong to Mann's aunts. This instance is telling not only of the uncertainty created by the images, but also the importance of the reader, as well as the necessity for reflection and research with a view to founding the documents' authenticity (Patt 162-87).

¹¹ Nabokov, an exile himself, has been often mentioned as the fifth emigrant, as he appears in the form of the 'Butterfly Man' in all stories. The photograph in question is a well-known photograph of the author that, whether recognised by the readers or not, destabilises the narrative in its contrast with the written description below it and disturbs by casting doubt. For a detailed analysis of this photograph and its function in Sebald's prose narrative, see Feiereisen and Pope. For an elaborate exploration of Nabokov's role in *The Emigrants*, see Curtin and Shrayser.

¹² Sebald has admitted to doctoring or creating some of the documents himself. In an interview with Carole Angier, when asked about certain parts in the diaries of Ambros Adelwarth, he explicitly states "Ah. That however, is falsification. I wrote it" (Schwartz 72), and proceeds to explain that although his great uncle did in fact write a travel diary, half of what is reproduced in the book has been produced by the author. Other similar examples are also provided in the interview.

¹³ In an interview with Arthur Lubow, W. G. Sebald talks about the photograph in question and clearly delineates the importance of critical thinking and scrutinising when confronted with such documents: "I had that picture...I thought very consciously that this is a place to make a declaration. It couldn't be more explicit. It acts as a paradigm for the whole enterprise. The process of making a photographic image, which purports to be the real thing and isn't anything like, has transformed our self-perception, our perception of each other, our notion of what is beautiful, our notion of what will last and what won't" (Schwartz 163).

¹⁴ When the photographs are embedded and in interplay with verbal narrative rather than functioning as paratextual elements of the plot, cut off from the text.

¹⁵ I am referring here to Kibedi Varga's "Criteria for Describing Word-and-Image Relations," according to which "interference" occurs when both the verbal and the visual aspects are primary and neither is subordinate to the other, when they "refer to each other."

¹⁶ "*Toute image, en même temps qu'elle n'est qu'elle-même, se retrouve, du fait de cette singularité, en posture d'être connectée à une quantité non finie d'autres images. Et c'est là comme un véritable théorème : plus l'image est singulière, et plus grand est son pouvoir de connexion*" (126).

¹⁷ For a discussion of the affective quality of art as a tool for understanding traumatic experiences, see Bennett.

¹⁸ I am borrowing the term from the W. G. Sebald's work, *On the Natural History of Destruction*.

¹⁹ “[U]ne volonté de rendre lisible ce qui n'est pas, travailler à une lisibilité de l'histoire qui échappe à la discipline historique” (384).

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