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Lunch seminar

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Narrative memory, episodic memory and W. G. Sebald's idea of memory

*If I say, rightly, 'I remember it', the most different things can happen, and even merely  
this: that I say it*  
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*

*I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion  
with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the  
history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is  
never heard, never described or passed on*  
W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

*Mnemosyne, one must admit, has shown herself to be a very careless girl*  
Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory*

*The now; the now. Mind this: in this is all*  
Earl of Shaftesbury

Memory is a hard notion for philosophers. It is probably a much better subject of inquiry for writers and poets. That is because a great variety of philosophical concerns are pulled in under the heading of memory. Memory is involved in the basic psychological experience of our continuity through time, that grounds - according to many - our personal identity. Memory is involved in our capacity of conceptualizing the world: To have a concept is to be able to recognize that the same takes place again. Memory is knowledge that we are able to retrieve as well as knowledge that we embody in our skills. Most of our knowledge at any given time is in memory. Memory is involved in everyday

inference: inferring new facts from our sense perception implies combining in an efficient way new information with background information that is stored in memory. Memory is also involved in self-knowledge as the fundamental ingredient of experiencing some events as belonging to our autobiography. And through our memories of our past experiences as our own experiences we constitute ourselves as distinct and unique moral subjects.

Thus, memory seems to invade all aspects of our cognitive and moral life. Along the history of psychological science, memory, learning and knowledge are so intertwined topics that one could wonder whether it is possible to pry apart what belongs to the realm of memory and what is proper to learning and knowledge. On the one hand, memory shares some epistemic properties with the notion of knowledge. The verbs “knowing” and “remembering” are *epistemic* verbs, that is, they imply the truth of what is known or remembered. It is a sort of semantic nonsense to say that I know something that is not true or to say that I remember something that it did not take place, even if false memories can be an interesting subject of psychological inquiry (cf. Hacking 1995, or the most interesting case of “Flashbulbs memories” - that is, vivid memories, often inaccurate, of what we were doing when an important historical events happened – investigated by Ulrich Neisser)<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, the understanding of memory and learning have been pursued as a unified research project for longtime, as for example in the empiricist tradition. Authors such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill speculated about the factors that affect the degree of strength of *associations* between ideas. According to this tradition, learning is to strengthen a particular association, and thus to be able to recall it.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. for example U. Neisser , E. Winograd (1992) *Affect and accuracy in recall: Studies in “Flashbulbs Memories”*, Cambridge University Press; I. Hacking (1995) *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, Princeton University Press.

Today, the science of memory distinguishes between a variety of phenomena that correspond to distinct neurological realities. *Semantic memory*, that is, the capacity to recollect factual information (such as Roma is the capital of Italy) is distinct from *procedural memory*, which allows us to learn skills and acquire habits. *Autobiographical memory* is still another neurological reality, which allows us to recall the personal episodes that uniquely define our lives<sup>2</sup>. This latter way of remembering breaks further apart into *field* and *observer* memories according to the position that the subject attributes to herself in the retrieved scene, that is, as part of the scene or as an external observer<sup>3</sup>.

And finally, memory extends far beyond the limits of our minds: It is the collective memory that we share with a human group that defines our cultural and social identity. It is through the external traces of our common memory that communities establish traditions and cultural values. How ethical considerations can be applied to the notion of collective memory (as for example “The duty to remember”) is a core question of contemporary reflection in moral philosophy (cf. A. Margalit, 2003<sup>4</sup>)

Although the multiple facets of the idea of memory may throw some doubts on the existence of a clear cut philosophical question about remembering or knowing the past, nothing seems to be more central to our human experience as our capacity to recall a unique repertoire of events, facts and emotions that distinguish our persons from anybody else. The very concept of our *self* seems to be grounded in our awareness of being enduring unique subjects through time.

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction between *episodic* vs *semantic* memory is due to E. Tulving (cf. E. Tulving, 1972: “Episodic and Semantic Memory” in E. Tulving and W. Donaldson (eds) *Organization of Memory*, New York, Academic Press. I here refer to the episodic memory through the broader notion of *autobiographical memory* (cf. D. Rubin [1986] *Autobiographical Memory*, Cambridge UP) because I will introduce further distinctions among kinds of subjective experiences of the past.

<sup>3</sup> Freud was aware of this distinction, that has been experimentally investigated by G. Nigro and U. Neisser (1983) “Point of view in personal memories”. *Cognitive Psychology*, 15, 467-482.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Avishai Margalit (2003): *The Ethics of Memory*, Harvard University Press.

Here, I would like to limit my remarks to the investigation of autobiographical memory. In particular, I would like to introduce a distinction that has been recently put forward by the British philosopher Galen Strawson, and see how it applies to the literary case of W.G. Sebald, one of the most astonishing writers of the last decades.

Let me add a last preamble to this exploration: I am not a literary scholar. My main concerns revolve around the epistemological question of how we come to believe what we believe and what sort of creatures are the varieties of mental objects that inhabit our cognitive life. Still, I think that some conceptual questions in philosophy can be illuminated by looking at literature, and that this is an exercise that worth exploring in order to gain insight on the nature of our mind. Take it as an exercise in what Steven Shapin calls “practical epistemology”, that is, the attempt to understanding our cognition through the investigation of history, biographies and fictional work.

The empirical investigation of autobiographical memory, that is, memory that involves the subjective experience of the person who does the remembering, has revealed gross inaccuracies in people’s reporting about their past events<sup>5</sup>. People reconstruct rather than simply recall events in their past, and the creative aspect of reconstruction is strongly influenced by contextual and emotional factors. Psychologists and philosophers have investigated the nature of these creative elements in memory reconstruction in order to understand whether there is any systematic constraints on the way people re-elaborate their past experiences. One of the mainstream hypothesis on these constraints is linked to a particular view of the self that is gaining attention in many fields of humanities

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. U. Neisser (1967) *Cognitive Psychology*, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts; D. C. Rubin, M. Kozin (1984) “Vivid Memories”, *Cognition*, 16, 81-95.

according to which our self-identity is fundamentally experienced in a narrative way and people distort their past experience in order to fit some narrative constraints on their autobiographies. Take, for example, the already mentioned case of distortion in flashbulbs memories: In a study on the memory of the *Challenger* explosion, Ulrich Neisser and Nicole Harsh<sup>6</sup> interviewed college students less than 24 hours after the event and the again two and a half years later. The second reports revealed a substantial forgetting of the circumstances in which they learned about the accident and, surprisingly, no decay in the subjective confidence that the report was correct. A possible explanation of the unchanged confidence about their report is that subjects tend to link their personal experience in a strong, narrative way, to major historical events and thus witness episodes of their lives as belonging to History. Vladimir Nabokov avowed some inaccurate passages in his autobiography due to the misperception of the relation between historical events personal history in his 1966 forward to the new edition of *Speak, Memory*:

Among the anomalies of a memory, whose possessor and victim have tried to become an autobiographer, the worst is the inclination to equate in retrospect my age with that of the century. This has led to a series of remarkable consistent chronological blunders in the first version of this book.

Psychologists and neuroscientists, such as Jerome Bruner and Oliver Sachs, have claimed that our tendency to make up a narrative of our life is deeply entrenched in the way we perceive our self-identity: Self is a “perpetually rewritten story” and, according to Bruner, we constantly engage in “self-making narratives” in order to make sense of our past.

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<sup>6</sup> U. Neisser, N. Harsch (1992) “Phantom Flashbulbs: False recollections of hearing the news about *Challenger*. In E. Winograd, U. neisser (eds.) *Affect and accuracy in recall: Studies of “flashbulbs memories”*, Cambridge UP.

Philosophers and literary theorists have enthusiastically joined the “Psychological Narrativity” thesis according to which making sense of our lives involves in a constitutive way the construction of narrative plots. Here is an illustration of what *narrativism* is about:

An attribute that may be uniquely human is consciousness of ourselves as temporal beings-beings with a history. Both as individuals and members of various groups our present existence is powerfully shaped by recollections of the past and anticipations of the future. Narrativists maintain that plot is the main device we use in trying to make sense of this aspect of our life [...] Through narrative emplotment we organize, integrate and seek an accommodation with temporality. Emplotment humanizes our experience of life making its passage meaningful for us. It gives order and direction to events that otherwise might be perceived as random or isolated.<sup>7</sup>

Under the heading of “narrativism” we may cast very distant strains of thoughts, such as Paul Ricoeur’s idea of narrativity as the primary mode of knowing and therefore explaining the world to ourselves and to others, or Daniel Dennett’s idea of the Self as a multiple draft of narrations. Typically, albeit not exclusively, thinkers in the analytic tradition take narrativity as a phenomenological datum that corresponds to some psychological reality: we cannot help but organizing our experience in such a narrative way because that is how our phenomenological experience is organized. Whereas authors in the hermeneutic tradition, such as Gadamer and the above mentioned Ricoeur see narrativity as the manifestation in discourse of a specific kind of time consciousness or structure of time<sup>8</sup> that makes sense only as in the intersubjective discursive exchange.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. L.P. Hinchman , S.K. Hinchman (1994) *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*, Suny Series in Philosophy of Social Science.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. H. White (1984) “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory”, *History and Theory*, pp. 1-33.

Narrativism may sometimes imply the stronger thesis of “Ethical Narrativity” according to which the moral experience of personhood is possible only through a narrative outlook on one’s life. Philosophers such as Charles Taylor and Marya Schechtman have argued for this view<sup>9</sup>. Paul Ricoeur seems to endorse a version of the same view when he writes:

How indeed could a subject of action give an ethical character to his or her own life taken as a whole if this life were not gathered together in some way, and how could this occur if not, precisely, in a form of a narrative? [1990]

In a recent article, Galen Strawson has challenged the centrality of narrativity in our experience of the past. According to Strawson, both theses, that is, “Psychological Narrativity” and “Ethical Narrativity” must be rejected on the basis of phenomenological and moral considerations:

It is not true that there is only one way in which human beings experience their being in time. There are deeply non-Narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-Narrative. I think the second and third views hinder human self- understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and can be highly destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts<sup>10</sup>.

Strawson discerns two psychological kinds of self-experience, diachronic and episodic, according to the role granted to the continuity of the self through time. Diachronic minds naturally figure their selves as something that was there in the past and will be there in the future. Episodic minds do not figure themselves, considered as their present selves, as something that was there in a past experience and will be there in a future experience.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. C. Taylor (1989) *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge University Press; M. Schechtman (1997) *The Constitution of Selves*, Cornell University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. G. Strawson (2004) “A Fallacy of our Age”, *Time Literary Supplement*, October 15<sup>th</sup>. Cf. a longer version of the same article (2004): “Against Narrativity”, *Ratio*, XVII, 4, pp. 428-52.

Diachronic minds tend to have a narrative disposition towards their past, whereas episodic minds do not link their idea of their selves to a particular phenomenological quality of their “self-experience”. Our knowledge of being the same human beings as in our past can be of a very indirect nature, and the experience of ourselves as a self can be distinct from that knowledge. Henry James used to say that he thought his previous books “as the work of quite another person as myself” a close relative may be, but not the same self as his present one, even though he had no doubts about his continuity through time. Thus making sense of one’s own life and making sense of oneself are different matters. Narrativism tends to link these two points of view on the self by arguing that it is only through the narrative reconstruction of our continuity through time that we make sense of our present self. Against this view, Strawson mentions writers such as Proust, Borges, Woolf, whose work shows to what extent the persistence conditions of our thinking ourselves as a “self” are distinct from the persistence conditions of our being the same human being in the past, the present and the future. Episodic minds –among which Strawson casts himself, the above-mentioned writers, Michel de Montaigne, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Stendhal, Fernando Pessoa, Iris Murdoch and many others– don’t have this persistent experience of identity through time as they were the main character in a novel who goes through a series of “peripeties” (as Edmond Dantès in the Count of Monte Cristo). Nevertheless, according to Strawson, they don’t miss anything central of the experience of being a self, nor lack any moral feature of the experience of making sense of one’s own actions through time. “Self-understanding – he concludes – does not have to take a narrative form” [cf. Strawson, 2004b, p.448].

I share Strawson's resistance to narrativity as the central ingredient of our self-identity through time. To be conscious that the past has shaped our present self doesn't imply to be conscious *of* the past: Memory is not knowledge *of* the past, but knowledge *from* the past. I can experience my self-identity, feel the lore of the past on it, and still lacking a narrative access to my personal history.

I am inclined to reject the "narrativity thesis" for two reasons. One has to do with my subjective experience of my past as a series of episodes that are linked to my present self in a very indirect way through time, space, people and emotional states. The other is that among the most interesting literary examples of writers who try to make sense of their self, few of them are narrative minds.

Here I would like to take as an example of anti-narrativism the writings of Winfried Georg Sebald, better known by his friends as Max, born in the Bavarian village of Wertag im Allgäu during the Second World war and died in a car accident in East Anglia in 2001.

Sebald is an explicit anti-narrativist: he was resistant to classify his fictional work as "novels" because of his intolerance of the "grinding noises" that accompany the heavy movements of a character through a plotted narrative.

Born in 1944, he studied German literature at Freiburg, and moved to England in 1966, first to Manchester and then to Norwich where he taught German literature at the University of East Anglia until his death at 57 years old. When the collection of novels *The Emigrants* came out in English in 1996 it was praised as a masterpiece, and its author acclaimed as new "voice of conscience" of Europe, compared to Nabokov, Kafka, Canetti and Thomas Bernard.

His style is a mix of genres: biography, poetry, essay, documentary and fiction. His books are filled with digressions and detailed physical descriptions of the landscapes and objects that surround the narrator. Captionless, black and white photographs are scattered through the pages, in an apparent unsequential way. Their relation to the text slowly unfolds while the reader tries to make sense of the intricate pattern of stories, descriptions and memories that Sebald gathers in his patient reconstructions of the past. How memory of people and events from the past haunts our lives and resonates in the space around us seems to be the central concern of his work. But the reconstruction is always indirect, filled with disparate objects that tacitly evoke an absence as in a still life. *The Emigrants* tells the biographies of four exiles, the German-Jewish landlord of Sebald's house in Manchester, the homosexual schoolteacher in his native Bavarian village, an uncle who emigrated to United States and the German-born artist Max Ferber. Two of them committed suicide, and another died in an asylum. As he reconstruct their lives with a mix of interview, biography and images, these emigrants seem to fade away again, as it was impossible to save them from their inevitable extinction in our memory: "And so, they are ever returning to us, the dead".

Personal memories and historical memories are both spread out in a bric-à-brac of objects, landscapes, photographs and mental images that seem to vanish away in the very moment we try to resuscitate them:

But what can we know in advance of the course of history, which unfolds accordingly to some logically indecipherable law, impelled forward, often changing direction at the crucial moment, by tiny, imponderable events, by a barely perceptible current of air, a leaf falling to the ground, a glance exchanged across a great crowd of people. Even in retrospect we cannot see what things were really like before that moment and how this or that world-

shaking event came about. The most precise study of the past scarcely comes any closer to the unimaginable truth than, for instance, a far fetched claim such as I once heard made by an amateur historian Alfonse Huyghens, who lived in the capital of Belgium and had been pursuing his research on Napoleon for years; according to him, all the cataclysmic events caused by the Emperor of the French in the lands and realms of Europe were to be traced solely to his color blindness, which made him unable to tell red from green. The more blood flowed on the battlefield, this Belgian scholar told me, the greener Napoleon thought the grass was growing [Campo Santo, 14]

Traveling is for Sebald a way to access the past, through the patient observation of the public traces of collective memory (buildings, museums, monuments...) and the strong emotional experience of being misplaced so present in the traveler's state of mind. In his first fictional work, *Vertigo*, he describes this feeling while traveling in the North of Italy, on the footsteps of Stendhal and Kafka. In his reconstruction of Stendhal's transalpine campaign in 1800 when he was seventeen years old, Sebald writes about the emotional impact on Beyle's memory of the vision of the dead horses in the battlefield:

He was so affected by the large number of dead horses lying by the wayside, and the other detritus of war the army left in its wake as it moved in a long-drawn-out file up the mountains, that he now has no clear idea whatsoever of the things he found so horrifying then. It seemed to him that his impressions had been erased by the very violence of their impact. For that reason, the sketch below (*see photocopies*) should be considered as a kind of aid by means of which Beyle sought to remember how things were when the part of the column in which he found himself came under fire near the village and the fortress of Bard [...] Beyle furthermore writes that even when the images supplied by memory are true to life, one can place little confidence in them [*Vertigo*, 6,7]

A feeling of a strong emotion linked both to presentiment, recollection and oblivion of the past pushes Sebald to repeat a journey from Vienna to Verona through Venice, seven years after a first trip during which a sudden sense of unease made him flee from a

restaurant in Verona in a rush and take the first night train to Innsbruck. After a detour to Riva del Garda and Milano he finally comes back to Verona:

[I] found myself opposite the Pizzeria Verona, from which I had fled headlong that November evening seven years before. The lettering of Carlo Cadavero's restaurant was still the same, but the entrance was boarded up, and the blinds on the upper floors were drawn, much as I had expected, as I realized in that instant. The image that had lodged in my mind when I fled Verona, and which had recurred time after time, with extreme clarity, before I was able to forget it, now presented itself to me again, strangely distorted – two men in black silver-button tunics, who were carrying out from a rear courtyard a bier on which lay, under a floral-patterned drape, what was plainly a body of human being. Whether this dark apparition was superimposed on reality for a mere moment or much longer, I could not have said when my sense returned to daylight and the people, quite unconcerned, passing the pizzeria, which had evidently been shut for some time. [*Vertigo*, 128]

The reader reconstructs through the pages that during the evening that Sebald spent at the Pizzeria Verona seven years before, an accident took place to one of the owners of the restaurant while hunting in the countryside. The image of the corpse, probably elicited by the name of the other owner, Carlo Cadavero, made Sebald flee away in a presentiment to be in the “moment immediately before a disaster”.

*Austerlitz*, his only entirely fictional work, is the story of a man who, by almost unconsciously following fleeting memories returning to him and strange feelings he sensed in particular places, recollects, 50 years after, his childhood in Prague and his Jewish origins erased by his adoptive Methodist Welsh parents. While studying the architectural history of the Liverpool station, Austerlitz starts to feel: “the scraps of memory beginning to drift through the outlying regions of my mind” [...]:

Memories like this came back to me in the disused Ladies' Waiting Room of Liverpool Street Station, memories behind and within which many things much further back in the past seemed to lie, all interlocking

like the labyrinthine vaults I saw in the dusty gray light and which seemed to go on and on forever. In fact I felt that the waiting room where I stood as if dazzled contained all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained, as if the black and white diamond pattern of the stone slabs beneath my feet were the board on which the endgame would be played and it covered the entire plane of time. [Austerlitz, 136]

Like the vertigo of looking at an object from an awkward perspective, the recollection of the past goes through the disordered sensation of whirling images, objects and words floating in our minds. Remembering is thus reconstructing, but not in a narrative mode: like the recollection of space and time of a *cabinet des curiosités*, the past emerges from complex patterns to vanish away again once we try to make sense of it.

The absence of a narrative mode and the mixture of genders that characterize Sebald's work do not seem to dissolve the narrator's self, which is strongly present through all his peregrinations, nor the ethical dimension of memory that seems to haunt all his work, as a German grown up in the invisible, unexplained sense of horror of the aftermaths of the Second World War. A moral imperative of saving the individual's experience of the "silent catastrophe" pervades all of his works as if only the recollection of a subjective perspective could make sense of our relation to History. While visiting the fortress of Breendonk near Antwerp, used as a penal camp by Germans until 1944 and then, almost left untouched and transformed in a national memorial and a museum of the Belgian *Resistance*, he writes:

No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open. But I do remember that there in the casemate at Breendonk a nauseating smell of soft soap rose to my nostrils, and that this smell, in some strange place in my head was linked to the bizarre German word for scrubbing brush, *Wurzelbürste*, which was a favorite of my father's and which I had always disliked (Austerlitz, 25)

linking the historical presence of horror he physically experiences in Breendonk to the unpleasant memory of his childhood with a silent father who never mentioned the facts of the war. As André Aciman has written of him: "Sebald never brings up the Holocaust. The reader, meanwhile, thinks of nothing else."

Sebald fears the loss of individual memory in the contemporary too dense urban societies.

About some burial rituals and ghost presences in Corsica, he writes:

To remember, to retain and to preserve was vitally important only when population density was low, we manufactured few items and nothing but space was present in abundance. You could not do without anyone then, even after death. In the urban societies of the late twentieth century, on the other hand, where everyone is instantly replaceable and is really superfluous from birth, we have to keep throwing ballast overboard, forgetting everything that we might otherwise remember: youth, childhood, our origins, our forebears and ancestors. For a while the site called the Memorial Grove recently set up on the Internet may endure; here you can lay those particularly close to you to rest electronically and visit them. But this virtual cemetery too will dissolve into the ether, and the whole past will flow into a formless, indistinct, silent mass. And leaving a present without memory, in the face of a future that no individual mind can now envisage, in the end we shall ourselves relinquish life without feeling any need to linger at least for a while, nor shall we be impelled to pay return visits from time to time [*Campo Santo*, 33]

A writer of memory, "The Einstein of Memory" as he has been called, Sebald fits Strawson's description of episodic mind, and at the same time makes us feel the centrality of memory in our life, the uniqueness of our recollections and the moral obligations of our remembering. The call for narrative as the only way to make sense of ourselves, so overstated in contemporary philosophy and literary theory, seems to collapse by a closer look at one case, among others, of anti-narrative stance towards the past.

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