Memory, Place and Pain in W.G. Sebald's The Emigrants

Do people always choose to avoid and run away from the pain of memory? The essay addresses this question by discussing W.G. Sebald's The Emigrants. The essay explores issues like emigration, place, memory, ethics and selfhood and the way they are deeply interwoven. Sebald's protagonists live their life in a divided manner: on one hand as they abandon, momentarily, these memories their day-to-day life become inauthentic and alienated, on the other hand when they dwell in memory, though they encounter unbearable pain, they also meet their echoed home. And so, paradoxically they prefer living in pain. However, as Sebald stresses and demonstrates how that pain and memory are tightly connected to certain places, the essay explores, mainly phenomenologically, the way places, memory, authenticity and selfhood are so deeply interwoven.

Keywords: W. G. Sebald, Martin Heidegger, memory, place, authenticity, pain.

Introduction

In his discussion of desire in The Republic, Plato brings the following story:

Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus under the outside of the North Wall when he noticed corpses lying by the public executioner. He desired to look, but at the same time he was disgusted and made himself turn away; and for a while he struggled and covered his face. But finally, overpowered by the desire, he opened his eyes wide, ran toward the corpses and said: 'Look, you damned wretches, take your fill of the fair sight!'

What makes this fragment so intriguing is the opposition between desire and abhorrence. Both are violent urges that aspire to take full control over our body and consciousness, both have a tendency to leave no space for other feelings, and both desire to take control over body and mind. They are very similar in these respects, yet they compete with one another. In desire there is a strong urge toward a thing: getting close to it, acquiring it, enjoying it. In abhorrence there is an opposite desire: to stay as far away from that thing, to avoid it at any cost, let nothing of it touch us. This paper shows how W.G. Sebald's The Emigrants² is an expression of this indecisive pendulum movement—between memory and forgetfulness, between being-in-home and being-in-exile³. Sebald's emigrants bear memories which ostensibly are just leftovers of their lost past; albeit, these leftovers carry a sense of imprisonment, a sense of being-in-exile, as they inform the subject of a lost past attainable only through memory. On the other hand, these memories function as home-carriers, as dwelling within these memories creates an existential sense of

³ As I very much lean on Heidegger's Being and Time, I took the liberty of using his style of terming things.
being-in-home. Thus, Sebald's protagonists move back and forth, from reality to memory and vice versa, without being able to decide what they prefer as their reality. They move from an actual, though alienated, presence to a mental, though "in-home", presence; from desire to "abhorrence". As in Plato's story, I claim that this desire and abhorrence are inspired by the same phenomenon: death. Albeit, if in Plato death shows itself as physical, external, and discrete—and literally so—here death is mostly mental, a consciousness event which cuts consciousness from reality; alienation. If in Plato death is over there while life is here, in Sebald death is here (the present time, lived consciousness) and life lies there (the past, memory). The only way to end this dilemma, this back and forth movement, this indecisiveness, is through life-ending events such as death, suicide, depression, and madness.

In The Emigrants, Sebald presents the story of four emigrants, all of them Jews or partly so, all of them old, born in Europe and raised as children there, and all "forced" to leave Europe due to war, pogroms and antisemitism. Thus, we find the retired Dr. Henry Selwyn, born at the end of the 19th century, who lives in England in a shattered house; as he grows older, he becomes increasingly homesick for the place he was born and lived in till the age of seven. Paul Bereyter an old teacher who was forced to leave his position and home village due to the Nuremberg Laws, as he was one-quarter of a Jew. Ambrose Adelwarth, who in 1910, at the age of 14, leaves Germany to America and to a life of wanderings up to his depression and solitary confinement. Finally, Max Ferber, an old painter who as a child was saved by his family—which sent him away from Germany in 1939 and was later murdered in a concentration camp—finds himself in Manchester, where he restructures his life.4

Sebald's imbues the phenomenon of emigration with significance and presence, not due to an interest in its demographic or cultural implications but in its phenomenology. That is, the way this phenomenon functions and takes meaning in his heroes' consciousness. His interest is not just in any emigrant, but in people who left their home and country due to an approaching catastrophe or violence (e.g., pogroms). Being an emigrant is shown to be not just a formal-biographical fact, but mainly an on-going modus and experience of consciousness. It is a lived consciousness of being-emigrant, and their suffering and existence grows out of that consciousness. This is not because they carry the sociological label of ‘emigrant’, as in “for them I am an emigrant whatever I do” or “I feel an emigrant because of the way society looks at me.”; rather, it runs much deeper, it reflects the way they perceive their broken identity, independent of society. It is a mood of existential strangeness from one’s self; alienation. It seems that as they grow older, the more memory-consciousness gains power over reality-consciousness, and the pain becomes endless. As Ferber says "I gradually understood that beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced – consciousness – and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about

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4 In Sebald's original and German written Ausgewanderten (1991) Ferber was originally named Max Aurach after the real character of Max Aurach, the English painter. However, later on Aurach preferred not to be closely identified with the book and thus Sebald changed it to Ferber.
this. What is certain, though, is that mental suffering is effectively without end".5

Why choose the term 'emigrants' and not 'refugees', or 'living in exile'? I take it to be some kind of sad irony. After all, the formal fact is that all of Sebald's heroes leave their home countries as a kind of choice; at most their parents choose so for them (Ferber, Selwyn). Unlike exile emigration is something we actively choose and thus it is strange the way an exilic mood controls the book. However, living in exile and the feeling of being forced to be so has nothing to do with the formal fact of not being forced but with the fact of not really choosing to do so. They lack what Harry Frankfurt termed a second-order-volition, an inability to reaffirm what they chose, the lack of an appropriate closure or departure from their past.6 They did not choose England or the USA—luck and history chose these for them.

Through discussing semi-realistic stories from the early 20th-century Jewish-European culture, Sebald shows how forced emigration ruined the lives of many, in terms of ruining their sense of home, belonging and identity. Their only way of home-living and being-in-home becomes that of constantly remembering. Though from a cognitive and behavioral point of view this recollection will be considered a free act, existentially it is not as it becomes their only way of being-in-home; they mentally survive that way. This constant remembering involves constant pain, as it accompanied by a feeling of having not only a personal lost past, but also a broken world. This situation is solved, as I said above, only through acts of demise: death, forgetting, suicide, madness and depression. Thus, Adelwarth suffers up to the point where he commits himself to a sanatorium, "longing for an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember";7 Dr. Selwyn commits suicide with his hunting rifle; and Bereyter also commits suicide as he lies in front of a train, thereby finally and symbolically identifying himself as a Jew (after being forced to be identified as such by the Nazi regime, for being a one-quarter Jew).

Sebald chooses a testimonial style of writing, forgoing terms of cause and effect, whether historical, sociological, or psychological, thereby allowing a much more subjective experience and existential meaning. However, though it is a personal experience, being a witness entails a commitment to being a a committed subject. That is, the unremitting use of chronologies, the burden of details, the meticulous and dry description of views and places, the relative lack of emotion and drama—it is documentarian in style. As Eshel puts it "Sebald's prose seemed to have consciously avoided the generalizing, the epic, and the quasi philosophical".8 In terms of style and reference to the past, we may term it as serving historical documentation. However, the interpretive starting point is completely contrary to that of a historian; the speech act is

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5 Sebald, The Emigrants, 1996, 170
7 Sebald, The Emigrants, p. 114.
different. While a historian is interested in "solving the riddle" by giving some meaning to what happened, by collecting important facts, locating major casual connections, integrating events to one major event, giving sense to a whole series of events—creating a narrative—Sebald's writing is much more like Benjamin's model of the wanderer in the modern city, as it leaps back and forth between memories, places, dates and episodes, preferring this over coherence, order, accuracy, objectivity and a linear narrative. By doing so, Sebald exposes his metaphysical position as to the way he takes human history to works. Furthermore, in testimony, what is crucial is a sense of authentic experience and not necessarily a sense of objective truth, accuracy or holism. So, while Sebald's stories are very detailed, they ignore major historic details required for understanding their background. An illustration of this allegedly mysterious approach is the way Sebald almost completely ignores two main motifs that recur within his writing: the Jewishness of most his characters (Selwyn, Adelwarth, Ferber) and three pivotal, political-historic contexts (the Holocaust, World War II, World War I) (Aliaga-Buchenau, 2006: 141-155). These details are tacitly transparent for the reader but are not given any centrality or causal standing, certainly no bold reference; they simply just float in the air of reading. You would think this forgetfulness is part of the reader's function to decipher things, yet these contexts, though not explicitly declared, are too transparent to be left to the reader to decipher. Why then does Sebald chooses to mention and not to mention? To regard and disregard? It seems that if these grand narratives—the Holocaust, ethnicity—are given a major role, they will automatically overpower the personal stories. They are removed from any direct discussion in order not to eclipse the private tragedies. After all, any positioning of socio-historic context in the foreground creates a rationalization, makes it a somewhat a global and not a personal experience, and so steals attention, empathy and focus. Solving memory is subjecting it to a linear and rational narrative, to language, thus making it understandable and so bearable. And as it subjects itself to such public and general devices, like rationality and language, it thus sacrifices intimacy, uniqueness and experience; its Otherness is destroyed. As Levinas describes this:

But theory also designates comprehension [intelligence] – the logos of being – that is, a way of approaching the known as being such that its alterity with regard to the knowing being vanishes. The process of cognition is at that stage identified with the freedom of the knowing being encountering nothing which, other with respect to it, could limit it…; in it the shock of the encounter of the same with the other is deadened.

In much the same way—even though it is derived from the opposite logic—many historians use private experiences only for exposing the grand

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narrative. They position the private event as an illustration of a grand one, and in doing so rob the event from its subject, making the subject incidental to the whole picture.

Albeit, there is another strange quality as to these emigrants' testimonies. Though it is clear what events they point at (The Holocaust, World War I, World War II), they are not direct testimonies of these events, and the witnesses did not experience those events directly. Their memorial testimonies are of what was before and what is now. This adds to Laub's observation that the Holocaust is an "event without a witness". Sebald's writing brings forth another type of non-presence witnesses: echoed witnesses. Still victims, still witnesses, still carry a tacit obligation for bringing the story.

Are these testimonies traumas? Cathy Caruth claims that what makes an experience a trauma is the way it "repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will". Following this, I believe Sebald's emigrants are not experiencing a trauma. This is not a trauma, as memory does not "jump" them, and as they have complex love and hate relations with these memories. They embrace memories as they bring a sense of home and authenticity; they loath them cause they bring, at the same time, a sense of exile and inauthenticity as to their current life.

LaCapra, while discussing the question of witnessing and trauma in history, claims there is a type of lacuna in the symbolical representation of trauma memory; we are unable to posit memory within some symbolic order and thus calm it, pacify it. Within trauma this reenactment keeps returning because every time it fails it has an "obligation" to come and try again.

However, unlike trauma victims it is not clear whether Sebald's protagonists have a therapeutic interest in "solving" memory in terms of pacifying it! Even when they try to forget it is not that they try to solve it; it is not an act of healing, understanding, forgiving, etc. Forgetting is still leaving things as they are! A process of solving may suggest a lack of loyalty toward past experiences, described above by Levinas as a deadening process. Sometimes, if we are to stay loyal to some memories, we must preserve the experience not only as personal and unique, but as irrational. As Felman cites from Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground: "I know very well that I am harming myself and no one else. But still, it's out of spite that I refuse to ask for the doctors' help. So my liver hurts? Good, let it hurt even more".

For victims, history is first of all not to be understood; rather, it is something that one first and foremost experiences; testimonies are there to "penetrate us like an actual life".

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13 Caruth Cathy, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1996), p. 2, emphasis is mine.
14 LaCapra Dominick Writing History, Writing Trauma (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2001), pp. 21-22.
16 Felman "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitude of Teaching.", p. 2
When listening to these testimonies, one cannot ignore the way the centrality of places within these testimonies, whether these are places of exile and whether these are places of home and belonging. Thus, if we want to understand this rupture, we have to understand this complex triangle of place, memory and selfhood.

**Place and the Event of Belonging**

As we the readers dwell upon the way Sebald’s heroes connect their suffering to their memories, there is no way of ignoring the pivotal position of places in their past memories and current alienation. As readers we face an endless journey of places. There is no way to avoid the way Sebald’s narrative intertwines memory and places. Thus, the question of place becomes a turning point for understanding the mood of being-emigrant.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger points out that humans are "born" into *being-in-the-world*.\(^{17}\) Being, says Heidegger, actually means "I reside" or "dwell alongside" the world, in a certain bounded space.\(^{18}\) That is, paradoxically, "the worlording of the world [das Welten von Welt]"\(^{19}\) is mainly through a certain limited place. The way we understand ourselves and internalize this existential mode as being-in-world happens not through the world and not through spaces, but through places. It becomes clear that though we consciously live with an "abstract" sense of world, what we actually dwell in is a pre-given, human and limited world. To understand this "evolution" of place dwelling, let us briefly discuss major concepts within Heidegger’s thought: the space/place dichotomy, the gathering process, dwelling and the Event (Ereignis).

Descartes’ scientific point of view conceived of places as spaces that "contain nothing but extension in length, breadth, and depth",\(^{20}\) space becomes limited through geometry, it becomes a *site*. However, Heidegger offers a different understanding, focused on *place* as a human concept with its socio-practical boundaries., These boundaries are defined not by some formal grid or mathematics, but from the inside outward, through the things the subject gathers in his involvement with that environment. Thus, place becomes more subjective, reflecting the way we are involved with our surroundings and things. Its boundaries are fuzzy areas where involvement becomes obscure for us. Thus, as space acquires a sense of aroundness, we negotiate with our surroundings in terms of closeness, ready-to-hand,\(^{21}\) as we humanly measure things like "a good walk", a "stone's throw", or "as long as it takes to smoke a pipe".\(^{22}\) We find such surroundings more and more populated and familiar

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when as humans we find ourselves "having to do with something, producing something, attempting to do something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determine…. all these ways of Being-in have concern as their kind of Being". 23 And so, boundaries point to where we stop taking care of things; it is a mental phenomenon that reflects our practical dealings with the world. As we care for them, these places become, a "container of experiences that contributes to its intrinsic memorability" 24. That is, the world we meet is in fact a situation, a limited time-place event. This place becomes "designated" when we are "unable" to gather more things and humans into a certain net around us. But what is the meaning of this gathering process? What constitutes gathering is linking things together, in this linking we expose these things, that is we reveal a meaning and thus they become more than just a presence. Let us observe the way Heidegger describes this act of gathering as to a bridge over a river:

The bridge swings over the stream "with ease and power." It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream…. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream. 25

The 'banks emerge' not physically of course — but as they acquire their meaning in relation to the bridge; they are released from their mere and silent presence. Their "functionality", and thus meaning, is revealed through the "act" of "bridging".

This locality of place is nicely expressed through the fact that Sebald's heroes refer in their home memories mainly not to Germany, Russia or Europe, which are too abstract for being a place; rather, their memories and longings are for certain localized places such as the Selwyn's "cheder", Bereyter's class, Adelwarth's Ain Jidy, Ferber's village.

What makes this gathering and act of belonging is the Event (Ereignis). Heidegger pictures the Event as a certain happening where things are gathered together, as before, but though the event is a down-to-earth one, it is also accompanied by a kind of magic: "[t]he event is not an event among other events", "it is something in which we are 'taken up' and "transformed" (Malpas, 2008: 218). It is an original moment of being-belonged. It discloses our self in relation with a certain place and surrounding; it is the gathering of self and things, which at the same time prevents the self from belonging-gathering in other environments. This event of gathering and the belonging of the Event and dwelling show the way human selfhood is not purely mental but is dependent on things, on the "physical" environment. As Malpas summarizes this so eloquently, "[m]ortalis are themselves gathered in and through the thing. 26

22 Casey, Remembering, p. 186.
The outcome of this is that there is no way of separating our sense of selfhood from our sense of our place. Places are memory-holders, as they are part of our selfhood. Sadly when you think of the Holocaust then not only Jews were murdered they were even robbed of what carries a basic dignity of their death and memory: cemeteries. Horribly, their current memorial sites are mostly those industrial sites of mass killing, Auschwitz and its twins.27

But what makes places such suitable candidates for being memory-holders? First, movement is an "enemy" for memory as any new movement eliminates the last one, thus not allowing any stability, and stability and persistency are crucial for memory. Places on the other hand supply this stability and persistency.28 Secondly, "places are congealed scenes for remembered contents; and as such they serve to situate what we remember".29 That is, the visual detailed richness of places serves as a hanger for our memories. However, places are not only efficient cognitive tool, to be memory-carriers they need another potential, and this is their ability to carry the attribute of One's own.30 Places become 'our places' as we invest caring and involvement in them.31 And this is done as we gather them through our lived body and through familiarity.32 As Trigg observes, following Merleau-Ponty comprehensive discussion, the lived-body is "absorbing the world from inside out", it "becomes a center stretching out into the world".33 The lived-body is an axis, which represents consciousness, for placing the near environment.

Thus, in Sebald's Emigrants, as memory is in the foreground so are places. The heroes, as well as the narrator—the fifth emigrant of this book—gain meaning through places and events. This is manifest in two complementary ways or moods. The first is the "home" mood, and the second is the "exilic" mood. The first one is mostly stable and static: land, hometown, family estate, mountains, deserts, houses and so on. The second one is mostly dynamic: trains, ships, carriages, cars, roads, destruction and war. Thus, for Bereyter, "home" is his hometown, the class, his father's store, while alienation and destruction are the railroad. For Adelwarth, alienation and forgetfulness is New York, while authenticity is the Jordan River. For Ferber, Manchester with its trains, canals depots and industrial chimneys, is exile, while home and belonging are being with his father on the summit of the mountain of Gammon, and the lengthy, detailed narration of his family home and home village (Steinbach).

Memory as Mood

For Sebald's heroes, as they live with the constant mood of non-dwellers, recollection is their mental method not only for moments of remembering, but

28 Casey, Remembering, pp. 186-187.
29 Casey, Remembering, pp. 189.
30 Casey, Remembering, pp. 192.
for dwelling through living memory. Choosing the term 'to live' is not some kind of trivialization, literary cliché or even a poetic metaphor; rather, it expresses the way memory actually works for Sebald's protagonists. His protagonists live their memories as an internal, ongoing process, one that fills their daily routines, that navigates and disciplines their daily consciousness; they become enslaved to these memories and to the act of memory.

When saying "this is the world they live in", I am thinking of two modes of memory. The first one is the "trivial", regular mode. In this mode, through recollection we bring from the past into the present, into consciousness, a meaningful event, and we dwell upon it momentarily. Within that dwelling we picture it, and we can locate ourselves and others in this picture. Such a memory brings about a mental-emotional reaction: a laugh, a tear, sharp sadness, sharp longing, an urge, and so on. These memories can actually fill our field of consciousness vividly, for some time, and we are fully aware of them. Mostly, these moments are relatively brief and they pass away through forgetfulness, thus allowing life to go on. However, there exists another mode of memory, one that is much less visual, much more "moody". In this mode, and though the trigger may still be a specific recollection, when that recollection disappears from consciousness metaphorically a certain weight or color remains within consciousness and accompanies our actions, thoughts and personal relations, for a relatively lengthy period of time, maybe even all the time.

As Sebald describes Adelwarth's trip to the Holy Land, he dedicates an extended paragraph to listing places, around and in Jerusalem: "the Russian cathedral, the Russian Men's and Women's Hospice, the French Hospital de St. Louis, the Jewish Home for the Blind .... " — and so on for 31 lines! What is the purpose of presenting such a list? Why does he provide such a list without any details to go along with these places, just names? And after that he suddenly dedicates the last part of the story to a lengthy description of their stay in Ain Jidy, which becomes a thorny and constant memory. This difference is an example of the way people find on the one hand an inability to dwell and on the other hand they suddenly find themselves at home—they dwell. This gap brings to the fore the way Sebald's heroes are constantly in a search for dwelling, and though they live within houses, cities, villages and so on, the only way they finally dwell is by going back, through memory, to those lost places where they felt at home. And though they all acknowledge the destructiveness of such a move, they still play hide and seek with their memory-places. Thus, although Selwyn spends most of his life in England, becoming a doctor and getting married, building a family and so on, he still he has no place for them in his memories! No place under the category of 'home'. Bereyter is compelled by his fellow citizens to leave his home town, his position and vocation as a teacher, and still, though he was actually exiled, he is "forced" to go back to Germany and to the town of S. Though for us it is

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36 Sebald, The Emigrants, p. 56.
irrational—for him it is totally rational; after all, his identity remains there. However, there is a price he has to pay for living after what happened: he has to be blind. In a way, Bereyter voluntarily embraces his imminent blindness, a blindness that allows him to hide the betrayal he suffered from his village fellows. Bereyter is also the only one who tries not only to live the past through memories, but also actually and physically go back to these places. However, when he goes back, he finds that though geographically these places are there, as before the war, they do not exist for him after what World War II has done to Europe. Similar to Adorno's famous saying, "There can be no poetry after Auschwitz", the same goes for Europe after the war: Europe is not the same and there is no way of returning to its prior form. This is the way Sebald describes this vain attempt by Bereyter:

What moved and perhaps even forced Paul to return, in 1939 and in 1945, was the fact that he was a German to the marrow, profoundly attached to his native land in the foothills of the Alps, and even to that miserable place S as well; which in fact he loathed and … would have been pleased to see destroyed and obliterated, together with the townspeople, whom he found so utterly repugnant. 37

As turning memory into reality is futile, two options remain for Sebald’s emigrants. The first one is trying to live within memory (Selwyn, Ferber), the other one is trying to obliterate it (Bereyter, Adelwarth). And so we find Bereyter as well as Adelwarth providing no direct testimony to the narrator. Their memories are revealed only by the narrator's investigations. This lack of direct testimony is accompanied by another tactic of handling memories: forgetting them. Thus, Adelwarth commits himself to electric shock treatment "longing for an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember". 38 This hide-and-seek movement is also revealed with Ferber, who locks himself in a hotel room in Geneva, avoiding places outside where he travelled in the past with his father. However, though he is frail and full of anxiety, he ultimately decides at the end "that only the reality outside could save me." 39 That is, only reality can save him from his memory!

Thus, though Sebald’s protagonists acquire professions, careers, status, wealth, etc. (Dr. Henry Selwyn, the painter Max Ferber, the teacher Paul Bereyter), they act as social automatons in the actual circles of their life. However, they come to the knowledge that abandoning memories is like abandoning their authentic self. Though the consequence is living in pain, they choose to live so; in the dilemma between a torn self and no-self, they choose to be, ultimately, a torn self. One can see, then, how for them the only way of annulling their suffering is by annulling consciousness. These humans are trapped and lost in a triangle of lost-identity, lost-place and memory. If so, does this tragedy make the work of memory, within the story of The Emigrants, irrational?

37 Sebald, The Emigrants, p. 57.
Rationality, Authenticity, Pain and Memory

Giving priority to memorial and experiential life over actual life is allegorically featured in the picture of Selwyn's house, in which Sebald anchors a mental picture of memory through exposing the reader to the labyrinths and locking mechanisms inside the house. As readers, we can clearly discern that the house, with its two big dark windows, remarkably simulates an owl, that common metaphor for a deep, gloomy, sunken, dark memory, one that is looking back at us (As a reader I found no way to avoid imagining it to be a staring owl, when looking at it). This homology of house, memory and ruin goes on: notice the way Sebald describes Dr. Selwyn's garden, where you can find at least three derivations for this metaphor: "But now the court has fallen into [1]disrepair, like so much else around here. It's not only the kitchen garden, he continued, indicating the tumble-down Victorian greenhouses and overgrown espaliers, that's on its last legs after years of [2]neglect. More and more, he said, he sensed that Nature itself was groaning and [3]collapsing beneath the burden we placed upon it". Thus, when Selwyn continually counts blades of grass, these are actually his memories, as alluded to by the narrator: "It's a sort of pastime of mine", and that time, the desolated garden, the tennis courts, the vegetable garden, what was once a manicured environment, becomes a wild garden; what was once controlled and disciplined has become abandoned. This is obviously an allegory of a process whereby private, fragmented memories gain increased control of consciousness and self-identity, leading to Selwyn telling the narrator that he is "merely a dweller in the garden, a kind of ornamental hermit". As we can see there is no self, but only a bundle of memories leading Selwyn to the climax of this process—as his memories leave him no other refuge but to commit suicide.

This emphasis of the homology of pain and disorder (irrationality) is given another metaphoric expression in Ferber's story. Sebald mentions how in the middle of Ferber's atelier stands a painting by Courbet, The Oak of Vercingetorix. This oak motif is also present in the opening picture of the book, where we see a tree with a thick stem, tangled branches, spreading horizontally, existing somewhere between earth and sky, one you can almost feel as it constantly strives upward. We can also see how deeply it is rooted in the earth, how it is almost geometrically structured; its shape recalls, almost forcefully, a circular-harmonic perception; the image is of order, rationality, harmony and power. There is a gathering of earth, sky and world; the Event becomes that of harmony and order. However, if with Courbet's painting there is only a tree and open land, with Sebald the tree is surrounded by many scattered tombstones, no link between them, partly broken and smashed. It is an image redolent of negligence, disorder, death—of ruin. Now, we find it

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40 Sebald, The Emigrants, p. 11.
41 Sebald, The Emigrants, p. 7.
42 Sebald, The Emigrants, p. 5.
43 Sebald, The Emigrants, p. 5.
44 This is if course a paraphrase of Hume’s classic expression ‘a bundle of perceptions', which is an accurate description of what is left of Sebald's protagonists.
45 Sebald, The Emigrants, p. 3.
difficult to gather this tree and these tombstones. Simmel describes this phenomenon of ruin as "natural forces begin to become master over the work of man: the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favor of nature". It is as if the history of life and growth succumbs to the history of death and ruin. Another, personal way, of looking at it is the way fragmented past memories of ruin increasingly take control over life consciousness. Death (ruin) becomes, paradoxically, the living force of life, if "the hierarchy of nature and spirit usually shows nature as the substructure, so to speak, the raw material, or semi-finished product; the spirit, as the definitely formative and crowning element. The ruin reverses this order: what was raised by the spirit becomes the object of the same forces which form the contour of the mountain and the bank of the river". Memories, as ruins, become forces that take control of what made them (spirit, consciousness). Memory is not only an entity, but an "activity and a passion in search of a narrative". It is a structured propensity for transforming the many memories into one, the incidents of life into a story, a group into an 'I'. However, sometimes this grouping is only a formal procedure, a proper name ('Henry', 'Paul', 'Max', 'Ambrose') and no more than that; it is an identity that is no more than an archive; even when it refers to an 'I', it is one that is broken and dismantled.

In 'Against Narrativity', Galen Strawson distinguishes between two opposing attitudes that match life and narrative. In the first and perhaps the most common, a person makes a correspondence between his overall human "biological" self and his diachronic life. In the other, a person recognizes more than one self in his overall human life; that is, he understands his overall self to be a chain of episodic selves: "one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future". Thus, a person who was once a God-fearing religious individual and is now an atheist, sees the first phase of his life as referring mentally to another persona. But if for Strawson this exemplifies a satisfactory option, almost a stoic one, for Sebald's emigrants it is a bad solution, actually no solution at all. Strawson believes that through his "pearl necklace" model (as each pearl refers metaphorically to a different biographic persona), "there are good ways to live that are deeply non-Narrative". However, when he writes "non-narrative" he actually means "non-mono-narrative" That is, when he writes against narrativity he in fact writes in favor of an option for a multi-narratives-self. But to create a multi-narrative picture one has to achieve closure vis à vis the present narrative, to peacefully say goodbye to it before starting a new one. Sebald's protagonists are an example of people whose life narrative was cut off suddenly and violently. They were totally denied the option of a life of narrative, in its plural or singular form; they were denied the option of closure. Though I disagree with Strawson's optimistic and

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47 Simmel, "The Ruin", p. 381.  
49 Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of a Narrative", p. 21.  
51 Strawson, "Against Narrativity", p. 430.  
52 Strawson, "Against Narrativity", p. 429.
harmonious model, I agree with his tacit insight as to the way memory functions as some kind of an Other for us. The present and on-going self (what Heidegger termed as the "they", Das Man; seeking averageness and the group as a source of inauthentic selfness) confronts what is actually a bygone self. Strawson's opinion represents a postmodern position, which holds that there is not necessarily a single self. What he offers, culturally, is the abandoning of our longing for a past as it is merely a myth; a man can start living from the middle. The past has at the most a causal-explanatory importance, but it is not a necessary condition for a being a self. What Strawson is offering is a logical solution for overcoming an existential passion for a continuous self. This logic depends, however, upon the way people reflect and perceive these lost memories. For Sebald, memory is the Event of belonging (Ereignis) as well as a lost paradise. These memories keep defining the present and future of selfhood—we might call them "existing past memories"—while at the same time they are blocking selfhood! As it is expressed in one of Sebald's cryptic remarks: "For, like death itself, the cemeteries of Constantinople are in the midst of life".

The dialectic of present and memories also brings forth the question of authenticity and inauthenticity. Following Heidegger's discussion of authenticity, as a sudden rupture in existence due to the possibility of death, Thomson points out another possible understanding of death within Heidegger's being and time. Thomson argues that what stands, existentially and hermeneutically, behind the meaning of death is "the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general". Thus, exile is in fact "the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general". Sebald's heroes perceive the present as having no relation—other than a casual one—with the past (memories). The past becomes true life, the present becomes an ongoing death. What makes things exponentially worse is the fact that in our "standard" understanding of death, it is a one-time discrete event, while here the experience of death becomes an ongoing event! Thus, living obsessively within memory becomes being-dead.

These existing past memories exemplify Thomson's way of defining Heidegger's concept of death as "the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general". On one hand, they allow being-at-home; on the other hand, and alongside that, they forbid the "impossibility of existence in general". They carry with them a consciousness of life and death at the same time, reflecting a type of malfunction in existence. The present is trying to communicate with the past, for the purpose of establishing a stable interpretation of the self that can serve the future, but is unable to do so. Though memory (as a mechanism) reaches memory (as content), it paradoxically captures it as someone else's memory. We enter some sort of

53 Heidegger, Being and Time, pp. 149-168.
54 Sebald, The Emigrants, p. 131.
55 Heidegger, Being and Time, pp. 299-311.
58 Heidegger, Being and Time, pp. 95-107.
existential malfunction, a self-malfunction. This is the moment when Sebald's protagonists tell themselves: we "experience ourselves as a kind of bare, existential projecting without any existential projects to project ourselves into". This is the "possibility of impossibility", the impossibility of "being-at-home".

Memory is not merely a static content that confronts us; it is a constant call for interpretation, for response, for understanding, for giving meaning to life and narrative. It commands us, and thus it can become an ethical crisis. In a way these memories designate some sort of Levinas' Other. As Sartre describes it: "The person is presented to consciousness in so far as the person is an object for the Other. This means that all of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escalating myself, not in that I am the foundation of myself as nothingness but in that I have my foundation outside myself", and as Casey adds "[w]e witness the othering of mind into something other than itself. Remembering is in effect a progressive voyage into the othering of memory as traditionally conceived. But, if memory creates an existential other who we still recognize, cognitively and ontologically, as the same I, it also brings with it a possible crisis, as; authenticity is the event where Dasein is revealed to his freedom:

Anticipation reveals to Dasein its looseness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concernful solicitude, but of being itself, rather in an impassioned freedom towards death – a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the "they", and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious.

Only within present time, and in front of memory, they are revealed to the fact that they live far away of their true and lost world. Now they have to choose between living authentically, while in pain, or amputate their memory and being. As we can see, Sebald's heroes choose, in the end, the second option.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the way memories work for Selwyn, Bereyter, Adelwarth and Ferber is not that they are merely painful; beside the pain, they are also memories of home, happiness, and calmness. Pain brings sober acknowledgment of their true authenticity, their lost past, of an inability to connect the actual self to these memories. But while we usually regard pain as something that we try to avoid or get rid of, here pain is embraced as it is involved with being-at-home, with relating to our selfhood. What they ask

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59 Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 269.
60 Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 270.
62 Casey, Remembering, p. xi.
63 Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 311.
themselves is in fact Milan Kundera's famous question: "What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?".\textsuperscript{64} They choose lightness: death, forgetting.

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\textsuperscript{64} Cited in Casey, \textit{Remembering}, p. 4.
