Three Stabilizers of Memory: Affect – Symbol – Trauma

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In a novel by the Hungarian author György Konrád with the title *Geisterfest* (*The Feast of Ghosts*), it is the project of the narrator to "animate the stories that have survived in the amber of time" (1989:7). In my paper, I want to pick up this formula and ask the question: Is there such an amber of time? Are there any such exceptionally retentive *milieux* for our memories? We are well aware of the fact that our memories are among our most fleeting and unreliable experiences. This is why in all cultures of all ages a variety of mnemotechnic devices from rituals and images to writing were developed to ensure the persistence of such memories that were considered relevant for the identity of the group. But such external props of memory will not be the focus of my discussion here. I shall not even discuss the first and foremost stabilizer of memory which is language itself. I am interested, rather, in those memory-*internal* processes and dynamics that work against the general tendency toward forgetting, rendering some of our memories more unforgettable than others that immediately slide into oblivion.

From a certain theoretical perspective, my use of the term 'stabilizer' could be viewed as problematic. Indeed, neurophysiological brain and memory research of the past two or three decades has presented a view of memory that has discarded the model of retention as stored information and is now speaking of a "flow" of neurological impulses (cf., Rahmann 1982:84). Memories, we have learned, are not preserved as encoded information but are constantly reconstructed. In opposition to the static model of storage and retention, we are presented with a dynamic model of continuous reconstruction and elastic adaptability to the demands of an ever changing present.[1]

Given such theoretical qualifications, it might seem that my paper is mistitled, insofar as memory is denied any sort of stability in the name of an unlimited transformational power. I want to argue, however, that some of our memories are more stable than others and that both retention and reconstruction may play a part in the process. In my search for possible stabilizers

1 "In this view, memory content is no more conceived as encoded information which is to be recalled but rather as something that is to be constructed in the process of memorizing in the present." (Straub 1992:50; my translation)

of memory, I came across the three key terms that I will discuss here, one after another: *affect, symbol, trauma.*

Affect

In the classical art of memory, emotional affect plays a pivotal role. The *ars memorativa* which was part of the system of oral Roman rhetoric consisted in connecting the units of an informational content with striking signs in order to render them more memorable. The anonymous master of Roman rhetoric from the first century B. C., whose magnum opus has come down to us under the title *Ad Herennium*, has elaborated on what he meant by striking signs:

> When we see in every day things that are petty, ordinary, and banal, we generally fail to remember them, because the mind is not being stirred by anything novel or marvellous. But if we see or hear something exceptionally base, dishonourable, unusual, great, unbelievable, or ridiculous, that we are likely to remember for a long time. [...]
>
> We ought, then, to set up images of a kind that can adhere longest in memory. And we shall do so if we establish similitudes as striking as possible; if we set up images that are not many or vague but active (*imagines agentes*); if we assign to them exceptional beauty or singular ugliness; if we ornament some of them, as with crowns or purple cloaks, [...] or if we somehow disfigure them, as by introducing one stained with blood or soiled with mud or smeared with red paint [...]. (as qtd. in Yates 1966:9-10)

This ancient mnemotechnic strategy has meanwhile been confirmed by an experiment which was designed by modern cognitive psychologists. They showed the same series of unremarkable slides to two groups of probants. While one group saw only the slides, the other group heard a dramatic and even graphic narrative while watching the slides. The result of the experiment was that the members of the second group were afterwards able to remember a significantly higher amount of the slides that were presented to both groups (cf., Schacter 1995:164-265).

What is stressed in both the ancient mnemonic treatise and the modern experiment is the arbitrary and manipulative character of emotional affects. In the *ars memorativa* and the psychological experiment, a cognitive content and an affect value are yoked together in a deliberate and arbitrary way. This is quite different, of course, when we pass from the art of memorizing to personal remembering, or, in the terminology of Endel Tulving, from 'semantic' to

'episodic' memory. In this case, memory and affect melt into an inseparable aggregate. This means that the affect value of individual memories cannot be externally manipulated; *their* emotional activation *cannot* be deliberately instigated.

It was precisely this inability to manipulate emotional response that turned the affect into such an important stabilizer of memory for J.J. Rousseau. He seems to have been among the first to scrutinize his own memories in the act of writing his autobiography, a genre that relies on memory recall as its most important source.[2] For Rousseau, a new question arose: How can autobiographical memories be tested and verified when there are neither witnesses nor external evidences for a given event? Is it possible to erect a standard of reliability for exclusively individual memories? It was precisely in the quest for such a standard that Rousseau discovered the affect. Convinced as he was of the subjective quality of his memories, he rejected from the outset any objective truth-claim. Instead, he focused on the affect value of his remembrances, anchoring them in what he called a "chain of emotions" (*la chaine des sentiments*):

> All of the written evidence I had collected to supplement my memories and to direct me in my project, have passed into other hands. They will never be mine again. I have only one unfailing guide that I can count on and that is the chain of emotions that has accompanied my self-development and provided me with those experiences that were their cause or effect. My misfortune is quickly forgotten, but I cannot forget my mistakes, and even less my good feelings. Their memory is simply too valuable for me to let go of them. I can accept omissions of facts, dismiss reality from my mind, or misread evidence, but *I cannot deceive myself about what I have felt.* (qtd. in Starobinski 1988:293-294; my translation)

From affect as a calculated ingredient in the classical art of memory, we move to Rousseau's view of it as the hard core of remembrance. Jean Starobinski, the great Rousseau-critic and psychoanalyst, paraphrased Rousseau's point in the following way:

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2 In a more general way, of course, the credibility of memories has always been a topos in memorial writing. In his *Confessions*, Augustine (1989:252, 251; my translation) invoked memory as his muse but did not ponder the truth of what she conveyed to him. He writes: "I cannot prove that what I confess is true, but those will believe me whose ears are opened by love." (X, III.3) In speaking to God it was inconceivable for him that he could in any way misrepresent his memories: "Who ever I am - for you, Lord, I am totally transparent." (X, II.2)

> Emotion is the indestructible core of memory [...]. The truth that Rousseau wants to communicate to us doesn't concern the exact positioning of biographical facts, but rather aims at the relationship that he has to his past [...]. This presents a form of truth that escapes, however, the laws of empirical verification. We have thereby left the realm of *truth* – the verified account – and entered that of *authenticity*. (Starobinski 1988:295; my translation)

Authenticity was an early modern invention and Rousseau had a seminal influence on its construction. Within the cultural frame of authenticity, personal memories acquired a new momentum as stabilizers of individual experience and identity. Or, to put it even more concisely, the affect functioned as stabilizer of memories and the memories as stabilizer of individual identity. This intimate alliance between affect, memory and identity can be instanced in another writer of autobiography who has likewise addressed the question of memory reliability. I am thinking of Mary Antin who was born in 1881 in Polotzk (White Russia) and immigrated to the U. S. with her family at the beginning of the century. In 1909, at the age of 28, she wrote her autobiography – that is, that irrevocably closed chapter of her life that ended with her emigration from the Eastern European Jewish stedl. Her own memories begin at the age of four with the burial of her grandfather. After sketching out the scene of the wake, she interrupts her account with the question "Do I really remember this little scene?," and continues:

> Perhaps I heard it described by some fond relative, as I heard other anecdotes of my infancy, and unconsciously incorporated it with my genuine recollections. [...] It is more likely, however, that I took no intellectual interest in my grandfather's remains at the time, but later on, when I sought for a First Recollection, perhaps, elaborated the scene, and my part in it, to something that satisfied my sense of dramatic fitness. If I really committed such a fraud, I am now well punished, by being obliged, at the very start, to discredit the authenticity of my memoirs. (Antin 1997:65-66)

This ironic commentary, however, cannot disguise the fact that Antin firmly believes in the truthfulness of her memories. She goes even further than Rousseau by claiming that such truthfulness may indeed be *counterfactual*, setting itself against empirical evidence. This issue is illustrated by a particular instance in her memoir – the dahlias that are supposed to have bloomed in a neighbor's garden:

> Concerning my dahlias I have been told that they were not dahlias at all, but poppies. As a conscientious historian I am bound to record every rumor, but I retain the right to cling to my own impression. Indeed, I must insist on my dahlias, if I am to preserve the garden at all. I have so long believed in them, that if I try to see *poppies* in those red masses over the wall, the whole garden crumbles away, and leaves me a grey blank. I have nothing against poppies. It is only that my illusion is more real to me than reality. (Antin 1997:66)

Poppies or dahlias? Why does Antin stress this minor issue, being as it is fully irrelevant to the flow of her story? I hesitate to classify her as an advocate of a post-modern epistemology, who subordinates an objective, empirically certain world of experiences to her "own" subjective truth. More likely, I believe her remarks to apply not to the structure of reality, but to that of memory. By insisting on *her* dahlias, she throws into relief what I would like to call the "apodictic quality" of affective memories. These are not subject to correction, for they stand or fall with the intensity of the emotional impact. To abandon such impressions is in fact to be left with nothing at all. Antin's testimony is based on her living connection to the past which she sets off from that of the professional historian:

> You may make a survey of Polotzk ever so accurate, and show me where I was wrong; still I am the better guide. You may show that my adventureful road led nowhere, but I can prove, by the quickening of my pulse and the throbbing of my rapid recollections, that *things happened to me* there or here; and I shall be believed, not you. (1997:69)

We have seen that memories which are stabilized by affects tend to resist discursive reinterpretation. With my next category, which is symbol, I will turn to discursive processes of retrospective construction and reconstruction of memories. My aim is to show that such a refiguration need not necessarily be qualified as a falsification, but can also be considered a stabilizing device of memory in its own right.

Symbol

In his pioneering study on memory and its social frames, the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs notes that

> every person and every historical fact, when entering into a collective memory, is transformed into a doctrine, a concept, or a symbol of sorts. When appropriated by a collective memory, it acquires a social significance, it becomes an element of a given society's ideational system. (1985:389-390; my translation)

What Halbwachs claims for collective memory – by which he understands socially shared and disseminated memory – can also be applied to individual memories. As an instance, I shall turn to a text of the Polish writer Andrej Szczypiorski, titled "Recollections of an Elderly Person," in which he explores the function of symbol as a stabilizer of memory. In this text, Szczypiorski reconstructs his memory of a Capuchin priest, father Anicet, who was born with the name Albert Koplin in 1875 in the East Prussian city of Friedland. After his entry into the Capuchin order and his ordination as a priest, he was transferred to Warsaw in 1918, where he chose to remain for the rest of his life. Father Anicet, who was active in charity and other social service, was counted among the most respected priests in Warsaw. In 1940, after the German invasion, he identified himself to the Nazi administration as Polish, a decision that one year later led to his deportation to Auschwitz, where he died in the gas chamber in the same year.

When Szczypiorski set down his personal recollections of this priest in the 1980s, he did so in a very specific institutional context. The Polish Catholic church was considering the elevation of Father Anicet into its official memory. For this reason, a memorial conference was convened in Poland's episcopal palace with the motive of petitioning to the Vatican for Father Anicet's beatification. Szczypiorski made it quite clear from the start that he could only contribute very personal recollections to this process of official memoralization: "In essence, everything I am about to relate here is a confession, a depiction of my spiritual life story." (1990:224; my translation) He had met the priest as a young lad aged 11-13, when he assisted him as altar boy from 1938 to 1941. Knowing nothing of his background, origins, or significance, the images and scenes of, and the short conversations with Father Anicet were strictly limited to a boy's perspective. Three years later, Szczypiorski became a member of the Polish resistance to the Nazi oppression and was sent to the concentration camp Sachsenhausen at the age of 16, from where he was liberated at the end of the war. Later, he served another term of imprisonment under communist rule. In the last years of his life, he was very active in the reestablishment of Polish-German crosscultural relations. He died in May 2000.

In his text, Szczypiorski fastidiously differentiates the recollections of his youth from those of the "Elderly Person" that he has become, who, as he repeatedly remarks, "carries a sack-full of memories on his back, having completed the greater part of his mortal life" (1990:225; my translation). With respect to his early recollections, he remarks that

> [t]he experiences that I had in early youth indeed continued to live on in me, but well-hidden in the crammed and dusty attic of the mind that one rarely revisits. [...] Father Anicet was certainly also in residence there, but inconspicuous, mute over the years, not needed. In my remembrance [...] he was, if there at all, a physically small man bowed with age, not very neat in his appearance, with sandals covering bare feet. And that was quite literally all I knew of him. (225; my translation)

The attic is a vivid image for latent memories.[3] Disorganized, forgotten, strewn about, they collect as waste: discarded matter without use or function. Like trash, such latent memories exist in an intermediate state from which they may either sink into complete oblivion or emerge into the light of conscious recall. Each one of the scenes and episodes that Szczypiorski can still relate after forty years and which, unfortunately, I cannot rehearse here in full, bears the stamp of an affect: ambition, humility, surprise, irritation, and mystery are involved where the perception of a scene congealed into a reminiscence. Turning to his later recollections, those carefully differentiated from the ones of his youth, Szczypiorski writes:

> Only in a later phase of my life did Father Anicet return. Today, he remains a central, in any case very important, figure in my spiritual adventure [...]. One could in fact claim that Father Anicet, as he appears in my memory, functions as a kind of a retroactive hero in my personal and spiritual maturation. He fills, as it were, a gap in my imagination rather than in my experiences as I lived them, thereby fulfilling a certain spiritual need – a kind of moral imperative – in my admittedly rather complicated life. (1990:225-226; my translation)

Just as the memories of youth are preserved by the emotionally-charged *affect*, so are those of maturity by the *symbol*. Both are stabilizers of a very different order. As Halbwachs emphasized, a remembrance acquires the force of a symbol as it is incorporated into the process of retrospective self-assessment. It becomes an element within that configuration of biographical meaning that we also refer to as story or narrative.[4] Szczypiorski makes the point quite clear that the Father Anicet of his memory is in no way identical with the historical person. What he reconstructs is not

3 This kind of latency can also be referred to with F.G. Juenger, as 'conserving forgetting', ('Verwahrensvergessen'), which he sets off from destructive kinds of forgetting.

4 For an explication of the concept of story see Randall (1995).

> his life, activities, or influence but rather Anicet as a symbol, someone elevated in my imagination into the rank of a symbol [...]. That which I carry with me, that which is important to me, is *my* Anicet, not the flesh-and-bones Capuchin father who once passed through the streets of Warsaw and was murdered behind the barbed wire of Auschwitz. (1990:226-227; my translation; my emphasis)

Like Mary Antin insisting on her dahlias, Szczypiorski stresses the idiosyncratic memory construction of his Anicet. Historians, as we have seen, would have objected to Antin's lack of verification; along similar lines, oral historians would probably consider the truth of Szczypiorski's memories compromised by retroactive reconstruction and made fit into the frame of a much later value system. I want to distinguish here with Szczypiorski between the perceptional content of a memory and its evaluation. As he has shown, the latter may change while the former my stay intact. Instead of rashly labelling such retrospectively reconstructed memory as distortions, I would like to argue that the preservation of many of our recollections, in fact, depend on such constructions and the possibility of integrating them into retrospective frames of meaning. Such a frame may serve as a scaffold, i.e., as another stabilizer of memory.

Trauma

The American literary critic Lawrence Langer, to whom we owe a number of important books on Holocaust trauma, would quite possibly classify Szczypiorski's transformation of recollection into symbol as a form of "heroic memory." For him, heroic memory is the opposite of an "unheroic memory." While the former presupposes an integral self composed of self-respect, free will, mental flexibility, positive values, models, and a rhetoric of redemption, the latter remains irreversibly severed from such resources. Langer relates the unheroic memory to a "diminished self," a being which has painfully experienced a complete loss of control over his or her environment, and whose discourse has therefore been vacated of all connotations of agency. In the testimonies of Holocaust victims, Langer found "an abandonment of the entire vocabulary of the integral self, anchored in such terms as choice, will, the power of deliberation, and future security" (1991:177). The unheroic memory, as Langer documents, is incapable of a retrospective mastery of traumatic experiences because it lacks the necessary mental and spiritual capacities that likewise fell victim to the Nazi terror. Langer is not primarily concerned with therapeutic rehabilitation for the traumatized Holocaust

survivor but the social recognition of his or her status. According to Langer, the diminished self "calls for an entire complex of redefinitions and new perceptions, a modernized or modernistic view of ethical discursive possibilities and limits that need not confine themselves to the reality of the Holocaust" (1991:177).[5]

Terms such as 'unheroic memory' and 'diminished self' are related to traumatic experiences that cannot be transformed into redemptive symbols. They result from experiences the intensity of which exceeds the capacity for cognitive and emotional integration. Trauma stabilizes an experience by encrypting it, i.e., by keeping it inaccessible to conscious inspection and reconstruction (cf. Herman 1992)

This stabilizing effect of the trauma is precisely what Jean-François Lyotard has emphasized in his psycho-historical essay on the Jews in the history of the European mind. Addressing the issue of anchoring the Holocaust in historical narrative and collective memory, Lyotard took up Freud's view of repression, which posits repression as a particularly tenacious form of *conservation* rather than as a means of forgetting. Yet, whereas Freud wanted to overcome repression in the name of his new therapeutic cure, Lyotard highlights it as the only adequate response that can do justice to the trauma of the Holocaust. I quote the core of Lyotard's rather involved and paradoxical argument:

> Via representation, a content is received by memory, and such an inscription may be considered as a potent shield against forgetting. I believe, however, that rather the contrary holds true. According to received opinion, only that can be forgotten which was inscribed before, because only that which was inscribed can later be erased. What, however, was never inscribed – because of lack of a material support, or lack of space and time in which the inscription could be situated –, what, in other words, remains unassimilable in the geography of power or in the history of the self-conscious spirit [...] cannot be forgotten. It remains 'only' as an unconscious affect, as a state of death in the midst of the life of the spirit – *comme un état de mort dans la vie de l'esprit.* (1988:38; my translation)

Lyotard embraced trauma as a potent stabilizer of memory that by far exceeds external memorial signs. With his metaphor of the attic Szczypiorski had described a state of latency in which sensations of the past are stored until they

5 A book that impressively fulfills the claims forwarded by Langer is Edith Wyschogrod's *An Ethics of Remembering* (1998).

are either remembered or forgotten; Lyotard refers to a state of latency, however, in which overwhelming sensations of the past are encrypted and can neither be remembered nor forgotten. But is Lyotard right in treating trauma as a stabilizer of memory? In order to learn more about this problem we shall turn to more recent discussions of trauma in the so-called 'False Memory-Debate.'

False Memories

In the last decade of the twentieth century, we have witnessed a series of controversies about the problematic status of repressed and traumatic memories. Between 1993 and 1995, the so-called 'False Memory-Debate' made headlines in the United States, questioning the reliability or unreliability of traumatic memories of victims of early-childhood incest and sexual abuse.[6] This controversy developed into an open legal battle between, on the one side, the victims who were liberated from enforced silence when they gained legal recognition in 1980 and were backed up by what was called "an incest recovery movement," and, on the other side, the F.M.S.F., i.e., 'False-Memory-Syndrome-Foundation,' primarily made up of the accused parents who rejected the charges as filed. They charged the sodality of psychotherapists with inducing rather than curing psychological diseases, and claimed that therapists "co-fabulate" with their clients fictitious traumatic memories to account for various psychic dissatisfactions. I am interested here in the conflicting theories of memory that it exposed rather than in the social and political ramifications of this debate. While trauma therapists contended that memories are in fact preserved over decades and can be reactivated, cognitive psychologists denied the possibility of such solid permanence, stipulating an unlimited range for transformations and retrospective induction.

In the fall of 1998, another false memory debate hit Europe, from where it spilled over to the United States in 1999. This time, it did not relate to the trauma of child abuse but to the holocaust trauma. This debate was triggered by an article by the Swiss writer Daniel Ganzfried who contested the truth of Binjamin Wilkomirski's autobiographical memoir which describes his early childhood experiences in Majdanek and Auschwitz. The book came out in 1995 under the title *Bruchstücke* (*Fragments*) and was immediately translated into

6 Another wave of this debate is to be found in three issues of the *New York Review of Books* 1994/1995. A comprehensive early account can be found in *Family Therapy Networker* (September/Oktober 1993), the leading journal of American family therapy. I am grateful to Helm Stierlin who first alerted me to this publication. Cf., also Jaroff (1993) and Tavris (1994).

12 languages, winning world-wide recognition and prestigious book awards. The investigations of Ganzfried produced a birth certificate and school records which prove that Wilkomirski spent all of his childhood in Switzerland. Bruno Grosjean was his first name, which he received from his mother when he was born as an illegitimate child in 1941. After spending some years in an orphan's asylum, he was adopted by Swiss parents from whom he received his new family name and became Bruno Doessecker.

In the meantime, this debate has been closed, not only by a law suit that was instigated against the author of the *Bruchstücke*, but also by two books published by Mächler and Lappin in 2000, dealing with the life and case of Wilkomirski and confirming the evidence collected by Ganzfried. While the problem is solved from the historical and legal point of view, it still yields ample food for thought for memory theory and the question of trauma as a possible stabilizer of memory.

It is my impression that in many ways the case of Wilkomirski is modeled on the incest recovery pattern. There are clear differences, however, between the family trauma induced by child abuse and the historical trauma of the holocaust that is backed by ample documentary evidence. Though often unable in later years to find ways of relating to their experiences, Holocaust survivors do not, as a rule, suffer from memory lapses requiring therapeutic recovery. Let us look at some of the parallels between the case of Wilkomirski and that of the victims of child abuse. Like them, the young Doessecker saw himself confronted with the coercive pressure of silence and repression in the new environment of his adoptive parents. "You must forget everything now" was the repeated admonition of his foster parents: "You must forget as one forgets a bad dream." (Wilkomirski 1998:139; my translation)[7] This stern command to forget had the opposite effect of provoking a strong desire to remember and to recover the lost identity of a 'repressed past.' As his search led him back to the dim and uncertain memories of the earliest years of his childhood, he had – very much like the victims of sexual childhood abuse – to rely heavily on external assistance in his process of remembering. The midwives of his recovered memories were extensive reading, therapy sessions, contact to two self-help groups, and frequent journeys to the death camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz accompanied and guided by sympathetic therapists and survivors who provided him with the necessary support to finally articulate what he himself may have believed to be his long repressed traumatic memories.

Wilkomirski himself distinguished between two kinds of trauma, carefully trying to dissociate himself from the kind of argument that I am here putting

7 Cf., also Wilkomirski (1998:115, 142).

forward. In an interview printed in *The New Yorker*, he insisted on the fact that over a span of 50 years, his traumatic childhood memories had never slipped into oblivion:

> Recovered memory means to re-discover through therapy lost things of your unconscious memory. And that is in my case absolutely wrong. Never in my life have I forgotten what I wrote in my book. I had nothing to re-discover again! [...] When I was a youngster, I spent hours and hours on free afternoons at a secret place in our garden, loudly speaking and repeating all I could remember. (Gourevitch 1999:54)

Wilkomirski describes his memories not as locked up in an inaccessible crypt between remembering and forgetting, but as conscientiously stabilized by verbal repetition. What he describes is not a traumatic memory but the careful construction of a counter memory which - in an almost gnostic way - the young boy used as a shield to withstand the pressures of what he experienced as an alien reality and identity. As I hope to have shown, affects stabilize memories, and memories transformed into symbols stabilize identities. Traumatic events, however, can neither be remembered nor forgotten, they linger in a cryptic state because, to quote an eminent psychiatrist, "their return to consciousness may produce a sanity-threatening and / or life-threatening situation" (Krystal, Ms. September, 2000:6). Traumatic memories, in other words, "are not compatible with the survival of the self," they destabilize identity. The paradox of the Wilkomirski case consists in the fact that he uses traumatic memory to stabilize his new identity. In Wilkomirski's case, trauma is the very stuff out of which his new identity is forged. He was able to overcome the precarious identity of the orphan by joining a group of exceptionally isolated individuals called the "Children of the Holocaust." Maurice Halbwachs was the first to argue that individual memories are stabilized by groups who share, exchange, and support each other's memories. He argued that when the group breaks up, the memories likewise break up and are eventually dissolved. Wilkomirski's case confirms Halbwachs's hypothesis: in order to partake of the group's identity, one must adopt the group's memories. With his testimony, Wilkomirski became an active member and publically acknowledged representative of the "Children of the Holocaust."

To further highlight the difference between the trauma of sexual childhood abuse and the trauma of the Holocaust, it is helpful to introduce Freud's distinction between *repressed* and *repudiated* memories (*verdraengte* versus

verworfene Erinnerungen).[8] While the repressed memories of childhood abuse require therapeutic help for their restitution, the repudiated memories of the Holocaust trauma require a sympathetic social milieu, a frame of communication in which the relating of traumatic experiences will meet with willing listeners who will corroborate or share the experience and become co-owners of the trauma. "It took actually about 20 years after liberation," writes Henry Krystal, "before a hearing could be obtained and before survivors could hear and listen to themselves" (Ms. August, 2000:10). While the one kind of trauma is reassessed in the closed milieu of the therapy room, the other is processed in the public arena. Wilkomirski wrote his memoirs at a time when the social atmosphere concerning the Holocaust had changed from repressive silence to a sympathetic public acknowledgement. His memories, however, were neither repressed nor repudiated but rather constructed as a counter- or screen memory to shield him against his personal family trauma. While trauma is a destabilizer of identity, in Wilkomirski's case, paradoxically, the Holocaust was used as an 'elective trauma' in order to stabilize a new identity.

I want to confront the case of Wilkomirski with another instance of false memories documented by the psychoanalyst Dori Laub. In his work as an interviewer for the *Yale Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies*, he conducted an interview with an elderly woman who had survived Auschwitz and was relating her experiences in a monotonous voice. When in her account, she approached the uprising of the prisoners in October 1944, her whole countenance changed. Intensity, passion, and color animated her narration. "All of a sudden," she said, "we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding. The flames shot into the sky, people were running. It was unbelievable." (Felman/Laub 1992:59) At this point, Dori Laub, the professional analyst and interviewer, changed into an affected listener who complemented the report with his imaginative support. He turned, in fact, into a witness for the witness:

> There was a silence in the room, a fixed silence against which the women's words reverberated loudly, as though carrying along an echo of the jubilant sounds exploding from behind barbed wires [...]. I was no longer in the deadly timelessness of Auschwitz. A dazzling, brilliant moment from the past swept through the frozen stillness of the muted, grave-like landscape with dashing meteoric speed, exploding it into a shower of sights and sounds. Yet the meteor from the past kept moving on. The woman fell silent and the tumults of the moment faded. [...] The gates of Auschwitz

8 This distinction is made by Henry Krystal, M.D., Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry of Michigan State University in "What Cannot be Remembered or Forgotten" (August 20, 2000:9).

> closed and the veil of obliteration and silence, at once oppressive and repressive, descended once again. (1992:59)

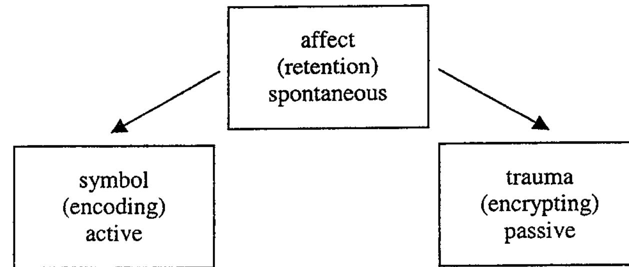
A few months later, Laub had an opportunity to present this testimony at a conference. The historians who were present, however, did not share his sympathetic enthusiasm. It was argued that the testimony of this witness was not correct. Not four chimneys had exploded in Auschwitz, but only one. In view of revisionist propaganda, they felt obliged to protect historical truth which was compromised by a false testimony. Against this verdict of the historians, Laub tried to plead for the truth of the woman's false memories:

> The woman was testifying, he claimed, not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number mattered less than the fact of the occurrence. [...] The woman testified to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. And that was historical truth. (1992:60)

Once more, we are confronted with an opposition between the truth of the historian and the truth of memory; and, as in the case of Mary Antin, we must admit that there is something to be said in favor of the truth of memory. While the memory of the survivor interviewed by Dori Laub is false on the level of perceptional content, it is true on the level of traumatic impact and her living connection to the past. This is quite different in the case of Wilkomirski whose memory may be true on the level of perceptional content – and many survivors have corroborated the accuracy of his accounts – but not on the level of traumatic impact which was caused not by the historical event of the Holocaust but by private family experiences. Thus, we must concede that the terms 'true' and 'false' are very difficult to apply to memories which, in fact, very often range between these clear and neat categories. The problem is highly complex because what we call the truth of memories may be related to the perceptional content of a memory, the evaluation of a memory, or even to the unconscious impact behind it.

Conclusion

Describing the flashbacks of her traumatic experiences, a victim of child abuse wrote: "Throughout such memories I am there, not here [...] reliving something clearly not understood, not given meaning – just lived and recorded, as if in amber, now suddenly cracked open" (Culbertson 1995:187). The aim of my paper has been to probe such metaphors as the amber of time, probing possible stabilizers of memory. The three terms under investigation – affect, symbol, trauma – point to three very different forms of stabilizing memories. Their implicit relationship may be expressed by arranging them in a triangular position.



Affect works as a magnifier of perception, retaining vivid scenes and acute images in the shape of disconnected fragments. Without affect, there are no memories; it highlights a few moments of our experience and retains them against the background of our continuous forgetting. Affect-memories bear the stamp of authenticity which is why they are cherished by individuals as inalienable private property. Such vivid, somatic, and preverbal memories retain isolated scenes without a before or after. In their fragmentary character, they may be considered as proto-narrative kernels. Memories charged with an affect hold a middle position between the active encoding of a symbol and the passive encrypting of trauma. From this middle position, the dynamics of memory can move in two directions. If the affect-memories are integrated into a framework of values or encoded in a narrative (which we have seen in the example of Szczypiorski), they become part of the stock of conscious memories which supports the structure of an identity. If, however, the affect exceeds a certain limit of intensity, it shatters memory and threatens identity.

This is what happens in trauma. The event which is neither remembered nor forgotten is encrypted where it remains inaccessible to conscious inspection and retrospective interpretation. Trauma is the impossibility of narration. Symbolic encoding and traumatic encrypting, then, are the opposite poles between which our memories are reconstructed.

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Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico, photograph Udo J. Hebel, 2001

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Preface

The volume recollects the International American Studies Conference "Sites of Memory in American Literatures and Cultures," which was held in Regensburg, Germany, May 11–14, 2000. It gathers original papers contributed to the burgeoning field of memory studies by experts from the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany during four days of scholarly exchange and memorable congeniality. All essays were revised and updated for inclusion in this collection. I would like to thank all authors for their continuing cooperation.

Overshadowed by the untimely deaths of Hans Bungert (Regensburg), whose 70th birthday was to be celebrated in the course of events, and Jürgen Heideking (Cologne), who had intended to give a paper on early national American commemorative culture, the conference unexpectedly became a site of mourning. The volume also pays tribute to the memory of two dear colleagues and acknowledged scholars.

The conference was generously supported by the Regensburger Universitätsstiftung Hans Vielberth, the Bavarian American Academy, the German Association for American Studies, the German Marshall Fund, the U.S. Embassy Berlin, the U.S. Consulate General Munich, the Fulbright Commission, the German-American Institute Regensburg, the American Antiquarian Society, BMW, and the City of Regensburg. The conference and the production of this volume would not have been possible without the help and and dedication of many people. I would like to express my gratitude to Zeno Ackermann, Juliane Bierschenk, Augustus Cavanna, Ursula Kuhn, Carol Renner, Marion Seidel, Alexandra Treuheit. A special thank-you note goes to Katharina Erhard, Karsten Fitz, Ingrid Gessner, and Susanne Groth whose unrelenting enthusiasm and hard work were indispensable in the final stages of editing the collection of essays. The University of Regensburg generously provided the larger portion of the funding for the publication of *Sites of Memory in American Literatures and Cultures.*

U.H.

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HEBEL (Ed.)
Sites of Memory in American Literatures and Cultures

This volume brings together twenty original essays by scholars from the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany. It focuses on the centrality of memory and commemoration to the formation, affirmation, and revision of American histories and identities over the course of more than two centuries. Individual studies engage theoretical issues and perspectives of American memory studies (Michael Kammen, Aleida Assmann), discuss literary texts that position themselves at the intersection of personal and cultural memories and counter-memories (Klaus Benesch, Joseph C. Schöpp, François Pitavy, Ulfried Reichardt, Nicolas Witschi, Renate von Bardeleben), interpret theatrical performances and civic festivities as enactments of individual and collective remembering (Kurt Müller, Winfried Herget, Heike Bungert, Udo J. Hebel), explore the potential of films, folk songs, and public buildings as commemorative media and memorial spaces (Winfried Fluck, James Olney, John Seelye, William Boelhower), and address the political and cultural implications of literary anthologies, national archives, and virtual libraries (Werner Sollors, Caroline Sloat, Christopher Mulvey, Hanjo Berressem). The collection offers a seminal contribution to interdisciplinary scholarship on sites of memory in American literatures und cultures.

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UDO J. HEBEL
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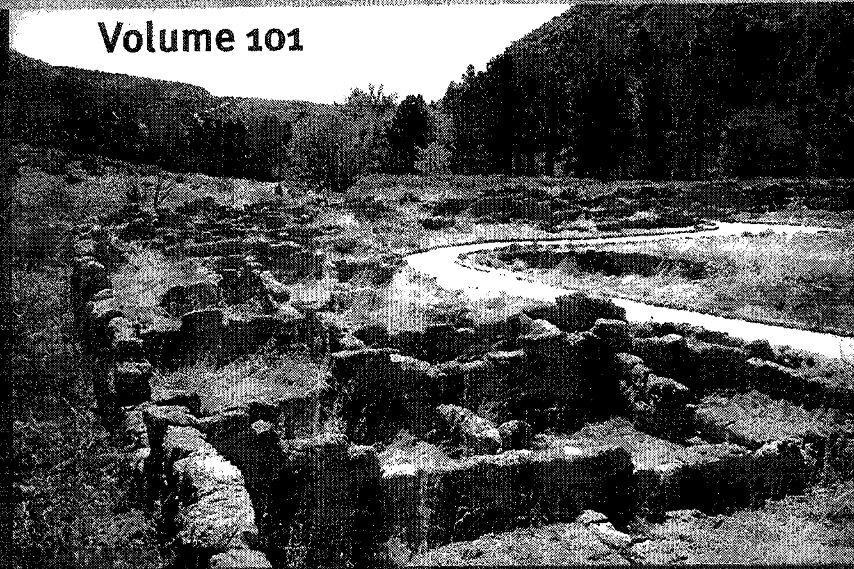

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