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3

Hirsch, Sebald, and the Uses and Limits of Postmemory

Kathy Behrendt

Marianne Hirsch coined the term “postmemory” to encompass a subject of enduring interest—namely, the fraught position of the generation that follows a period of collective trauma. Her specific focus in her initial work on postmemory was on the relationships that children have with parents who were victims or witnesses of such trauma. Hirsch is explicit about her personal connection to the subject: she is a child of parents who escaped the Holocaust, and she grew up in a climate in which the after-effects of trauma and victimization manifested themselves in countless ways.

Hirsch developed her conception of postmemory in a series of works, and that conception has, over time, proven to be quite malleable. In one sense, the term simply refers to the ways in which members of the generation following a catastrophe (although Hirsch also includes members of the “1.5” generation—child survivors of catastrophe) are aware of and connect to their elders’ past suffering. Often, though, the term includes not only that awareness but also the often publicly available imaginative and/or aesthetic responses (sometimes called “postmemory work”) of members of this generation to the trauma their family endured. For the most part, my concern is with this latter sense of postmemory. Although postmemory is malleable, it has several more or less constant features: the experiences of the victim are transmitted to the descendant through narrative and sometimes through images (photographs being especially important to Hirsch); the post-rememberer strongly identifies with the victim while remaining aware of the distance between them; postmemories are powerful and are invested with emotion; the post-rememberer connects to the past

through imagination and creativity; and, finally, post-rememberers are not passive recipients of memories, but place themselves in the morally imperative role of witness, entrusted with preserving the past they have inherited and transmitting it to others. How best to convey the memories they are bequeathed remains a source of constant scrutiny, both by the post-rememberer and by the interested wider audience.¹

A prime example of postmemory work, for Hirsch, is Art Spiegelman's complex biographical and autobiographical graphic novel *Maus*, which recounts Spiegelman's father's life before Auschwitz and his time as a prisoner there. This is interspersed with the author's present-day dealings with his aging and irascible father, as they meet in order that the son can record these oft-told tales of family struggle and persecution. The work is as much about his father's past suffering as it is about Spiegelman's own inherited guilt, angst, and ambivalence as the one surviving son (another did not live) of death camp survivors. As the numbers of living primary victims of that particular catastrophe wane, interest in the generation following them continues to grow, and their situation becomes a subject of interest in its own right, replete as it is with its own pain. Insofar as members of the next generation are compelled to ensure that their parents' experiences are not forgotten, the pain is supplemented by a deep sense of responsibility. Hirsch is only one among many writers who recognize the special position of the post-trauma generation, and the notion of postmemory is her attempt to provide a conceptual framework able to illuminate their situation and guide their endeavours.

In what follows, I explore the virtues and shortcomings of Hirsch's conception of postmemory. To draw out the virtues, I will tap recent developments in the philosophy of memory. Having done that, I will argue that by expanding her conception of postmemory to include works that lack those virtues, Hirsch risks diluting them. Her recent move to classify author W.G. Sebald's work as postmemorial is a case in point. Finally, and again through appeal to Sebald, I will issue cautionary words about postmemory in general and about the ethical dangers and limitations inherent in Hirsch's emphasis on empathic access to the past experiences of the victims of trauma.

I

Hirsch's concept of postmemory intersects with several areas of emerging interest in the philosophy of memory. Gone from memory theory is the hegemony of the "archival" model of human memory, whereby past experiences are fixed entities contained in some interior metaphorical storage

closet so that memory's success is judged solely in terms of how little damage we do to these items when retrieving them. Many memory theorists now contend that change and reconstruction are inevitable aspects of memory.² Some argue that *good* remembering is not static; rather, it can alter when our evaluation of the past alters (Campbell §2.3). In a related development, memory is no longer being treated as necessarily private and interior. It can also be public, often taking place "through action, narrative, and other modes of representation in public spaces" (Campbell 362). Memory's capacity to evolve according to the ever-changing present context does not necessarily entail distortion. Memory is always selective; we cannot represent every possible detail of a past experience, but must pick and choose among them—and these choices may be good or bad. Thus, "good" memories select details of the past that are significant and relevant from the standpoint of the present—what we know, understand, and feel about that past situation *now*. Sue Campbell calls this *accuracy*: selecting, sometimes from among an abundance of details, those elements that we now take to be salient in light of our current knowledge and intentions *vis-à-vis* the remembered content, and doing so in a way that strikes the appropriate emotional tone (Campbell §§3.2 and 3.3).³

Postmemory is in keeping with these revised conceptions of memory and has great potential to exemplify Campbell's virtue of "accuracy." Postmemory seeks to do justice to ancestral memories—to get them right by capturing the emotional content of those experiences and by isolating those elements that will convey what we *presently* understand to be the devastating extent of what was suffered in the past. This is often done for the purpose of enhancing others' understanding of those events. Additionally, postmemory is often conducted in a public forum through creative and imaginative expression, with a vigilant attentiveness to what might be, at any given cultural moment, the most appropriate aesthetic means of preserving and conveying the past (an art installation, a graphic novel, etc.).

Tied to the aforementioned developments in memory theory is a separate recent move to acknowledge a moral dimension to memory.⁴ Talk of an ethics of memory is increasing, alongside examination of the moral implications of bearing witness to the past. Often, such witnessing is achieved through the institutions and conventions surrounding "collective memory," be these museums, memorials, truth and reconciliation committees, or efforts to preserve a threatened Aboriginal culture. Clearly, Hirsch's concept has resonance here too, and she explicitly holds up postmemory as a model for "an *ethical* relation to the oppressed or persecuted

other” (“Surviving Images” 10). Insofar as the post-rememberer has been assigned the role of witness, she is—often in publicly available forums—fulfilling an ethical imperative in receiving, preserving, and passing on what was known, felt, and experienced. Hence, the work of postmemory is never merely aesthetic, notwithstanding its creative aspects; it also entails a duty to sustain the integrity of the original experience—something not necessarily demanded of a purely artistic endeavour.

Accuracy on the one hand, and the fulfillment of the moral imperative to bear witness on the other, are two of postmemory’s virtues. And both are tied to the broader possibilities of memory as a tool for advancing emotional and intellectual flourishing (i.e., instead of memory being a mere repository of past experience). Hirsch’s more recent (and broader) elucidation of postmemory, however, threatens to dilute the concept’s strengths.

II

While there are some philosophical models underpinning postmemory, there are also problems with the concept. Two significant strands of criticism have emerged. The first of these we might call “the Butler objection,” after Joseph Butler, who famously argued that—contrary to what John Locke supposedly implied in his groundbreaking writing on personal identity—memory *presupposes* personal identity.⁵ If a subject at a later time remembers having had a certain experience at an earlier time, it is because the experiencing and the remembering subject are one and the same. It is *because* the experience is his that he can have memory-consciousness of it; it does not become his by virtue of his having such consciousness (and therefore the memory relation does not *create* but merely *presupposes* personal identity, *pace* Locke). While Butler’s point has since been disputed as a claim about what is possible with respect to memory,⁶ it remains relatively uncontroversial that, contingently speaking, his account captures how things do in fact go in real life; we are built such that we can remember our own experiences and no one else’s, and identity between a subject at an earlier time and a subject at a later one coincides with any memory-like relation between them. Hirsch does not appear to be in the business of disputing received views about the empirical facts of memory (or personal identity), so wherein lies her entitlement to claim that one person can have a memory-like relation to the experience of another? In particular, how can she go so far as to claim that the experiences bequeathed to the post-rememberer are “so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right” for the post-rememberer (“Surviving Images” 9)? Gary Weissman nicely captures the tenor of the Butler

objection when he writes that “no degree of power and monumentality can transform one person’s lived memories into another’s” (17).⁷

Hirsch is well aware of this line of criticism and has confronted it directly in a recent paper. She absolves herself of committing a basic empirical error about memory by making clear that, as far as she is concerned, we cannot have *literal* memories of another’s experiences (“The Generation of Postmemory” 109). But in attempting to address the objection at hand, she walks straight into the sights of another criticism—one that often gets conflated with the Butler objection but deserves separate consideration. Hirsch maintains her rhetorical entitlement to the term “memory” on the grounds that postmemory *seems* like memory in crucial respects—specifically, “it approximates memory in its affective force” (“The Generation of Postmemory” 109). Thus, *affect* is the key point of resemblance between a victim’s experience and a post-rememberer’s connection to it, and this affective resemblance is, as said, achieved through imaginative means. Imaginative and affect-laden identification with the victim is a mark of postmemory, and lest there be any doubt about what this looks like in practice, Hirsch makes it clear: “It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences [...] of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of ascribing them into one’s own life story” (“Surviving Images” 10). In short, it is a question of empathy—of imagining what it is like to be another, or at the least, imagining how things would be for oneself if one were in another’s circumstance. It is Hirsch’s continuing commitment to this aspect of postmemory that feeds into the second strand of criticism—namely, the appropriation objection.

According to the appropriation objection, we are, with postmemory, dealing with something akin to counter-transference on the part of the post-rememberer, wherein “empathy [...] shades into overidentification” and the focus is primarily on the self, not the victim (Franklin *A Thousand Darknesses* 224–25). When the post-rememberer adopts the victim’s experience as her own, there is nothing to bar her from “coloniz[ing] victims’ memories and identities” (Crownshaw 216). What fuels the criticisms here is not the Butleresque concern that Hirsch is simply mistaken about the proper ascription of memories to subjects of experience. Rather, it is the intimation that the post-rememberer can herself live through anything resembling what the victims lived through, feel what they felt, or forge and possess her own traumatic experiences, with the victim as facilitator of this exercise. These intimations, more so than any tendency toward an overly liberal or literal use of the term “memory,” are what I take to be the true target of the appropriation objection.

Insofar as empathy is a key component of postmemory, I do not think Hirsch ever fully escapes the appropriation objection. Although perhaps we can somewhat alleviate the sense that the act of postmemory is essentially self-regarding by recalling that it is the child of the victim-parent who is the post-rememberer, indeed, a child who grew up immersed in manifestations of the victim's trauma—not just publicly available information, but deeply personal family stories, images, and psychosomatic symptoms. A sympathetic reading would allow for a degree of entitlement to identification here, consonant with the nature and extent of the relation between the rememberer and the post-rememberer. If Hirsch's personal connections to the memories she preserves and conveys are a potential safeguard against the appropriation objection, however, why then does she expand her concept of postmemory to include people who don't have familial ties to survivors of the trauma? On the expanded depiction of the postmemory generation, anyone with an affiliative connection to, or even just an interest in, the traumatic event is potentially welcome into the fold of postmemory.⁸ In addition—and as is more my concern—what qualifies as postmemory work is also altered and expanded beyond the narrower bounds I discussed at the outset.

Hirsch's expanded conception of postmemory, if left unqualified, seems to allow the concept to be applied with equal facility to not just the children of Holocaust survivors, but also the authors of fraudulent Holocaust memoirs.⁹ The warning that postmemory work may absorb "unregulated fantasy" into its ranks has been issued before (see Long *W.G. Sebald* 118). Leaving this criticism aside, I will, for present purposes, focus on just one recent entry into Hirsch's enlarged cast of post-rememberers—the German author W.G. Sebald. I will argue that he does not qualify as someone engaged in "cultural postmemory work," as Hirsch would have it ("The Generation of Postmemory" 117). This is ultimately tied to the manner in which he escapes accusations of appropriation by eschewing imaginative empathy. Moreover, there are also particular features that are conspicuously absent in his work, which distances it from the milieu of the postmemorial.

III

Sebald is certainly engaged with the general phenomenon I mentioned at the outset: the position of the generation that comes after a catastrophic event. This, along with his harvesting of real-life anecdotes, archival data, and especially photographs from that past, is no doubt what endears him to Hirsch. But at the same time, Sebald's status as a member of a

postmemory generation is complicated by the fact that his heritage does not directly tie him to the victims; he was born in Germany at the end of the Second World War, to a father who was a captain in the German army. Moreover, Sebald was raised in an environment wherein, by his own account, little was said or spoken about that time (see Jaggi). Only when he had distanced himself, both spatially and temporally, far from his national and family origins, did he even begin to explore that past through creative means.¹⁰

Hirsch claims to be able to cope with these discrepancies between Sebald and more “conventional” post-rememberers, such as Art Spiegelman (“The Generation of Postmemory”). My concern, though, is less with the clear disparities between Sebald and the children of victims, and more with the differences between the creative products of their separate pasts. Sebald’s work is not in keeping with much of what I have identified as philosophically prescient about postmemory. In particular, his works touch on the Holocaust in a way that is often antithetical to the qualities of witness and accuracy—qualities that, as discussed, are exemplified in Hirsch’s conception of postmemory. These points can be drawn out through consideration of the title character of *Austerlitz* (the book Hirsch focuses on), Max Ferber of *The Emigrants*, the narrators of both works, and consideration of the various ways in which none of them qualifies as a post-rememberer. Hirsch focuses on *Austerlitz*, although much of her analysis would apply in equal measure to *The Emigrants*, in particular the section on Max Ferber, which has much in common with the story of *Austerlitz* (especially the acutely felt loss of the mother and the relation of the characters to the narrator.) I include them both for interest’s sake, but whether taken together or separately, the stories of these two characters reinforce the absence of many key features of witness and accuracy in Sebald.

Both *Austerlitz* (an art historian) and Ferber (an artist) were sent to Britain as children and are descendants of Jewish parents left behind in mainland Europe, who were subsequently killed or lost in the Holocaust. Both convey accounts of their lives, and of the lives—as much as is known—of their parents, to an unnamed narrator over a series of conversations that take place over a long span of time. As in all of Sebald’s “prose fiction,”¹¹ certain clues lead or mislead us to note a striking resemblance between the anonymous narrator and Sebald himself, but the genre-transgressing nature of the works impedes a fixed and determinate identification.

Detailed discussion of what it means to be a witness is relatively new in the philosophy of memory, but some plausible criteria have been proposed

by Jeffrey Blustein.¹² A witness must, at the very least, have epistemic authority if she is to be credible; she must know whereof she speaks, and those to whom she testifies must be aware of, or able to obtain, these epistemic credentials. Conversely, a good deal of the irremediable misfortune of Austerlitz's and Ferber's situations arises from the fact that neither of them knows in any detail what happened to their parents; they can only surmise. The limit of their knowledge circumscribes their potential as effective witnesses; if one purpose of witnessing is to render salient to the audience what was salient for the sufferer, then neither Austerlitz nor Ferber is in a position to do this.

Another arguable feature of the witness is agency—witnessing being an active and deliberate undertaking for a perceived purpose. Hirsch herself extols the “anchors of agency and responsibility” in postmemorial aesthetic treatments of the Holocaust (*Family Frames* 264). Yet Austerlitz and Ferber are so often presented to us as passive vessels for the past, as not in control of the effect it has on them, and as all the more vulnerable because of this. For both these characters, the past often manifests itself in involuntary or unconscious ways, such as through the vivid dreams they relate to the narrator, the possibly hysterical symptoms they display (Ferber's increasing agoraphobia and memory gaps concerning a recent visit to Lake Geneva, and Austerlitz's anxiety attacks and incidences of cognitive and emotional paralyses), and their tendency toward obsessive-compulsive behaviour (Austerlitz's endless night walks around London, and the artist Ferber's scraped down and restarted paintings). Similarly, both characters exhibit visceral responses to places that bear some relation to their family's past (both return to locales from their childhood and experience anxiety and despair) and have inexplicable affinities to certain other places that connect more obliquely with that past (the outskirts of Manchester, for Ferber, with its bleak post-industrial vistas dotted with warehouses and chimneys; Liverpool Street Station in London, for Austerlitz, later discovered to be the site of his arrival in Britain on the *Kindertransport*).

In addition to Austerlitz and Ferber's lack of agential freedom, there is another related feature of agency that is conspicuously absent for them—namely, the conscious and deliberate. Even if we consider the above examples of manifestations of the past to be forms of memory, none of them amounts to a form of testimony, because testimony cannot be largely unconscious or “unwitting” (Blustein 315).¹³ While Blustein's demand for conscious control over the content of one's testimony is a more controversial feature of witnessing, there is a strong case to be made for it in

connection to the aforementioned epistemic feature. We cannot align unconscious testimony with the epistemic authority required of bearing witness; one cannot bear witness to a truth that is largely inaccessible or obscured to oneself. A degree of insight into the source of one's memory-activity is needed in order to bear witness, otherwise one lacks competence and authority to speak to others of such matters (Blustein 316). The notion of unconscious or unwitting testimony also threatens the all-important ethical element of testimony at stake here, by raising the unpalatable prospect that something of such normative significance may be accidental.

Certainly lack of insight and self-understanding dominate the lives of characters like Ferber and Austerlitz, which is why they remain in a perpetual state of remorse, each engaged in his obsessive pursuits. It may also explain why they both commit acts that are anathema to postmemory witnessing: they relinquish rather than safeguard what little they have in the way of material connection to their family's past. Austerlitz gives over his collection of photos to the narrator; and in a quite literal abandonment of any pretense of standing as a conduit for his mother's past experience, Ferber gives up not just photographs but also his mother's manuscript memoirs.

Thus, Ferber and Austerlitz fail with respect to the broader purpose of postmemory: to bear effective witness. I also believe, however, that they fail at the level of the second of the two aforementioned virtues of postmemory: *accuracy*.

IV

"Accuracy," recall, means in part the selection of salient elements from the details the past presents us. Yet at key points in Sebald's texts where accuracy would seem to be most required, it is significantly absent. Sometimes this is due to a want of detail (Austerlitz's retrograde amnesia being a clear case in point), sometimes due to an excess, as Austerlitz is also frequently overwhelmed by the details of the past, in various guises. He pores over the Nazi film footage of Theresienstadt in slow motion, searching every frame for evidence of his mother, who was interred there. Likewise, he searches the monolithic new Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris for information about his father, but bureaucratic and architectural obstacles prevent him from finding anything meaningful among the vast archives. Crucial details also escape Ferber. He repeatedly tries to paint from memory the man with the

butterfly net, who saved him from possible suicide on an occasion when he revisited a key locale from his childhood, but he cannot ever capture the face of his rescuer. Nor can Ferber remember the parting words of his final encounter with his parents—instead he recalls trivial details, such as the make and model number of the airplane he flew out on.

Although he is comparatively exempt, accuracy eludes even the narrator himself at times. The narrator of *The Emigrants*, much as he would like to, cannot give the names of the three women in the photograph from the Łódź ghetto, which he describes at the end of the chapter on Max Ferber. He toys with the possibility of three Hebraic names before withdrawing that speculation and, instead, naming the women after the three fates of Roman mythology—Nona, Decuma, and Morta. We have a key artifact of postmemory here—a photograph—but no one is left who can extract what should be of primary significance—namely, the identity of the subjects. They are plunged instead into the realm of myth, and so again accuracy is lacking: what ought to be salient is inaccessible (and the destructive power of the artifact—a recurring motif in Sebald—is compounded).¹⁴ This functions, among other things, as a salutary warning to the reader of the narrator's own limitations in getting to the heart of matter on our behalf.

In sum, recurring elements of Hirsch's postmemory include witness and accuracy, and Sebald's characters display little evidence of speaking to these qualities. This is not to say that Sebald's work is lacking qualities it would have benefited from; rather, he is engaged in a different project, and one best not subsumed under the umbrella of postmemory work. Hirsch is cognizant that Sebald brings new and complicated issues to bear on her conception of postmemory. She is aware of the ambivalence and complexity of a work like *Austerlitz*, and she tries to incorporate such features into a more complex and problematized conception of postmemory ("The Generation of Postmemory"), but this effort is not fully successful. This is not because there is a single, fixed set of possibilities for what can constitute postmemory work; what may qualify will evolve according to the needs of the time, as noted (see my section I; and Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory" 117–19). Rather, it is because there are certain key recurring aspects of postmemory that are less expendable insofar as they help define what is valuable within the concept.

The concept of postmemory began largely as an attempt to capture the relation of children of survivors to their parents' memories, through emotional engagement and empathy. The means for this is creative imagination,

and the goal is to preserve remembered events. If we expand postmemory to include cases like Austerlitz and Max Ferber's stories, where some or all of these elements are absent or suppressed, we obscure what is of value in both Hirsch and Sebald.

V

One response to all this would be to argue that although some of Sebald's characters fail to qualify as post-rememberers in any unproblematic sense, his narrator largely succeeds. After all, with respect to his candidacy as witness, the narrator's epistemic and agential credentials are all apparently intact. Although he may, at times, be limited in his ability to be accurate (in Campbell's sense) in what he conveys, he is not pathologically so; the suffering and misfortune of those for whom he speaks are relayed with great detail and sensitivity and resonate with our current understanding and expectations of such people. Perhaps I have simply misidentified the possible location of any alleged postmemory relation in Sebald. Hirsch, too, focuses on the character of Austerlitz, although she does credit the narrator with being an affiliative post-rememberer ("The Generation of Postmemory" 119).

I think it is also not advisable to treat Sebald's narrator as a post-rememberer, for reasons that concern a crucial difference between Hirsch and Sebald—namely, the role of empathy.¹⁵ Among all the central qualities of postmemory, this is clearly an important one for Hirsch, as well as the most problematic. Hirsch's emphasis on imagination and emotional channelling as the primary means of engaging with another's past, and her talk of "identification with the victim" and adoption of their experiences as "experiences one might oneself have had" ("Surviving Images" 10) are, as mentioned, what open the door to accusations of appropriation. I had suggested that we might alleviate this criticism on Hirsch's behalf by allowing post-rememberers special dispensation as close relatives of the rememberers in question. This of course does not help make the case for bringing Sebald's German, gentile, mere acquaintance of a narrator into the fold of post-rememberers. But there is something beyond these relatively superficial disparities between Sebald's narrator and Hirsch that, I believe, separates the narrator from a narrowly conceived post-rememberer. The central issue here is not any putative entitlement to empathic access to another's past experience, but the very idea of empathy itself as a means of ethical engagement with another. I want to draw on one final, recent

philosophical discussion in order to illuminate what may be worrying about the appeal to empathy, and also to reinforce the disparity between Hirsch and Sebald in this regard. In doing this, I will cast a more critical gaze over the postmemory endeavour in general.

Peter Goldie, in “Dramatic Irony, Narrative, and the External Perspective,” discusses the attempt to imagine the mental life of others—their thoughts and feelings—from the inside, from their perspective. He calls this “perspective-shifting” and warns that it is an overrated and even dangerous means of ethical engagement with others (Goldie 78). For one, perspective shifting rests on the assumption that either there are no substantial differences between myself and the other, or, if there are, that they can be readily overcome. Even occasional perspective shifting runs the risk of “egoistic drift” (Goldie borrows the term from Martin Hoffman): I shift my perspective to someone else’s and in the course of imagining how things were for them, I naturally bring to mind a similar situation I myself once endured, and the attempt to empathize “ends up as something rather self-indulgent” (Goldie 80). *Sympathy*, by contrast, requires an external perspective, according to Goldie: “In thinking of the other person as another, our sympathy does not mirror his suffering: it is an ethical response to his suffering; we feel *for* him,” and, “in contrast with perspective-shifting, we are free to think of him in all his particularities, appreciating his perspective on the world as ineliminably his, and perhaps as radically unlike our own” (82).

Apart from this appreciation of the other as another unique and autonomous being, there are further normative benefits to maintaining an external perspective. We refrain from putting ourselves in another’s position, partly in order to defray egoistic drift and so to focus on the other’s situation and not our own, as is appropriate in a situation where it is the other person’s suffering that is meant to be the focus of ethical attention. This also, crucially, allows us to bring to bear our own perspective in evaluating the other—something we could not do if we simply allowed our perspective to be displaced by that of the other (Goldie 82). As it happens, Hirsch herself at times alludes to the situation (although not the full dangers) of losing one’s own perspective within the postmemory act: “Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not [...] mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a

previous generation” (“The Generation of Postmemory” 107). If Goldie is correct, then there are serious repercussions to such a displacement: one loses one’s own evaluative perspective on the situation and has nothing to offer in response to the reported trauma other than simply to reflect back to the sufferer his own pain. While this may not always be avoidable (and in the case of close relatives in certain environments, may be inevitable), it is not to be commended or endorsed as “an *ethical* relation to the oppressed or persecuted other” (Hirsch “Surviving Images” 10).

Finally, perspective shifting is limited because it is dependent on imagination, and imagination is limited, especially when it comes to exceptional and/or terrible events. The upshot of this is that when we are incapable of successfully imagining certain things, the demands of the perspective-shifting enterprise lead us to a place of mere incomprehension (Goldie 83). The potential for mistaken, confused, inadequate, or egregiously inaccurate imaginings is rife in such situations. By contrast, the external perspective leaves room for understanding based on an appreciation of how very different that person is to us and of the unique circumstances she was in. Understanding of the other, far from being undermined, is reinforced when we admit to the impossibility or inadequacy of imaginatively adopting her perspective.

If the trauma is not remembered, or only partial information on it is available, or if the one who comes after is not capable for whatever reason of confronting or absorbing any such details, then postmemorial perspective shifting and empathy is simply not an option. Ferber and Austerlitz cannot shift their perspective to that of their parents’ suffering; they know too little about it. That is in part the source of *their* suffering. Sebald’s narrator is in a somewhat different position, having a broader and, in some respects, more informed perspective on the past sufferings of others.¹⁶ But note that Sebald’s narrator makes no pretense of adopting the position of the people whose stories he recounts. Their speech is always indirect; he reports what they say and makes no presumptions about how things are for them beyond the accounts that they themselves, or those who speak about them, supply. In one oft-cited instance early on in *The Emigrants*, he briefly attempts to encroach on the interior territory of one of his characters, Paul Bereyter, only immediately to withdraw on seemingly moral grounds. Having tried briefly to picture Bereyter’s final moments prior to his suicide from that character’s own point of view, the narrator desists in going further, explaining that “such endeavours to imagine his life and death did not [...] bring me any closer to Paul, except at best for brief

emotional moments of the kind that seemed presumptuous to me. It is in order to avoid this sort of wrongful trespass that I have written down what I know of Paul Bereyter” (29). In this way, the narrator establishes that an external perspective is not merely the means he happens to have chosen for conveying the story of another, but is the very basis for sustaining an appropriate moral stance towards that person. In these respects, the narrator is a model of the external perspective and its virtues.

The mechanizations of the external perspective are in turn mirrored in the experience of the reader of Sebald, who must constantly negotiate the intricacies of the embedded narratives, and who can never get entirely lost in one voice or perspective if she is to appreciate the layers of dramatic irony at play—something that itself demands an external stance. Goldie compares the benefits of taking the external view in real life to the significance of dramatic irony in the reading of great literature, and he himself uses the example of a text with embedded narration (in this case, Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*). For dramatic irony to function in a novel with multiple layers of narration, the reader must keep in mind and evaluate all the different perspectives of the narrative. While there are many examples of embedded narratives in literature, Sebald is notorious for the extent to which he deploys this technique, sometimes leaving us with four or more layers of narration (such as the narrator’s report of Austerlitz’s account of his former nanny’s conversation with Austerlitz’s mother). Our ability to appreciate, or even comprehend, the complexities of an embedded narrative would be lost if we consistently shifted our perspective to that of the voice at the bottom-most layer; we would fail to appreciate the significance of the fact that what is being conveyed reaches us through the filter of multiple, differing points of view. These skills of a good reader extend to real-life engagement with autobiography, or diaries, or history. We do not take everything at face value, but must consider the sources when evaluating the content, and comprehend and respect the differing points of view at play.

Perhaps the external stance is heightened in Sebald because of the author’s own acute awareness of his particular vulnerability to accusations of overidentification and appropriation. About this, we can only speculate.¹⁷ I do not, in any case, think that Hirsch’s closer ties to the victim-rememberers she empathizes with exempt her from any lessons to be learned from Goldie’s critique of empathy—lessons that are clearly meant to apply across the board. Insofar as Hirsch expresses occasional ambivalence about the powers of postmemory, Goldie’s discussion helps articulate and

reinforce that there is indeed serious cause for concern. Meanwhile, Sebald's works, if anything, stand as a countervailing influence to the displacing powers of postmemory's perspective shifting.

VI

A.S. Byatt once said of Sebald that he “connects with immense pain, only to say you can't connect; he tries to make you imagine things that he then delicately says are unimaginable” (cited in Franklin *A Thousand Darkneses* 186). That is almost right: I do think Sebald allows us quite unequivocally to connect with immense pain—not, however, from the often unimaginable position of the victims of it, but rather from the stance of those who are excluded from imagining it: descendants who were bequeathed no memories or who simply could not cope if they were, or the compassionate observer who documents their plight. Hirsch speaks of postmemory as “defined through an identification with the victim or witness or trauma, [and] modulated by the unbridgeable distance that separates the participant from the one born after” (“Surviving Images” 10). While so much of what is important for her is the impulse to identify with the victim, it is that unbridgeable distance that is the defining feature of Sebald's work. This is not surprising, given that it is the absence of memory that is so often at the heart of his stories.

Hirsch's concept of postmemory is of most value when it is restricted to cases in which there is close and relatively unfettered access to the victim's past on behalf of the post-rememberer. It is in such instances that the virtue of accuracy has the most potential to display itself, and the qualities required to carry out the moral imperative to bear witness are more likely to be in place. Even then, as Goldie argues and Sebald illustrates, there are risks and limitations involved in any form of empathic engagement with the past of another.

NOTES

- 1 These features are extracted from discussions in the following works by Hirsch: *Family Frames*; “Projected Memory”; “Surviving Images”; and “The Generation of Postmemory.”
- 2 See Campbell; Hacking; Neisser and Fivush; and Schachter.
- 3 Campbell's discussion of accuracy in turn borrows heavily from Adam Morton's work on emotional accuracy. I will continue to use the term “accuracy” in her technical sense as outlined; it therefore is not intended to convey what

the term sometimes might be taken to imply with respect to memory—for example, an abundance of detail and/or a reduction to the concept of truth; see Campbell §3.2.

- 4 Though books in philosophy on this topic remain rare. See Margalit; Blustein.
- 5 Butler first appendix; Locke bk. 2 ch. 27.
- 6 See Parfit's controversial quasi-memory hypothesis, §§80–81.
- 7 Ruth Franklin is even less tolerant than Weissman of Hirsch and others' deployment of the "buzzword ... 'memory,' in all its forms" (see *A Thousand Darknesses* 223–24).
- 8 At her most expansive, Hirsch expresses the inclination to welcome, ideally, anyone who has visited the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington into the throng (*Family Frames* 249). Though see Weissman 17–18 for something approaching a defence of this.
- 9 Such as the notorious case of the apparently sincere but evidently deluded Benjamin Wilkomirski (his book *Fragments* being an example, if ever there was one, of the concerted effort by a relative outsider to ascribe the traumatic experiences of others into his own life story; see Lappin; Eskin). For a (somewhat oblique) attempt to exclude cases of mere delusion and fantasy from the category of postmemory on Hirsch's behalf, see Long ("History, Narrative, and Photography").
- 10 See Anderson for a compelling discussion of why Sebald's national and political identity and personal background render him an unlikely candidate for inclusion in the "postmemory circle" (142). I don't pursue this line of argument, so well covered by Anderson, but it is compatible with and a supplement to the various theoretical-philosophical differences I identify between Sebald and Hirsch's more narrowly construed conception of postmemory.
- 11 Sebald's own tentative term for his style of narrative, which defies easy categorization; see Wachtel 37.
- 12 I will draw from Blustein's criteria as given in Chapter 6.
- 13 See Felman 15–16 for a discussion of Freud's notion of unconscious testimony. There is some (possibly deliberate) equivocation on Felman's part in that she also speaks of manifestations of the unconscious as *evidence* for conscious, cognitive testimony (by the analyst if not the analysand). Of course, hysterical symptoms and other manifestations of the unconscious, like physical scars, may stand as evidence for testimony, and perhaps indispensable evidence at that. My claim, following Blustein (315–16) is simply that they are not in and of themselves testimony in any sense that has notable epistemic and ethical constraints—constraints that Hirsch herself would endorse.
- 14 See Franklin "Rings of Smoke" 142 for a different and more critical reading of this passage. I believe that when we cease reading Sebald as attempting the "work of memory" (Franklin 142) or postmemory, Franklin's criticisms fall by the wayside.
- 15 Long considers Sebald's narrator a Hirschean post-rememberer; see his "History, Narrative, and Photography" and *W.G. Sebald*. My criticisms in this

section apply broadly to his analysis as well, although space prohibits the detailed consideration his claims deserve.

- 16 This is at least true in the case of Austerlitz up until a certain point, since Austerlitz by his own admission deliberately avoided or repressed all information about the Second World War and the Holocaust well into adulthood. See Behrendt for an account of the special problems and issues surrounding this situation.
- 17 Though, again, see Anderson for a discussion that touches on this.